

Relational Theory

2: Unilateral or Relational Engagement?

What do we mean by 'engagement'?

Inclusive economic policy and practice sees 'engagement' as important and thinks of it in relation to communities.

However, 'engagement' can be understood in many different ways...

- In the absence of a clear conceptualisation, there is a tendency for professionals to see it as 'doing to' stakeholders who are characterised by deficits, rather than 'doing with' full partners in the educational process who have all sorts of assets to bring to bear on a joint endeavour (Ferlazzo, 2011).
- Positioning strategic and economic policy development as a common interest requires a more relational approach, where *"partnership underscores mutual interdependence and helps create an understanding of community - not as those with problems, but as the group to which we all belong"* (Battistoni, 1997, p. 155).
- Relational engagement activities need **spaces in which to develop relationships** that promote the sharing of knowledge based on a common interest that challenges deficit views of certain communities as 'impoverished'.
- This also requires a shift in the role of the professional, moving from initiating a one-way intervention to **a relational model of engagement where stakeholders are also viewed as resources for professionals' own learning** (Midwinter, 1973, 1975; Benn and Chitty, 1996; Melaville et al, 2006; Warren et al, 2009; O'Leary et al, 2011; Thomas, 2012; Dyson and Kerr, 2013).

The acknowledgement of what professionals need to learn from stakeholders establishes a clear link between a relational and an asset-based approach to engagement. As Foot (2012) explains:

asset approaches make visible, value and utilise the skills, knowledge, connections and potential in a community (p.8).



A unilateral approach to engagement emphasises “*power over’ others, the capacity to get others to do one’s bidding*” (Warren et al, 2009, p.2213), whereas a relational approach, in contrast, is defined as an organisation and its stakeholders getting things done collectively, starting from the point of their “*shared interest*” (Warren et al, 2009).

A relational approach to engagement is about creating the relationships that can provide a foundation for long-term and sustainable change, not a quick fix (Warren, 2009).

Both local communities and policymakers and professionals have a shared interest in developing a more socially just economy that will also support the wellbeing of community members.

Audit 2: Doing To or Doing With: What counts as 'Engagement'?

Current strategic and economic policymaking activities can be evaluated to assess whether they are more 'unilateral' or 'relational' in their approach to community engagement.

Using the ideas of 'unilateral' or 'relational' engagement, think about 'what counts as engagement' in your current community engagement activities. Use resources like policy documentation, recruitment and marketing information, media accounts and community feedback to identify unilateral and relational approaches, together with examples of community needs and assets.

Activity 2:

- In your work team, decide on 3-4 community engagement activities to consider.
- Work separately to complete a proforma for each engagement activity before considering the questions.
- Come back together as a team to compare and discuss any emerging patterns or themes.

Note down any patterns and consider:

- Do certain project **locations** or the engagement of **certain stakeholders** appear to influence the type of engagement activity?
- Why might this be so?
- Does the **funding or duration of the project** have any impact on the type of activity?
- In what ways?
- Has the type of engagement adopted affected project outcomes?

Audit 2:

Doing to or doing with: what counts as engagement?

Activity	Location	Funding/Duration	Key Stakeholders	Outcomes
Evidence of professional interest or shared interest?			Areas for development:	
Evidence of community areas of need identified:			Areas for development:	
Evidence of community assets identified (tangible):			Areas for development:	
Evidence of community assets identified (intangible):			Areas for development:	