

## Commentary article

# Towards a community engagement turn? Historians debate forms of engagement in 21st century-higher education

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### ***Abstract***

Should the luxury we currently enjoy of focusing our research mainly on debating and/or philosophising about the discipline of History in centres of Higher Education and Training (HET) not be transformed in the 21st century? Recently, the trend is that community engagement in these environments should become infused with the tertiary education sector vision by means of engaged research; and engaged, teaching and learning, and that HET scholarship should focus on community engagement that complements sustainable livelihoods. With this in mind a webinar was organised by North-West University's Regional History Research Group. This was held on 29 November 2021, with the title "Engaging communities in regional histories research: Sharing experiences and best practice." Prof Sulevi Riukulehto (Finland), and Prof Sekibakiba Lekgoathi (University of the Witwatersrand) were among the prominent speakers. Interesting ideas and experiences of working with communities were discussed and ideas were put forward on community engagement in the process of fieldwork.

Historians are familiar with working in communities and engaging with them proactively, especially with selected individuals in communities. However, for the most part this tends to remain a one-directional process with the purpose of reaching a specific research goal and often has little community agency. In this discussion – here viewed as a commentary – my aim is to instil debate; to rethink the historian's involvement in communities and how this can encourage the involvement of the wider community. Therefore, this discussion will be presented in two major parts. In the first, a brief discussion is inspired by the Annales approach, and this is then infused with ideas from several theoretical approaches that are more recent. These will be considered for their possible role in historical analysis and how they might be useful to historians as historical tools. In the second part I argue for a 21st-century approach to historical research that requires that historians associate more widely with communities close to their particular institutions/universities which will then function as spaces to allow students to learn from and to give back to the communities concerned. Thus, the positioning of (traditional) History in this visionary space for research, is linked to teaching and learning practices, particularly in undergraduate and honours modules. It is hoped that this will be a learning curve to gain and implement new, refreshing ideas that will contribute towards community sustainability and also create new research opportunities.

**Keywords:** Community engagement turn; Historians; History research; History education; Higher education.

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## Community engagement studies and History

Conducting research with members of a community can be very useful as a form of service learning and also has the potential to serve as a practical outlet in the teaching process.<sup>2</sup> It can be agreed on that historians, and researchers in other disciplines, should give serious consideration to engaging with communities as a means of migrating knowledge by teaching and learning. However, recent studies indicate that top - down research efforts, the traditional research approach, are not the ultimate way forward for studying 21st-century communities. The historiography of historical method and research techniques and a range of other possibilities must be revisited and refreshed to arrive at a modern-day approach. In the subsections below it is therefore appropriate to think about re-visiting History method and theory and examining modern research practices, teaching and learning with(in) communities. The work of pioneer Annales historians of the 1920s comes to mind when thinking about proactive research initiatives in the community setting.

### The Annales historians and engaging with communities

For the Annales historians “traditional” histories were those dealing mainly with political matters and public institutions. These theorists claim to have redirected their research by resorting instead to quasi methods designed to be more directly involved with local communities or those at the regional level, rather than on countrywide scale. In 1968, Gailanpiu Gonmeih re-visited the Annales method and outlined its original intention of creating what he called “a new reality” in understanding past societies:<sup>3</sup>

Febvre ... studied the nature of unbelief. The Annalistes [were] building on their nature of unwritten assumptions that dominate the decisions of social groups, elucidating their attitudes to life, death, and time, their conceptions of the role of children and of the character of childhood, their concept of the family, their assumptions about the interaction of generations, and their thoughts and feelings about work and money. The search was for a structure of “collective mentality” ...

To create a “collective mentality” in research the Annales proponents emphasised the village community in multidisciplinary and scholarly collaborative ways. Gonmeih continues:<sup>4</sup>

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2 ES van Eeden, I Eloff & H Dippenaar (Eds), *Community engagement research in South Africa: Histories, methods, theories, and practice* (Pretoria, Van Schaik, 2022).

3 G Gonmeih, “Annales Scholl of thought and its contribution”, *Agricultural History*, 52(4), 1978, pp. 538-548 (with emphasis on pp. 542-543).

4 G Gonmeih, “Annales Scholl of thought and its contribution”, *Agricultural History*, 52(4), 1978, pp. 542-543; T Stoianovich, *French historical method. The Annales paradigm* (London, Cornell University Press, 1976).

In the village all the “structures” that fascinate the Annalistes – spatial, psychological, economic – can be studied. Individual villages provide the sources in parish registers that make possible “family reconstitution” over centuries from baptism, marriage, and death records. Tax rolls throw light on income, land distribution, and regional product. Folklore, passed on through written records or oral testimony, illustrates popular culture and throws light on hidden assumptions, on the mental structure, that governed village society. Linguistics, social anthropology, and a host of other social sciences could be utilized...

The influence of the Annales paradigm on historical thought globally, has without doubt been significant. Since the 1970s, South African historians have also contributed to their own versions of the Annales approach. Yet contributions seemingly remained versions of the “me” (historian) mostly directing the research goal about a community and not the “you” as (community member) knowing from experience, memory, and lifelong wisdom on a particular place, or a community perhaps? The Annales historians might perhaps not have engaged with communities as it’s done in 2021, but what they did and how they thought about it, surely was a huge leap in thought about community at the time.

For historians the current HET vision on community engagement might be a challenge, if viewed in scholarly terms, or if thought of in a practical sense. Some academics might well see community engagement as having features of hybridity and can be viewed as government related,<sup>5</sup> which means having a political end. The criticism despite, and which may carry some merit, it should be noted that in 21st-century postcolonial democratic Africa and the wider world a transformed academic paradigm with(in) community is encouraged, and very necessary. This implies thinking about engaging with communities in academic fieldwork rather than merely “utilising” individuals as mainly subjects in research. Understanding and conceptualising this need has been recognised by some scholars who have written at length on sustainable development, and these should not go unnoticed.<sup>6</sup> The crucial issue is how to re-position the traditional approach to History, with perhaps some of the more progressive (for its time) ideas of the Annales, and to integrate them into the 21st-century HET visionary space.

In the next section some recent research is shared for the reader to discern whether historians should think about communities differently rather than studying them on a purely academic level.

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5 L Lange, “The public purposes of the university: A historical view, 1995-2010”, B Leibowitz, (Ed), *Higher education for the public good: Views from the south* (Stoke on Trent, Sun Press, 2012), p. 53.

6 I Eloff, “The sustainable development goals and community-based collaboration and research”, Elize S van Eeden, Irma Eloff & Hanlie Dippenaar (Eds), *Community engagement research...*, Chapter 26.

## **Some 20th to 21st-century voices on community engagement and History**

Participating in research projects and experiencing inclusive community engagement in Africa as part of the mission statements in higher education and training (HET) has a history. Formal scientific theoretical research on community engagement surfaced from about the late 20th century. In South Africa, its visibility in HET is associated with the “White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education” of 1997,<sup>7</sup> which indicates that studies are required on the “potential of community service in higher education”. This resulted in the establishment of many service partnerships across the country, and some collaborative conference discussions on what might be expected from academia.<sup>8</sup> Problematic, however, is that some scholarly initiatives at the time were perceived as politically inspired, activist and radical, rather than scholarly. In assessing the value of these early (for at least two decades) hardcore community engagements, serious researchers felt that caution should be exercised because research done “in” community settings did not necessarily imply input and collaboration “with” community members.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The political-ideological nature of community engagement***

The political undercurrents of understanding community engagement may perhaps be a reason why many HET institutions are cautious in their approach towards communities. For example, in the case of Argentina, compulsory community engagement was introduced in the 20th century, with the Argentinian Ministry of Education as the dominant patron. A solidarity organisation, known as Centro Latinoamericano de Aprendizaje y Servicio Solidario (CLAYSS), was co-founded in 2002 by a historian, Professor Nieves Tapia. CLAYSS was tasked with contributing to “the growth of a fraternal and participative culture in Latin America through the development of educational, social engagement projects”. However, the organisation operates in a socialist political framework, and funding for research appears to be made available only if it does so under this philosophical banner.<sup>10</sup>

Some academics may view the historical trends in community engagement undertaken in South Africa since the 1960s as being similar in nature to the example given above. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were some community-based projects which featured political activism, lacked empathy and showed limited evidence of the

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7 Notice 1196 of RSA, Ministry of Education. White Paper No. 3: “A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education”, Pretoria, July 1997.

8 ES van Eeden, H Dippenaar and I Eloff, “On responses of Higher Education and Training with(in) society through research, teaching and community engagement”, *Educational Research for Social Change*, 19(26), 2021.

8 ES van Eeden, “Mirroring 25 years of community engagement research and practice in South Africa”, ES van Eeden, I Eloff & H Dippenaar (Eds), *Community engagement research in South Africa:...*, pp. 14-15.

10 ES van Eeden, “Mirroring 25 years of community engagement”, ES van Eeden, I Eloff & H Dippenaar (Eds), *Community engagement research in South Africa:...*, pp. 9-10.

necessary scholarly requirements.<sup>11</sup> One of the pioneers of community engagement practices in the country, Johan Muller,<sup>12</sup> remembers academia's engagements with community about peoples' education and apartheid that was "savagely opposed. The engagements of especially academics at the University of the Witwatersrand during the politically turbulent mid-1980s are recalled. Muller claims that there was a conscious strategy by academics to rather follow a socio-politically engaged approach than a conceptually and empirically knowledge-based method that HET is known for. However, Muller feels that this pretext was not bearing fruit because of a shortage of qualified people to create vigorous educational knowledge. In his opinion, contextual (historical and theoretical) knowledge was lacking. This view was also expressed by other scholars.<sup>13</sup>

By the 1990s another negative trend became apparent in community engagement. It was a decade of academics and students being more prominent in community under the banner of "in-service to the community", but critically viewed by some as tutors and students receiving more benefits (funding from projects and reaping the rewards) instead of being the "benefit-bringers".<sup>14</sup> Thinking about community engagement in a broader disciplinary sense has since rapidly transformed.<sup>15</sup> Becoming aware of community and community needs was engendered by research and HET's commitment to an array of projects.<sup>16</sup>

By 2018, demands were "growing for universities to do more in contributing to development drives beyond their immediate sphere of operation". The idea was that within its mission, the university should "foster sustainable development" and that "local voices [should be] assimilated within its knowledge creation", thereby leading to "diffusion, and societal engagement" with the objectives of the particular community concerned. According to Mbah "this has the potential to instigate the university's engagement to address

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11 From a historical point of view discussion is possible on the rise in popularity of social history at the time, although infused with other radical debates. This led to a rise works on local and regional histories and is new field in research. In particular the Wits History workshop and the HSRC division of Regional History fall within the ambit of the most prominent debates. At the time the Wits History Workshop expressed an emotional kind of political activism with limited scholarly direction. This while the HSRC regional history section indulged in finding a scholarly direction structurally but possibly with a limited or selective community vision.

12 J Muller, "Engagements with engagement", Council on Higher Education and Training (CHET), 2009, pp. 1-13; Council on Higher Education (CHE), "Community engagement in South African higher education", *The Kagisano Series*, 7 (Auckland Park, Jacana Media, 2010), p. 70.

13 MJ Young, "Discussion suppers as a means for community engagement", *The Journal of Rural Health*, 2006, in CHE, *Community engagement...*, 2010, p. 3.

14 CHE, "Community engagement in South African higher education", *The Kagisano Series*, 7, 2010, pp. 72-75.

15 RW Riley and JA Winston in DL Featherman, M Hall and M Krislov (Eds), *The next 25 years: Affirmative action in higher education in the United States and South Africa* (Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 277-285.

16 See several examples of disciplinary and collaborative contributions related to communities in ES van Eeden, I Eloff & H Dippenaar (Eds), *Community engagement research in South Africa:....*

local and regional concerns and promote relevant development underpinned by mutual trust”.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Disciplines and community engagement***

Although community engagement is not necessarily only a collaborative disciplinary effort,<sup>18</sup> one particular aspect that still requires more robust academic intervention in Africa and indeed globally, is how each discipline reflects on its standing and purpose with and within the community.<sup>19</sup> Others relate community engagement to “pan-African action research” in various research formats.<sup>20</sup> This way forward for articulating research with communities has become pivotal in giving more consideration to the distinctive needs of local spaces on the African continent. Furthermore, in the process, it contributes to a more “Africanised” knowledge system<sup>21</sup> and an educational approach, one that is able to serve Africa.

To elaborate on community engagement from an academic historian’s angle, the critical question is: “where” and “how” does History as a discipline fit into the community engagement vocabulary and then into research per se? It has become necessary that historians who undertake research in communities and engage in teaching should discuss their findings and engage in constructive discussion, learning to think together. Shared experiences and ideas should be viewed as best practice with(in) communities.

### **A glimpse into the role of historians and community engagement: The historiography**

In the past decade, certain history departments in HET environments in the United States of America have put forward thoughts on how researchers in the

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17 M Mbah, “Can local knowledge make the difference? Rethinking universities’ community engagement and prospects for sustainable community development”, *Journal of Environmental Education*, 50(1), 2018, pp. 1-12.

18 See, as examples, the Japanese *machizukuri* model in community engagement that reminds one of the ethnographic method of Sulevi Riukulehto at the Ruralia Institute, Helsinki in Finland. While the *machizukuri* model emphasises community design and development, the Finnish model accentuates the community experience of home towards initiatives of design and development. On this see Shigeru Satoh, *Japanese Machizukuri and community engagement: History, method and practice* (Routledge, 2020), pp. 270; S Riukulehto & T Suutari, “Studying processes and experiences: Ethnographic tools for experiential field research in communities”, ES van Eeden et al (Eds), *Community engagement research in South Africa:...*, Chapter 23.

19 In this regard the contribution by B Jacoby, *Service-learning essentials: Questions, answers and lessons learned* (San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass, 2015), pp. 1-25 (and chapter 5).

20 Compare with the contributions of NN Mtawa, *Human development and community engagement through service-learning: The capability approach and public good in education* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), Chapter 2-3; TS Mudau & S Makgatho, “Community engagement: An instrument for applied rural-based research and development in (South) Africa”, in MA Mafukata & KA Tshikolomo (Eds), *African perspectives on reshaping rural development* (Hershey, IGI Global, 2020), Chapter 13; J Preece, *University community engagement and lifelong learning: The porous university* (Johannesburg, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 117-118.

21 J Preece, *University community engagement and lifelong learning:...*, pp. 116-118.

field of History can be more participatory when undertaking community research rather than just moving in and out for research purposes. Historical research should also reach the lecture hall and classroom: not only to debate community issues but also to consider local opportunities that may arise and, to also interrogate practical possibilities “benefitting” communities.

For example, the students at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in the Department of History in the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, are committed to outreach and community engagement. They do so through public events, adult education programmes, running online classes, engaged scholarship, and conducting community-based history projects.<sup>22</sup> In 2018, a member of staff at the Columbia University, New York City, Prof Barry Goldenberg, authored an article that might be perceived by historians and educators of History as somewhat controversial. Goldenberg’s work is entitled: “Rethinking historical practice and community engagement: Researching together with ‘youth historians’”, and this is one of the first research disseminations by a historian in which the academic discipline of History is challenged to think about community engagement in a different, rather unusual way.<sup>23</sup>

Goldenberg views his article as an experimental contribution towards collaboration. His intention is to spark dialogue on how to combine traditional ideas on History with hands-on community involvement by students “for the purposes of rethinking traditional historical processes”.<sup>24</sup> For Goldenberg, it is about changing the way historians think about teaching and learning. His aim is to instil another angle on historical tradition. The community engagement emphasis of the University of Massachusetts, as mentioned above, seems similar, but Goldenberg indulges in a more diverse approach.

Another example of historians and community engagement is showcased by archivists Pam Hackbart-Dean,<sup>25</sup> and Walter Ray,<sup>26</sup> who write about community engagement practice as locating history where it “lives”. The reporting deals with an initiative undertaken by activists from an African American community that became involved to ensure that the University of Carbondale’s Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) which has been collecting local histories since its installation in 1956),

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22 University of Massachusetts Amherst, “Community engagement”, available at <https://www.umass.edu/history/community> (accessed 1 November 2021).

23 BM Goldenberg, “Rethinking historical practice and community engagement: Researching together with ‘youth historians’”, *Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 23(1), 2019, pp. 52-77.

24 BM Goldenberg, “Rethinking historical practice and community engagement: ...”, *Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 23(1), 2019, pp. 52-77.

25 Pam Hackbart-Dean is the head of Special Collections and University Archives, University of Illinois-Chicago.

26 Walter Ray is from Southern Illinois, University Carbondale.

was preserved intact.<sup>27</sup> This collection “represents [the] diversity of race, economic status, gender and sexuality, religion, and politics in southern Illinois”. Hackbart-Dean and Ray explain that a “directed effort to be more proactive in community engagement beyond town and gown, as well as to diversify the local collection, began in [southern Illinois in] the 2000s”.<sup>28</sup> Although museologists and the local archivist might be associated more with the field of Public History it is of interest to note that Hackbart-Dean and Ray choose to use the term “community engagement”, rather than “public history”, a term coined by Robert Kelley in the 1970s.<sup>29</sup>

Paul Ashton and Alex Trapeznik acknowledge the first British International Conference for Public History in 2005, but note that “these public history practices were part of a radical tradition which took root in labour, local, oral and community history related to the Workshop Movement which [Raphael] Samuel co-founded in the late 1960s.”<sup>30</sup> Ashton and Trapeznik then add to their observations some information on the reasoning behind the recent developments of establishing an International Federation for Public History. Tertiary institutions, they say, are “under increasing pressure to meet competing goals...”<sup>31</sup> among which, community engagement is actually prominent.

With the creation of the International Federation of Public History in 2010, some refreshing views have come to the fore from conferences (and have seemingly orchestrated the creation of many published works)<sup>32</sup> on how to see, think and engage with the public about public history. Ashton and Trapeznik call for a “public turn”.<sup>33</sup> In some of these recent works, leading South African scholars like Natasha Erlank and Julia Wells make significant contributions. Julia Wells views public history as “A tool for recovery”, which apparently relates to what she calls “justice history”. Public historian Tanya Evans sees public history as being linked to local and community history,<sup>34</sup> while David Dean of Canada<sup>35</sup> leads

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27 In a broader sense the 1950s represent the establishment of local and regional history centres in the United Kingdom, other parts of Europe and in the United States, among others. See ES van Eeden, “Pioneering regional history studies in South Africa: Reflections within the former Section for Regional History at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)”, Chapter 16, C Souradien, S Swartz and G Houston (Eds.), *Society, research and power. A history of the Human Sciences Research Council from 1929 to 2019* (Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 2021), pp 257-272.

28 P Hackbart-Dean and Walter Ray, “Community engagement. Finding history where it lives”, *College & Research Libraries News*, 82(8), 2021

29 T Cauvin, “The rise of Public History: An international perspective”, *Historia Critica*, 68(1), 2018, pp. 3-26.

30 P Ashton and A Trapeznik (Eds.), *What is public history globally? Working with the past in the present* (Great Britain, Bloomsbury, 2019), Introduction, p. 3.

31 P Ashton and A Trapeznik (Eds.), *What is public history globally?...*, p. 5.

32 DM Dean (Ed), *A companion to public history* (USA, Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 1-12; International Federation for Public History, available at <https://ifph.hypotheses.org/> (accessed December 2021); J Wojdon, D Wiśniewska (Eds), *Public in Public History* (New York, Routledge, 2021); P Ashton & A Trapeznik (Eds.), *What is public history globally?...*

33 P Ashton & A Trapeznik (Eds.), *What is public history globally?...*, Introduction, p. 8.

34 See the Ashton book and the publication by Dean.

35 Among his publications are DM Dean (Ed), *A companion to public history* (New York, Wiley Blackwell, 2018), pp. 1-12.

with some very recent ideas in an international journal on best practice in public history. He sees it as being “for”, “by”, “with” and “about” the “public”, a theme that emerged from the 2018-2019 International Public History conference.<sup>36</sup>

Though not all public histories are viewed by academic historians as scholarly and appropriate, it is exciting to observe from recent contributions that public history can take a role in community engaged research, and in teaching and learning. Furthermore, there is a definite trend globally from scholars in HET to gain a better understanding of how formal science can infuse with(in) communities and be applied appropriately, refraining from a one-way research mode.<sup>37</sup>

### **Getting practical in HET with History: Community engagement in local and regional community context for teaching and learning opportunities and research projects**

Like public history, the roots of regional history studies also date back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and were beginning to emerge as early as the 1950s. A radicalism in its practice was the result of the Marxist ideology imposed in British labour history from the 1960s. It is therefore hardly surprising that there was activity by regional historians on the debates concerning community engagement. Dealing with this rich historiography, is for another day. Rather, the practical or applied community engagement side of History as discipline, is touched upon very briefly in this discussion, by emphasising History’s positioning in the three visionary pillars of HET (see Image 1).

#### ***Community engagement in teaching and learning***

It seems vibrant from recent debate in the available sources that in the teaching and learning component of history, “community engagement” with people in a nearby community and those at a local/regional level is to be encouraged. Public histories, histories on heritage and histories of local and regional spaces encourage the development of an engaged academic community. This is especially true if these communities are in close proximity to educational institutions, thereby facilitating experiential or practical assessments such as oral history projects; exploring community archives; community-based history projects such as the preservation of historical structures and places that require maintenance and/or storage of historical data. The Goldenberg project, for example, as mentioned above, refers to “challenging the norms of history research through co-conducted oral histories”<sup>38</sup> in communities.

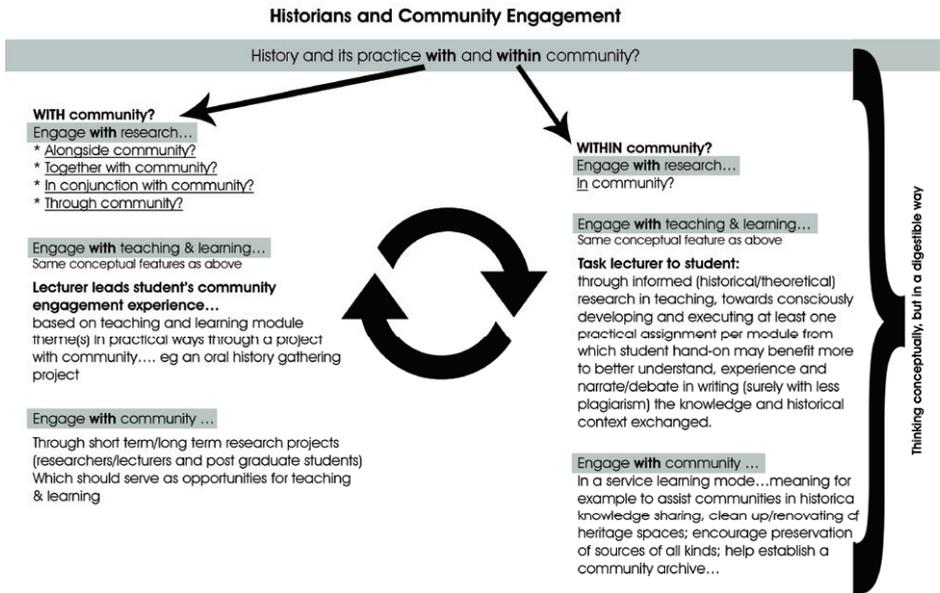
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36 DM Dean, “Publics, public historians and participatory public history”, J Wojdon, D Wiśniewska (Eds), *Public in public history*, pp. 1-15 (published in 2021)

37 Compare the contributions by J Wojdon, D Wiśniewska (Eds), *Public in public history*.

38 BM Goldenberg, “Rethinking historical practice and community engagement: ...”, *Rethinking History*, 23(1), 2019, pp. 52-77.

Image 1: Practical options in all three HET visionary principles



Source: Regional history webinar on “Engaging Community/ies in regional histories research: Sharing experiences and best practise”, Presentation, Elize S van Eeden, “Community engagement studies and History: Sharing moments of conflict and collaboration in research”, 29 November 2021.

### ***Community engagement in research***

Research projects in the vicinity of an HET institution where history students are able to engage with communities can make a valuable contribution to undergraduate and post-graduate studies. For example, they could encourage creative ideas for area-specific museum themes, or lead to the presentation of a community seminar in which students share their ideas on the current project being studied in their module with the residents of a neighbouring community. The responsiveness of the community should instil further action and debate and possibly lead to a joint initiative such as identifying historic sites in the area,<sup>39</sup> and compiling a narrative on the area’s history as a community contribution. This will equip students to observe, research and record history and encourage collaborative initiatives.

In the past, research projects undertaken in communities took a one-way approach. Firstly, oral interviewing was used as a research tool to gather information. The idea behind this was to give residents a voice in the project, although compiling the written memory remained the domain of the historian. The interviewing was usually

39 J Tosh, *The pursuit of History, aims, methods and new directions in the study of History* (London & New York, Routledge, Taylor & Francis, sixth edition, 2015), pp. 1-22.

conducted in the traditional way and the argument given that the residents were “consulted” and that knowledge was indeed shared but the formulation of ideas and the written treatise – the “science” – was the work of historians. For the most part this was tolerated within HET structures in the past, but more recently, within the last two to three decades, this type of community engagement has been questioned as inadequate. The enrichment of disciplinary debate is necessary, but it must not be “dormant”, with hardly any “proactive outlet.

Society requires that academia across the board (and not only a selective few disciplines) should think more creatively and robustly from within the confines of their own disciplines. Careful consideration should be given and steps taken on how to do the following:

- Ensure that research is undertaken in an appropriate community (and who should participate in the project). Engage with a view to i) provide insight and ii) help participants solve practical issues that have arisen within that specific society. – Thus, engaged research.
- Ensure long-term community assistance and initiatives based on the research undertaken with(in) the community. These should be continuous initiatives that are supported and funded by stakeholders in the community and government. Thus, engaged communities.
- Ensure a continuous refreshing of a discipline such as History’s teaching and learning content at an under-graduate level, complemented by research done with(in) communities. For example, students in the discipline should not only study theoretical material provided by their lecturers. There should also be assessments and assignments that relate to current societal issues in the community rather than focusing on the past.<sup>40</sup> In essence its engaged teaching and learning.

There have been several significant contributions by historians in South Africa in which historical knowledge supported communities in the practical sense, but also learnt from the past. One example is Martin Legassick’s history of Gordonia that covers land issues,<sup>41</sup> and another is Howard Phillips’s publications on pandemics,<sup>42</sup> which feature creative information sharing. Works of this nature have a definite place in History’s positioning in academia as well as in community engagement. Yet, if senior undergraduate and honours students cannot learn from past knowledge and thereby gain constructive hands-on experience with(in) a community, then many lecturing efforts may be of short durée. A truly engaged teaching and learning environment in

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40 Ideas of the author. See Regional history webinar on *Engaging community/ies in regional histories research – Sharing experiences and best practise*, Presentation: ES van Eeden, “Community engagement studies and History: Sharing moments of conflict and collaboration in research”, 29 November 2021. Link: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1G13Y\\_jqsAKO\\_iKsUqLKFzy6xFKawU4sC/view?usp=drive\\_web](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1G13Y_jqsAKO_iKsUqLKFzy6xFKawU4sC/view?usp=drive_web).

41 M Legassick, *Hidden histories of Gordonia. land possession and resistance in the Northern-Cape, 1800-1990* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2016), pp. 124-126; 136-138.

42 H Phillips, *Epidemics: The story of South Africa’s five most lethal human diseases* (Ohio, Ohio University Press, 2012).

the discipline of History will not only create opportunities to transform education, into an Africanized way of doing, but will ensure that the scholarly community of historians in the making, will become more observant when engaging with local communities for the purposes of learning, mutual need, and co-shared “lekgotla”<sup>43</sup> actions. The aim must be to strive for engaged teaching and learning.<sup>44</sup>

These are but a few ideas on how to consider reorientating traditional history to become more participatory and collaborative.

## **To conclude**

This commentary touches upon the Annales paradigm towards community research and then focuses on recent international trends to position History as discipline with(in) the community setting. The discussion points to a history that is indeed deeply rooted in community but one that is awakening as part of the three-tier vision of HET. It is argued that History also accommodates community-engaged historical research, its purpose being to serve its lecture-venue outcomes in modules, and eventually hold the possibility of hands-on utility. This approach will not only allow HET assignments in the discipline of History to become “alive”, but also serve as an experiential contribution created with(in) the specific community. With community engagement as focus, it might very well become a new turn for History in its many fields of focus, and for African historians it will hold the promise of Africanising history teaching and research and making it more appropriate for the African continent. In closing, the discussion emphasises that communities are indeed a vital part of the historian’s ambit.

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43 It is said that a lekgotla [also called a ‘Bosberaad’ in Afrikaans] in South Africa refers to a meeting or get-together, and is based on the traditional concept of elders gathering to ponder and question. ... This is a way of providing individuals with the resources and space to define their place in a changing South Africa. This programme often includes school tours. See also <https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/About/What-we-do/Community-engagement/Community-Engagement-and-Outreach-Projects>, 2019.

44 KT Motumi, “Practicalising the significance of the ‘history-is-all-around-us’ approach in and out of the classroom”, PhD thesis, NWU, 2021.