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Sub-theme: Student Engagement, Agency, and Success

Equity, Access, and Inclusion:

Language as Engagement Infrastructure: Towards an Epistemically Inclusive Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education.

Universities increasingly position community engagement as a central mechanism for advancing social responsiveness, transformation, and public participation. Yet while considerable attention has been given to participation, partnership, and co-creation, limited scholarly attention has been paid to the language through which engagement itself is conceptualised, communicated, and enacted. This conceptual paper examines the relationship between language and inclusion within higher education engagement practices, asking whether the language of engagement is genuinely accessible and meaningful to the diverse stakeholder communities universities seek to engage.

Drawing on emerging insights from the Reimagining Language as Praxis in Engagement project at Nelson Mandela University, the paper argues that language acts as a form of engagement infrastructure that influences who participates, whose knowledge is recognized, and how relationships between universities and communities are negotiated. Moving beyond viewing multilingualism as merely a translation exercise, the paper examines how key engagement concepts such as participation, reciprocity, collaboration, transformation, and community can carry different meanings across linguistic, cultural, and epistemological contexts. It suggests that moments of translation difficulty, conceptual ambiguity, and linguistic contestation are not obstacles to engagement but valuable opportunities for understanding the hidden assumptions embedded within institutional engagement discourse.

The paper proposes a conceptual framework that distinguishes between linguistic access, conceptual accessibility, epistemic inclusion, and language as praxis. It argues that inclusive engagement requires more than making information available in multiple languages; it requires creating spaces where the meanings of engagement concepts can be collectively negotiated and co-constructed with stakeholder communities. In doing so, the paper contributes to debates on multilingualism, community engagement, knowledge democracy, and decolonial approaches to higher education. It concludes by suggesting that the future of engaged universities may

depend not only on speaking more languages but on developing greater institutional capacity to listen, learn, and create meaning across diverse knowledge traditions.

Keywords

Community Engagement, Multilingualism, Language as Praxis, Inclusion, Epistemic Justice, Higher Education