



The **Edu-Village** concept was uncovered this year (2015) through reflecting on the organic development of a trans-disciplinary collaborative training platform in the marginalised and impoverished communities of the Free State province of South Africa. The training platform now identified as a virtual village (Edu-village) addresses the acquisition of skills to promote self-sustaining opportunities for members of these marginalised communities, enabling them to contribute to the social and economic wellbeing of their community.

The World Health Organisation (OTTAWA Charter) recognises that health is not an aim in and of itself but a vehicle for living a life of quality, the right of every individual. Through this treaty pre-requisites for health were identified otherwise known as social determinants of health and wellbeing making all health care professionals accountable and responsible for acknowledging and addressing these determinants. Primary healthcare offers health care workers the opportunity to be concerned with and address these determinants by promoting health and preventing ill health. It is vital that health care professionals are adequately trained to play a role in advocating for these marginalised populations so as to consciously consider the cycles of ill health often perpetuated by social and economic struggles.

During the past few years as an occupational therapy department and faculty of health sciences (University of the Free State) a number of partnerships were developed and established through various different initiatives. These partners and now stakeholders consist of a variety of non-profit organisations, government departments (in particular health and education), individuals and private groups from the marginalised communities, university students and community service and

engagement facilitators, the training platform of the health sciences faculty of the University of the Free State.

These partnerships grew and evolved due to a variety of independent initiatives however one particular group of learners from a special needs class (adolescent school going learners who are not able to access the standard curriculum at schools due to internal and external factors) and their dedicated teacher (Ms Natascha Meisler) situated in a rural area which presented with particularly high challenges required and inspired collaboration of stakeholders in order to find effective and sustainable answers for the ever-growing special needs population. In the absence of appropriate schools and trained special needs teachers this population has been further marginalised and the comprehensive nature of the needs and challenges have become increasingly evident as statistics and the burden of disease became known perpetuating the cycle of social and economic struggle.

As the partners began to share the burden with one another through various initiatives, particularly addressing knowledge and skill development, the power of uniting became very real and valued amongst all involved. A sense of hope was formed through redefining community by discovering common unity in collectively acknowledging and addressing the cycle of impoverishment.



It was through collaboration and the implementation of these shared initiatives that the need for equipping the individuals of marginalised communities with skills and knowledge that would empower and enable them to

participate and contribute to their community became apparent and the idea of an organised training body/facility was conceptualised.

The idea is that pre-graduates of the Edu-village are those individuals who may be considered by society as persons who are potentially a social and economic burden to society as a result of amongst others marginalisation. A post-graduate from the Edu-village will have the confidence to participate productively in his/her community

hereby breaking the cycle of impoverishment and associated social and health concerns.

Learners access the Edu-village through any organisation or body that is associated with the Edu-village concept and has bought into the idea of sharing the burden and



generating solutions together. The Edu-village is in the process of developing a range of what are termed universally designed pathways. The universal design reflects the inclusivity of all individuals and their right to access

opportunities that will empower them towards self-sustainable living. These pathways reflect a variety of themes (for example eco-building, food gardens, farming, technology, and healthcare) associated with particular knowledge and skills that are acquired through facilitated and guided experiential learning.

The Edu-village is underpinned by 4 principles:

- ▶ Interdependence
- ▶ Access to Expertise
- ▶ Extended Learning Platforms
- ▶ Progressive Education

Interdependence of organisations and individuals suggest a commitment to being interconnected, being able to count on one another in addition to focus on win/win partnerships at all times. The concept of synergy is relevant here, together we are more than the sum of the individual parts, so being part of the village allows collaborative opportunity and access to all other partners. Each organisation and



individual whether learner, facilitator or sponsor recognises that they need the other parties and operate from this basis ensuring that all

benefit through this collaborative platform. This allows for connections on community, provincial, national and global level allowing the marginalised community member who enrolls in the pathway access to a dynamic and diverse platform which in the past was incomprehensible.

Access to expertise implies that individuals who access the Edu-village will have the opportunity to access expertise where they were previously denied the opportunity given marginalisation promoting equality and assured access to dynamic growth. This



in turn promotes self-efficacy and personal causation as the individual experiences mastery in acquisition of skills and knowledge as a result of participation and involvement. In addition once a learner has acquired knowledge he/she will be expected to transfer this knowledge and skills to another or group of individuals in order to further ensure his skills attainment, hereby becoming a trainer in his/her own right by sharing his /her newly acquired skills. Developing the role of both learner and trainer (sharer of expertise) is essential and at any point can be switched, once again investing in equality and the valuing of interchangeable roles of all individuals.

Extended learning platforms allow all individual learners and/or facilitators' access to a range of learning opportunities with regard to location and context in which this learning takes place. For example different building sites where training can be



accessed or facilitated in the province, country or even globally. These platforms also allow the individual to develop life skills as they interact with different cultures, world views, organisations and people they may not have had the

opportunity to given their marginalised context. This for example include building

together on a project with an international crew that do not speak the language of the learners yet have to work on the same project. These platforms ensure dynamic and current educational opportunities, enhances life skills and personal growth through the swapping of locations, facilitators and learners.

Progressive education refers to the use of real life situations in which training takes place. Learners have the opportunity to address real life challenges within their training which creates an authentic process in which confidence and competence can develop. Experiential learning ensures depth of learning and acquisition of skill in addition to the realness of and almost necessity of making mistakes



and the value associated with developing creativity and ideas as opposed to the concept of failure often known to these community members. Assessment is offered to the learner through evidence generated through his actions and involvement in community projects and development as opposed traditional assessment methods. The evidence is seen in his/her contribution to the real life projects and related people and contexts, including an immediate feedback loop (reflection) and long term visual portfolio development.

The Edu-village was recently launched at a three day social entrepreneurial Indaba organised in partnership with a non-profit organisation (Bloemshelter – a shelter for the homeless), International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the University of the Free State. The Indaba provide ample opportunity for the sharing and



implementation of the principles in addition to creating a platform for further discussion and development.

Many current and potential stakeholders were present which gave rise to the need for the development of a data base, steering committee and research platform. In addition the University has recognised the Edu-village as a training platform (CBE Community Based Education) for students and has generated inclusivity of faculties to enhance the opportunity to productively address marginalisation and the relevant social determinants of health.

This project is in its early developmental stages, it is noted that the sharing of the burden, partnering with the community and relevant stakeholders appears to have allowed for the generation of hope, greater action and promising results.

Heidi Morgan

Occupational Therapy

University of Free State

Bloemfontein

South Africa

MorganH@ufs.ac.za

