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Academic practice and public engagement through the lens of Hannah Arendt's public sphere of action

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to conceptualisations of public engagement as part of academic practice in higher education. It uses Hannah Arendt's idea of action in the public sphere, which is underpinned by the belief that all have the capacity to contribute to the renewal of the world, and that we are equally different. It argues that public engagement should go beyond a one-way flow from the academic to the public and should instead aim to promote engagement towards renewed understandings of all participants. The ideas are exemplified by the practical example of a conference, co-designed and co-organised by the author. It highlights participatory processes of the conference towards generating engagement of a wide variety of participants and considers evidence of the renewal of understandings from such public engagement. The conference is drawn upon to develop a reconceptualisation of public engagement.

Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to conceptualisations of public engagement as an important facet of academic practice. It does this through drawing on Hannah Arendt's work on action in the public sphere and by exemplifying this with the specific case of an international conference. In drawing on the conference, I aim to develop a reconceptualisation of public engagement between academics and those in professional or other communities outside of higher education.

The paper has the following structure: first, I consider current ideology informing public engagement in academic practice and argue for a reconceptualisation of such engagement. I then present Hannah Arendt's theory of action in the public sphere as a framework for this reconceptualisation. In the next section, the context and methodology of the investigation is explained. This is followed by the practical exemplification of a public sphere in the form of a conference. To conclude, the principles underpinning the practices in the conference are reiterated and argued to offer a reconceptualisation of public engagement within academic practice.

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Public engagement and academic practice

In common with other aspects of academic practice, public engagement tends to be subject to the pressure of 'new managerialism': practices which reduce the idea of accountability for quality and contribution to the public sphere to practices of auditing and accounting (see, for example, Biesta, 2009). Within this paradigm, public engagement can become decoupled from teaching and research, 'sequestered, regulated and defined' and promoted or rejected in terms of the 'positional goods' it provides to the institution (Watermeyer & Lewis, 2018, pp. 1612–1613).

This has tended to cultivate an instrumentalist, means-towards-narrow-ends approach towards public engagement, in which the main driver of policy and practice is the way in which such engagement secures gains against competing institutions. These gains can include international league table success (Hazelkorn, 2015) and increased recruitment through the positive marketing generated by a high position in the higher education league tables. Public engagement with research can be compromised by incentives to 'game' the system (Murphy, 2017) based on limited ideas of what counts as the public impact of research.

This approach, which could be seen as aiming to extract value from knowledge, is in contrast to a wider sense of any public good and contribution to society by the institution or the sector. Such an instrumentalist approach may therefore be at odds with other purposes of public engagement, such as contributions towards ideas for new understandings around issues of importance to the community and wider humanity. I would argue that the possibility of such engagement contributing to ideas of public good beyond narrow interests can be subsumed under the imperative of institutional self-promotion and prestige.

Another way of envisaging public engagement is where the academic is committed to being what Boyer describes as a 'vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems' (1996, p. 11). Public engagement viewed in this way sees academics positioning themselves as socially accountable and projecting themselves towards the wider public in ways that resonate with the public about matters of interest and significance to people outside academia.

This projection goes beyond sharing research results with the public. Barnett argues that academics and research groups can 'reach out to the wider public, not just to share their ideas and results, but to engage dialogically with members of the public' (2018, p. 95) in developing understandings around issues of concern and towards collaborative investigations. I believe that this is an argument for acknowledging the legitimacy of many world views and for plurality in practice. Seen in this way, public engagement goes beyond presenting research in a one-directional way from the academic outwards, and moves towards reciprocity and multi-directional flows, between academics and others, around issues of common concern.

Within this conceptualisation, an important part of public engagement is to create spaces of interaction between people from different backgrounds and perspectives with the aim of identifying issues for collaborative enquiry and fostering transformed understandings around such issues. In these spaces, each is positioned as having the potential to contribute new thinking and insights around the issue as a basis for exploring ways forward.

Hannah Arendt and action in the public sphere

For Hannah Arendt, action in the public sphere is based on two conditions of humanity: that of our natality and of our plurality. Natality refers to the capacity we all have to act as agents, capable of original thinking and of 'beginning something anew' (1958, p. 9). Arendt uses 'plurality' as meaning that as humans we are equal by virtue of sharing a common world, and yet we are distinct from others (p. 175). In this assumption of plurality Arendt's theory assumes different values, interests and different understandings among people and communities. It assumes equal difference, in which 'no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised' (p. 57). Any attempt to stifle plurality is an attempt to stifle the public sphere which 'relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself' (1958, p. 57). As such, her theory highlights the need to search for common understandings and negotiated ways forward within such difference.

Arendt contrasts action with 'labour', which is cyclical and repetitive and does not endure, and 'work' which is characterised by the use of appropriate means to produce durable, pre-determined ends. Arendt's action, on the other hand, combines an idea of public spaces and processes and gives them the overtly political dimension of people, in their plurality, voluntarily engaging and collaborating because they wish to bring renewal and transformation to a matter of common concern. For this reason, it is sometimes referred to as 'political action' (Buckler, 2012), although its emphasis on new beginnings contrasts it with a form of politics in which one rules over or manipulates another, according to Benhabib (2010, p. 6). This makes action inherently unpredictable in its consequences (Arendt, 1958, p. 230) and therefore the antithesis of a narrow agenda or a means-towards-a-predefined-end approach, characteristic of instrumentalist approaches to public engagement.

For Arendt action, including speech, is the means by which we realise our natality, because it reveals an answer to the question 'Who are you?' (p. 178). It is the enactment of freedom. However, this does not only involve asserting one's opinions in the public sphere. Critical exploration of an issue with different others enables each one to interrogate their own taken-for-granted assumptions and values-based positions and to de-normalise them. It is a process by which previously uncritically assumed frames of reference – for example, mental and cultural boundaries and interpretations – can be questioned and renewed to become more critical and more reflective. It can be the dialogic process described by Bakhtin of 'coming to know one's own belief system [as it is perceived] in someone else's system' (1981, p. 365), enabling renewed understandings to be generated between people in their difference. Arendt's idea of action is therefore highly appropriate to renewing and transforming our understanding of issues in which there are potentially many perspectives and where there is no 'right answer', but rather the complexity of many understandings, epistemologies, purposes and practices manifested.

I believe that Arendt's theory of action therefore provides a conceptual framework for public engagement whose aim is to renew and deepen understandings as a basis for negotiated, morally informed action towards human development and social transformation. Such public engagement can inform understandings of how issues are framed for further enquiry, and whose perspectives and insights are considered legitimate in contributing to knowledge claims.

Conferences and public engagement in academic practice

Conferences can contribute to a public sphere of action, in which the public and academics, from different roles and backgrounds, can be acknowledged as having unique understandings of relevance to the issue of common concern, and as having knowledge-creating capacity about such issues. However, such opportunities offered by conferences are sometimes not fully taken up. Drawing on the work of Paolo Freire, Ravn (2007) refers to a 'banking' model of conferences, in which delegates are considered to be empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge of experts. Such conferences can rely largely on 'one-way communication' at the expense of discussion or ways of integrating the information in theory, research and practice and do not encourage 'interaction, engagement and reflection among participants', according to Wiessner et al. (2008, p. 367). Within this style of communication, knowledge disseminated in such conferences can be separate from the understandings and the practices of the people who are affected by its application. Such people may struggle to gain legitimacy for their perspectives and knowledge claims within theoretical approaches derived wholly from academia and which run the risk of being removed from the complexity of everyday challenges people face (Schön, 1995).

Even where there is interaction, there can be a tendency for participants to leave conferences with 'their own' learning, but with little understanding of the overall learning that could benefit their scholarship or practice (Wiessner et al., 2008, p. 368). This tends to assume the individual benefit of participation in a conference, instead of viewing it as part of a public sphere of action in which all participants in the process can develop renewed understandings from their interactions.

Narrow conceptions of who should attend can limit the potential of action in the public sphere. Gaventa and Bivens (2014, p. 72) argue that despite differences in disciplines and training, academics tend to have a similar world view in common and a 'monoculture of knowledge'. If conferences are only attended by academics, and those from a Westernised tradition of academia, the opportunity is missed for critical engagement and framing of issues of concern from a broad and, I would argue, more 'public' perspective. For example, Neves et al. (2012, p. 8) advocate the importance of 'balancing the power of typically dominant groups' by placing emphasis on increasing the participation from 'low- and middle- income country attendees' to promote plurality of perspectives. Enabling the engagement of academics alongside members of local communities and people from practice outside academia is another way of balancing the domination of particular perspectives and assumptions. There can also be an absence of meaningful student engagement in academic conferences, an issue lamented by Wood et al. (2017, p. 120) and one which limits their contribution around issues of concern to them.

The underlying premises and conduct of a conference can also be open to critical reflection and wider input. For example, conferences may suffer from a 'colonialist perspective', according to Lee, DeZure, Debowski, Ho, and Li (2013), which they argue is an 'inelastic practice with no accommodation to the otherness of the international colleague, because the otherness is still largely unseen or seen as inferior' (p. 91). I would argue that this colonialist perspective can equally apply to the potential contributions of those from professional practice and local communities outside academia, whose contributions to the understandings of issues of concern may be deemed inferior and

delegitimised. This limitation can impoverish the breadth of public engagement around issues which subsequently inform research, policy and practice.

Drawing on the work of Ravn (2007), the model of the 'learning conference' is advocated by Louw and Zuber-Skerritt (2011). They argue that the learning conference is a type of temporary learning organisation which fosters an environment in which members act and 'learn to learn together' as equals for the benefit of the whole, expressing ideas and challenging themselves in a culture of cooperation and trust.

Context and methodology

The conference which forms the context of this investigation took place in York, UK, in September 2015. It was held to mark the end of a three-year international Erasmus Mundus project, which was made up of multidisciplinary partners from universities in Bolivia, Peru, Portugal, Spain and the UK and collaborators from five continents. The aim of the Erasmus Mundus project was to engage communities in making visible the many ways of expressing value and values in their economic activities, encapsulated by the notion of the 'social and solidarity economy'. This is an economic system that includes entities such as social enterprises, cooperatives and other organisations with social and environmental, as well as economic, aims. Questioning the driving values of efficiency towards financial profit of the private sector, and the centralised control of the public sector, the social and solidarity economy could be seen as a manifestation of the idea of empowerment through the collective, socially oriented action intrinsic to Arendt's theory.

The project was designed to broaden and promote public engagement to inform the understandings from which knowledge is created about the economy. The end-of-project conference, described and explicated later, aimed to share what had been learnt in the three years of the project and expand the dialogues towards new publics, renewed understandings and new knowledge. In this sense, it was the start of new conversations, rather than purely the transmission of conclusions from previous ones.

Methodology of the investigation

The investigation into the end-of-project conference was based upon action research principles. As conference designer and coordinator, I was 'embedded within the research' (Bradbury, 2015, p. 2). Characteristically of action research, it aimed to challenge and change a social situation which the researcher identifies as unjust (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2015, p. 453). In this case, it aimed to challenge and change an approach within academia in which a wider public can be excluded from spaces in which knowledge and understandings are generated and shared. It aimed to expand ideas and practices of public engagement.

The intention was to work towards enacting and theorising alternatives and generate new understandings through public engagement based upon Arendt's public sphere of action. I have drawn on post-conference reflective dialogues with conference participants in which meanings of aspects of the event were co-constructed: a continuation of the public sphere of the conference. I have also included comments from participant evaluations carried out online a week after the conference.

The social and solidarity economy conference

In what follows, I draw out aspects of the design and practice of the conference and explain participatory methodology used which made the conference a space of public engagement. More details about the conference, along with information about participants and the participant evaluations, can be found in the Conference Report (2015). The processes of engagement and participation in the conference, and the theorisations of them, are explained in more detail in Meredith (2020).

The conference theme aimed to be one which could invite diverse responses from a wide variety of people from different contexts. It was entitled 'Developing Social Entrepreneurship Cultures through Cross-Sector Collaboration' and was organised by me and Catalina Quiroz-Niño as co-designers and co-ordinators of the project on behalf of the lead university in the UK. The conference aimed to address an issue of concern around which people representing different roles and sectors, and from the so-called global North and South, would have a unique contribution to make. We identified the need for such a conference in the following way:

> Many of the complex problems we face today require responses from multiple and interconnected sectors and perspectives. Cross-sector collaboration brings together different actors, each with unique expertise, experiences, and perspectives to find solutions to these problems.

> This conference aimed to address this question, not only to academics, but to social entrepreneurs, public policy officers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), graduates and students, posing the question: 'How can higher education foster interactions between the current economic systems (public, private and social) to promote social enterprise cultures for human-centred, sustainable development in our communities?' (Conference report, 2015, p. 3).

The conference as a public sphere of action

Participants came from the academic, social and solidarity economy, private sector and policy-making spheres, and from global North and global South contexts. Local and international social entrepreneurs and representatives from the third sector attended alongside university-based academics and policy makers from the European Union and Latin America. In addition to the plurality of disciplinary backgrounds, professional role and geographical region, some participants were specifically invited from regions generally less represented in international conferences, as highlighted by Neves et al. (2012), such as two academics from Cuba; students, who are often marginalised in academic conferences according to Wood et al. (2017, p. 120), were also positioned as an intrinsic part of the processes of knowledge sharing and creation aspects of the conference.

Catalina and I created a variety of spaces and processes in which, for example, participants from the global North or the global South (or both together) led sessions, and in which sessions were led by students, social enterprise practitioners or academics, or a combination of these. There were spaces focusing on spoken presentation or discussion and those focusing on artefacts. In the following section, I describe and explain some of these spaces and processes. These are placed under sub-headings which, I argue, draw out features of public engagement towards renewal and social

transformation which may be relevant to other contexts of engagement between academia and the wider community. Each of these are based upon Arendt's understanding of political action which, as explained previously is based on natality, or the capacity of each one to contribute to renewal, and plurality, which acknowledges our equal difference.

The opportunity to influence the agenda and propose conference themes

For meaningful public engagement in an Arendtian sense, the issues and questions of common concern cannot be tightly pre-engineered in advance. It is important to focus on an issue of common concern to potential participants. This meant that the objectives and methodology of the conference needed to consider the priorities and concerns of potential participants. Establishing the theme involved discussions with the Erasmus Mundus project partners, with project collaborators and their wider networks.

As part of the registration process, participants were asked to state their expectations for the conference and efforts were made to accommodate such expectations. Some of these expectations were highly specific and not easily accommodated into the main agenda. For this reason, time was allocated for 'open space' methodology (Owen, 2008), in which participants could propose a topic and invite others to coalesce around them for discussion. Participants could stay with a topic for as long as they felt they were contributing or gaining something from the dialogue. This approach was informed by an understanding of the importance for public engagement of people raising their own questions for enquiry, framing issues in their own way, or establishing points of interest and concern for possible collaborative action (Meredith & Quiroz-Niño, 2021).

Creating spaces for all participants to make a unique contribution

An important aspect of Arendt's theory of action is the capacity each agent has in bringing something new to the public sphere. In this section, two examples are given in which spaces were created to highlight the unique contribution different participants could make. The first of these involved a group of British Council-sponsored students who gave presentations to inform academics and policy makers about how higher education could take a greater lead in developing understandings and skills relevant to social entrepreneurship. The second example considers an event in the conference – the social economy fair – which involved social entrepreneurs and MBA students, people from very different backgrounds and professional experiences, working together towards a common purpose.

Example 1: The British Council students. Among the participants in the conference was a group of 18 students from the UK and Canada, who had recently completed international research placements in social enterprises sponsored by the British Council. The students were uniquely placed to contribute understandings towards ideas about how universities could best raise awareness and prepare students for social endeavours and social enterprise as a possible career choice. Prior to the conference the students worked individually and in small groups to organise their ideas about the actions universities could take to develop awareness and opportunities for students in this respect. During the conference itself the students presented these ideas to participating academics and to the European commissioner for education.

The student co-ordinator commented that the students:

[M]ade some really useful and interesting recommendations for different things that universities can do to try and encourage social entrepreneurship and raise awareness about social entrepreneurship opportunities amongst their students. (Conference video, 3.9.15)

Spontaneous relationships developed between some of the students and the social entrepreneurs and academics present, based around mentoring the students for their plans to develop socially focused enterprises, and developing conversations about the students' ideas to highlight social entrepreneurship as a viable career option within universities and prepare interested students for this. An academic from the UK explained: 'What's really intrigued me about the conference – there's been students working alongside the academics' (Conference video, 2015).

This dialogical engagement was expressed by one student who stated that she 'felt like there've not been any barriers' (Participating student, Conference video, 2015).

The contribution of these students to the conference was a professional development activity (Wood et al., 2017). As importantly, it enabled them to exercise their natality (Arendt, 1958) and make a unique contribution to the public sphere in the present, and as more than *potential* experts or *future* valued contributors and individuals with important knowledge in the future, which can subtly diminish the contribution of the person and the group in the here and now and is based upon a deficit model. In the conference design, they were positioned as 'beings' who have agency and expertise now, rather than as 'becomings' requiring professional development before their work can be taken seriously as a contribution to the public sphere and to the learning of others.

Example 2: The social economy fair. As well as the changing conceptualisations and dialogue towards collaboration referred to earlier, the conference promoted engagement between groups from very different contexts. This will now be explained in relation to a social economy fair, which took place on the second day of the conference. Local social enterprises were invited to set up stalls to demonstrate and discuss their activities, artefacts and practices with conference participants (Conference report, 2015, p. 46).

The event was planned and organised by master's degree students from the host university, overseen by Dr Chris Mortimer, director of the master's programme in business administration. The interaction took place between the social enterprise practitioners who tend to have particular, and well articulated, visions of the purposes and practices of their enterprises – as well as practical and tacit knowledges about dealing with the complexity of addressing human need – and the students, who had largely theoretical understandings and expertise in business administration, event planning and promotion. In this way, the interaction was designed to provide opportunities for engagement between people from different geographical and professional contexts.

Chris Mortimer reflected on the social economy fair and the transformative influence the engagement had on her MBA students and potentially for their renewed understandings towards their actions in the world:

[They] … were all international students … . What was really interesting is most of them never ever come into contact with this thing called social enterprise or social economy,

because they all come from cultures where making money from business at the moment is really, really important . . . .

So introducing students to this idea of social enterprise is really interesting, and they're like, 'Well why would people do it? If they're not making money from it, why do they do it?' So it opens up a huge dialogue about the importance of business within society and how business has to look after the society in which it operates. So, it's starting to touch on those more ethical things. But also, in a lot of these countries there is no national health service. There is no social welfare system. And if the countries want to grow everybody has to be given the opportunity of taking part in that growth. . . .

I think for a lot of the students when they met a lot of the social enterprises in real life they were like, 'Ah! Actually I can now understand where this would fit within my country and the gaps that it would help alleviate.'

Two of [the students] went on to do their dissertation about social economy and social enterprise in their own countries. (Transcript from recorded interview, 7 July 2016)

The experiences of organising the social economy fair offered the possibility of engagement between people from different roles and contexts. The practical collaboration enabled a renewal of understandings.

Plurality and creating opportunities to centre different perspectives

The conference design aimed for a balance of representation from global North and global South in the keynote presentations as well as for plurality of voices and perspectives based on different professional roles. Some keynote speakers presented theoretical understandings and conceptualisations. Others gave narrative accounts to identify and explain their journeys through practical challenges. In this way, knowledges using theoretical frameworks originating from academia were privileged alongside, rather than at the expense of, other perspectives.

Some of the themes were later explored in small group discussions in which participants were able to share and test ideas and assumptions. The insights gained at each round table were presented to all conference participants. One commented in their conference evaluation that their roundtable 'was highly engaging and gave the speakers present the opportunity to openly debate an array of possible solutions and outcomes in view of developing social entrepreneurship in the university context'. Another participant stated: 'It set up the exchange of perspectives and laid out bridges between participants.'

Plurality as equal difference – avoiding a 'deficit' model

The conference was conducted through the medium of two languages. It was designed around a recognition of plurality and equal difference, as much as possible, between English and Spanish as the main languages with interpretation from and to either language being available for those who needed it. As such, no participant was identified as a 'non-speaker' of a particular language and positioned as having a deficit on the basis of mother tongue or preferred language. All participants spoke one or both of the languages of the conference and all were equal in a linguistic sense. This meant that each could contribute their perspectives and insights in their most familiar language. At one moment, their own language was the medium of expression and speakers of the other language relied on translation. At other moments, this dynamic was reversed.

From multiple dialogues to one public sphere

Arendt's (1958) notion of action in the public sphere involves engagement and dialogue around an issue of common concern. To promote sharing of such 'common-ness' and making public the results of the multiple interactions, Catalina and I gave consideration to how this greater sense of the whole of the dialogues around the issue could be shared and recorded in a way that started to overcome the limitations of multiple, live dialogues and enable a greater sense of the overall learning and insights gained through the interactions.

Bringing the dialogues together was achieved in three main ways. First, in the foyer of the conference participants' expectations solicited prior to the conference itself, as explained earlier, were displayed on a wall. Alongside statements of expectations, participants were invited to develop a 'working wall' or 'Hub' of responses and comments on Post-it notes as the conference progressed, on which they could summarise any new insights they had developed during the parallel sessions and other events, any new actions they planned to take in light of their learning and experiences in these sessions, and any new contacts they would like to make to discuss specific themes arising from the sessions. In this way, I would argue that the engagement was oriented towards purposeful action.

Project collaborators collated many of the insights shared by participants in the Hub. So as a second way of bringing the dialogues together, participants gathered at key moments of the conference for a summary of insights and reflections recorded in the Hub. This was regarded positively in participant evaluations. For example, one described it as 'Super useful', while another 'Loved the summary of the sessions'.

Third, the Conference Report (2015), referred to earlier, was created and made available online following the conference. This report summarised keynote and parallel session presentations, key points recorded from the round tables, participant pre-conference expectations and post-conference evaluations and photographs of the event. A video of the conference was also produced (Conference video, 2015). Both artefacts provided a means of bridging the 'real time', synchronous nature of the communication within the conference and the advantage of products which enabled reflection away from the live event.

These three practices meant that participants could leave with more than their own fragment of learning and with a sense of the bigger picture of others' learning (Wiessner et al., 2008) and of the insights and understandings generated.

Participant reflections on the participative methodology

In this section I will present participant responses to the conference in relation to Arendt's (1958) notion of a public sphere of action based on natality and plurality, and the renewal of understandings this generated around the issue in focus.

Public engagement in a sphere of plurality

The plurality of the spaces of engagement was commented upon by participants, who appreciated 'the opportunity to hear from and meet with international practitioners and not just the usual suspects'. The sense of equality of contribution between participants was noted by one, who appreciated a 'sense of parity, everyone engaging with one another

as peers'. One participant noted in their conference evaluation that 'there was good variety and plenty of space to listen and to engage and each delegate seemed to have their moment'. Many participants referred in their evaluations to changes in their thinking from their engagement in interactions in the conference. One participant drew attention to the 'cross-pollination of shared values across continents [and] the debates and shifts of terminology that happened as a result of the interaction'. Another found it 'very productive because we found ourselves between different countries and cultures accepting the limits of the Western paradigm and talking about education, learning, knowledge(s) and some really important ideas.'

Some participants reflected on a change in their thinking about the idea of a social economy in relation to their work, for example: 'It changed substantially the way I envisage the social solidarity economy and the work of universities.' In an email dialogue about the influence the conference had had on her renewed understandings and practice, an academic based in the United States commented:

> So, the York conference did open up and created a space for dialogue, reflection, and re-framing of my practice. The conversation that took place was not just inter, but intra within myself as an educator of the arts and what they mean for whom we serve. (Dr Miwon Choe, email exchange, 1.4.18. Unreferenced)

Others alluded to similar internal dialogues. For example, for one, their participation '[f]orced me to think more about the nature of interdisciplinary learning and how it can be enhanced within post-secondary institutions.' Another stated it 'gave us an opportunity to share and re-conceptualize what matters for us to carry on our work as educators, community leaders, and organizers'.

Arendt's theory of action in the public sphere implies going beyond talking and moving into action in the world we have in common. The planning of negotiated action was referred to by participants. One highlighted the 'space for dialogue and developing concrete ideas for action'. For another it 'encouraged constant exchange between participants and possible involvement in future projects, as well as serious and deep theoretical discussion'.

The complete evaluations can be found in the Conference report in the language in which they were written (English or Spanish) (2015, pp. 48–52); the evaluations written in Spanish are translated into English in Meredith (2020, pp. 318–334).

Conclusion: reconceptualising public engagement in academic practice

The capacity of each one to contribute to renewal on the basis of our equality in difference is a key idea in Arendt's theory of action in the public sphere. In this paper, I have used it to inform understandings of public engagement as part of academic practice. The principles of such public engagement, as exemplified in this paper, involve creating spaces and processes in which understandings of all participants can be transformed through engagement with different others. I identify these principles as: enabling the public to influence the agenda and frame their own themes; creating spaces for all participants to make a unique contribution; using opportunities to centre different perspectives; ensuring equal status in areas of difference – avoiding a 'deficit' model; and bringing the dialogues together into one public sphere. The principles, developed

from and enacted in an international conference, are relevant, I believe, to reconceptualising a wide variety of contexts and practices of public engagement.

Disclosure statement

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