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Editorial: Descending from the Ivory Tower: The Challenges and Successes of Community Engagement for Mutual Learning

Lesley Wood, Laetitia Greyling and Petrusa du Toit (Guest Editors)

The aim of this journal is to offer a platform for disseminating research that promotes social change. As an editor of the journal, I believe the ultimate purpose of education is to improve quality of life for all, and this aim must entail moving towards a more socially just society. Educational research should make important epistemological and ontological contributions to social improvement through theories and practices that make a real difference in the lives of people. In theory, academics in higher education can influence social change by integrating the core academic tasks of teaching, research, and community engagement through community-based research and/or service learning. In practice, the process is not so simple.

The aim of this themed edition is to share research that promotes participatory forms of community engagement that seek to "break down the distinction between researchers and researched" (Gaventa, 1991, pp. 121–122) to enable collaborative generation of knowledge and the development of awareness as catalyst to mobilise for social change. However, when tertiary researchers decide to descend from their "ivory towers" to work with communities, they are often faced with challenges that hinder their attempts to engage in a collaborative manner with community partners. This is to be expected, because the life experiences of academic researchers and community members living in contexts of poverty and social injustice are usually worlds apart. Researchers trained to be objective, uninvolved "truth" seekers often find it difficult to partner with people who are used to a less clinical approach to interaction and decision making. Engaging authentically with community members requires researchers to invest emotionally in the lives of others, to develop a strong sense of empathy, and to genuinely care about those they are professing to help. Traditionally, research has been conducted *on* people, rather than *with* them. Researchers have excluded participants from the research process—what to research, how to do it, and what to do with the results. As academics, we have made decisions on behalf of others, justifying this violation of democratic values by citing our superior knowledge of theory and methodology.

This reasoning is no longer acceptable; for knowledge to be converted to relevant, sustainable change, we have to begin to grapple with the intellectual conundrum of how to distribute more evenly the fruits of democracy (Wood, 2014). To do this, we have to be able to develop a trusting relationship with community partners so that we can work together to generate knowledge that will lead to improved quality of life and a more socially just way of being. As researchers, we are in as much need of epistemological emancipation as those we call our community participants.

As Hardman (2014) argued, we need an epistemology of engagement that allows for the voices of the different stakeholders in the research to be heard and listened to, so that new knowledge can be synergistically created from combined wisdom. For this to happen, I argue that the research paradigm has to be emancipatory and transformative, the research design must be participatory, and findings have to be disseminated where they will make a difference. We need methodologies that take cognisance of the fact that "change unfolds in non-linear ways, paradoxes abound, creative solutions arise out of interaction under conditions of uncertainty, diversity and instability (Fullan, 1994, p. 4). Such approaches to research

allow for an engagement that "provides a space for generative learning, which is explorative in nature, rather than exploitative" (Hardman, 2014, p. 98).

Some twenty years ago, Nash (1993, p. 54) said "the fundamental dilemma is that participatory researchers who want to work with marginalised communities must demonstrate how their work is significant for the lives, needs and aspirations of . . . communities." Today, that dilemma still exists, and this themed issue is aimed at promoting debate and contributing to the generation of knowledge in this under theorised field.

In the first article, Zuber-Skerritt proposes participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as a theoretical framework and methodological approach to community engagement by university researchers. PALAR combines participatory action research with the notion of lifelong action learning, resulting in sustainable and meaningful change for all participants. Action research has three main intents—theoretical, emancipatory, and practical—and in this article, Zuber-Skerritt explains how PALAR can be applied to guide university and community partnerships in research to:

- generate knowledge that is culturally and contextually relevant;
- help people to think laterally and holistically to free them from epistemological oppression; and
- make and sustain positive changes in their circumstances.

This conceptual argument is strengthened by the provision of practical guidelines to design a PALAR project.

Kearney then presents a case study, based on a PALAR project conducted in Australia, highlighting the challenges of community–university research partnerships, which seem to echo the experiences of South African researchers. Based on her extensive experience in leading such collaborative partnerships, she offers some suggestions as to how challenges can be minimised. Her conclusions help us to think about what university policies we might question, and how we should go about structuring community engagement to make it a mutually beneficial learning process.

Researchers who undertake community-based research tend to do so because they are committed to promoting the well-being of others, and to contributing to the creation of a more just society. Cherrington uses participatory visual methods to increase the social agency of children in rural areas, through the imagining of hope. This personal reflection on her learning provides helpful lessons about establishing a working relationship for engaged research to generate cocreated knowledge. She also raises some interesting points about the ethical issues of collaborative research with children.

The next three articles shift the focus to student learning for community engagement. In recent years, community-engaged programmes have become a core focus in higher education (Bender, 2013) and service learning, a scholarly form of community engagement, is becoming entrenched in many programmes (Smith-Tolken & du Plessis, 2013). Service learning to promote social change has to be a critical, justice-oriented, disruptive pedagogical practice (Butin, 2005) where students partner with community members for mutual learning and development. Dippenaar et al. share the lessons learnt from one service learning experience spanning several years. Service learning is becoming an integral part of student preparation for working in a diverse and fast-changing world, and the learning from this article can help to inspire and guide other academics who may be struggling with the integration of a meaningful and reciprocal community-based learning experience into existing curricula.

Esau then provides insight into two different student experiences of community engagement: one concerned with service learning in the undergraduate teacher education curriculum, and one focused on the postgraduate experience. He raises some interesting points about the need for academics and students to gain an empathic understanding of community members' lived reality and how it might impact on the collaborative relationship. He clearly demonstrates the value of such an experience for student learning.

Finally, Wood et al. address an aspect that is at the core of all participatory, engaged research: that of the need to be able to critically reflect on the process and emerging learning, and to be able to facilitate this skill in participants who are not normally required to be so self-reflective. This account of postgraduate and supervisor learning offers useful insight to other academics struggling to master the art of critical self-reflection.

The articles in this issue, written by leading international and national scholars in the field, provide suggestions to answer some of the key questions that scholars in community engagement grapple with, such as:

- What are suitable conceptions or theoretical frameworks for community engagement to promote mutual learning and sustainable change?
- What are the experiences and needs of community–university partners with regard to community engagement?
- What are the challenges of participatory community engagement, and how could they be addressed?
- What key lessons can be learnt from accounts of successful community engagement?
- How can we educate students to be able to engage with communities to create knowledge partnerships?

Together, the articles thus contribute to the emerging body of scholarship around community-engaged practice in higher education. Continuing with the theme, Waddington and Hendricks report on their experience of attending the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) conference in Gateshead last year, with the theme of *Connecting Researchers, Connecting Communities*. Okafor closes the issue with a concise review of Swanepoel and de Beer's recent book, *The Community Development Profession: Issues, Concepts and Approaches*, which advances the call for participatory and democratic forms of community engagement put forward by the articles.

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Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) for Community Engagement: A Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to make a new genre of action research accessible to readers in theory and practice that is distilled from my forthcoming work (in Zuber-Skerritt, Kearney, & Fletcher, 2015). Here the focus is on participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), a conceptual integration of lifelong action learning and participatory action research. PALAR is conceived as a philosophy, a methodology, a theory of learning, and as a facilitation process for community engagement. The paper explains the meaning, significance, benefits, effectiveness, applications, successes, and challenges of PALAR with regard to community engagement. The Appendix provides practical guidelines for strategic team design of a PALAR project.

Keywords: community engagement, PALAR, lifelong action learning, participatory action research, theoretical framework

Introduction

Community engagement is a core function of higher education in South Africa and other countries. Yet relatively few academics and postgraduate students in higher education and related fields know how to conduct research and development in this emergent area of scholarship. The need for capacity building in theory and practice is clear. This conceptual paper therefore builds on previous research that positions participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as one possible approach to effective, collaborative, creative, innovative, and self-developed community engagement (Kearney, Wood, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2011; Zuber-Skerritt, Kearney, & Fletcher, 2015). The purpose of this paper is to present the essence of this work by developing a theoretical framework and vision for community engagement through PALAR and to contribute to understanding what kind of research, knowledge, and action we need to create in order to achieve practical community engagement and improvement for social justice and for positive, transformative, and sustainable change.

The conceptual models I have developed are based on my practical experience in higher education for over 40 years and on my critique of the literature on qualitative research methodology, lifelong action learning, participatory action research, and higher education. In particular, the models are based on my experience of designing, conducting, and evaluating PALAR programs with academics, postgraduate students, and community leaders in several universities and private business schools in Australia, South Africa, and other countries—collaboratively with my coauthors mentioned above, and with other scholars. I've invited some colleagues as critical friends to provide constructive feedback on drafts of my theoretical framework that I present here in revised form (before developing it further in later work). The paper is structured around, and based on seven questions, using interrogative pronouns:

What is PALAR and its theoretical framework?

Why is it important in this 21st century?

Who can benefit?

How can PALAR be learnt and facilitated?

When is it appropriate and/or effective or not?

Where can it be applied?

What are the successes and challenges?

What is PALAR and its Theoretical Framework?

PALAR is an acronym for participatory action learning and action research. It is a holistic, integrative concept that incorporates related concepts and values such as participation, collaboration, communication, community of practice, networking, and synergy. It is also related to ALAR, an integrated concept of action learning (AL, traditionally used in organisation and management development) and action research (AR, traditionally developed in social work, education, and higher education). Although several authors (Knowles, 1985; Margerison & McCann, 1985) had noticed the similarities between action learning and action research before, these two traditions were brought together for the first time at an international conference, namely, the First World Congress on Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management (ALARPM) at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia, in 1990 with 360 delegates from across the world and from all sectors of society (including consultants from industry, government, and business schools, and school and tertiary teachers and university staff). A year later we founded the ALARPM Association, now called ALARA (Action Learning and Action Research Association). At the fourth ALARA World Congress, organised by Orlando Fals Borda in Cartagena, Colombia in 1997, we had about 1,850 delegates because we partnered with the Participatory Action Research (PAR) network whose members have been concerned mainly with community development, mobilisation, and engagement. In this way, the concept of PALAR has emerged and included further related concepts such as lifelong action learning or LAL (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) and action leadership (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). I have defined action leadership as "collaborative, shared leadership in the form of *primus inter pares* [the first among equals], guided by democratic, ethical human values and universal principles, and developed in learning and coaching partnerships" (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011, p. 222) as opposed to individual charismatic leadership, or as a top position with high status in an hierarchical organisation. Action leadership can be developed through PALAR.

PALAR is not static; it is an ongoing, emergent genre in the large family of action research, including action learning (AL), lifelong action learning (LAL), action research (AR), action learning and action research (ALAR), educational action research (EAR), collaborative action research (CAR), participatory action research (PAR), critical participatory action research (CPAR), participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), action science (AS), appreciative inquiry (AI), and so forth. Table 1 summarises the key characteristics of, and the relevant central references to, these main kinds and derivatives of action

research for the reader's information and further study interest.[1] My preferred kind of action research is PALAR, but I realise that it is but one way of integrating action learning and action research—and that other approaches are capable of achieving effective outcomes. Even within PALAR, there are often choices to be made about how a particular part might be implemented.

Table 1: Examples of Some Kinds of Action Research (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015, pp. 105–106)

Acronym	Key features and references
AL	Action learning means: asking fresh questions; learning from and with one another in sets or support groups; working together collaboratively on solving complex problems of mutual concern; sharing experiences, ideas, feelings; and critically reflecting on what works and what does not, how and how not, and why or why not. It aims to improve or change work practices and to create knowledge or understanding (Brockbank & McGill, 2007; Dotlich & Noel, 1998; Marquardt, 1999; McGill & Brockbank, 2004; Pedler, 1997, 2008; Revans, 1982).
LAL	Lifelong action learning integrates the concepts of action learning and lifelong learning. Active and transformational learning for life and not confined to childhood or the classroom, it is voluntary, self-motivated learning from our daily interactions with others, therefore ongoing. It enhances inclusion, active citizenship and personal, professional, and organisation or community development (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013).
AR	Traditional or practical action research involves solving social problems individually or collaboratively, using a spiral of action research cycles (plan–act–observe–reflect) and making the results public. It integrates research and action, theory and practice, research and development, creating knowledge and improving practice (Lewin, 1946, 1948, 1951; McNiff, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2008, 2013; Stringer, 2013).
ALAR	ALAR is an integrated concept of inquiry, using AL processes and AR principles, following the same philosophy, paradigm, and methods in ALAR programs or projects. ALARA (www.alarassociation.org) is the ALAR association of international practitioners and scholars from diverse fields and sections of society (Zuber-Skerritt, 2009). ALARA publishes the *ALAR Journal* (http://journal.alara.net.au) and a series of monographs.
EAR	Educational AR aims to improve learning, teaching, curriculum, and administration at the primary and secondary school levels and in higher education, especially teacher, pre- and in-service training (Altrichter et al., 2000; Noffke & Somekh, 2009). The *EAR Journal* is available online at http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/reac20#.U7VQV7G4NsI
CAR	Collaborative AR is conducted by a group of people (not an individual) who work with or without a facilitator or educational researcher. CAR includes EAR but is also used in the health sciences, community development, and other fields (Goodnough, 2011). CARN (www.mmu.ac.uk/carn) is the international CAR network.
PAR	Participatory AR is like CAR but is always aiming at inclusion, social justice, and equality of participants in the research. PAR originated in developing countries but then spread across the world. PAR is also an international network of scholars and practitioners from diverse fields and sections of society (Fals Borda, 1998; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1972; Hunter et al., 2013; Koch & Kralik, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2013).
CPAR	Critical participatory AR aims at social justice and participants' emancipation—from a critical theorist perspective. It distinguishes between technical, practical, and critical AR (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, 2005; Kemmis et al., 2014).
PALAR	PALAR is an integrated concept of ALAR and PAR and lifelong learning, aiming at positive social change for a just and better world for all human beings. Action leadership can be developed through PALAR (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, 2011; Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013).
AS	Action science is a combination of mainstream science and action research, improving practice through collaboration and reflective dialogue (Argyris et al., 1985; Helskog, 2014; Raelin, 1997).
AI	Appreciative inquiry is a collaborative approach to studying and changing social systems such as groups, organisations, communities (Bushe, 2013; Cooperrider et al., 2008).

To more deeply understand this action research genre of PALAR, one needs to understand the philosophical assumptions underpinning the practice and applications.

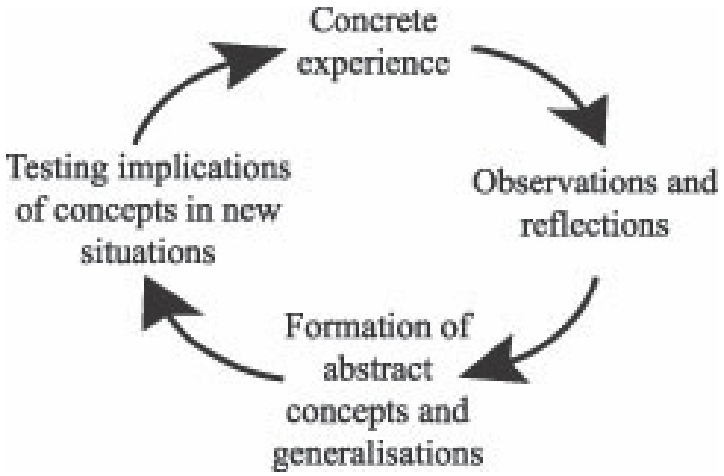
Assumptions about learning and knowledge creation

Traditionally, it has been assumed that scientific knowledge is created by specialist scholars, scientists, or theorists and then applied by practitioners. In contrast, the basic epistemological assumption in participatory action learning and action research is that practitioners, too, can create knowledge on the

[1] Tables 1 and 3 and Figures 2–5 are reprinted here from Zuber-Skerritt et al. (2015) with permission of the publisher (email of 31 July, 2014 from Beth O'Leary).

basis of concrete experience by critically reflecting on this experience, formulating abstract generalisations from it, and testing these newly created concepts in new situations—thus gaining new concrete experience, and continuing the next cycle of experiential learning and knowledge creation. Figure 1 illustrates this experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984, p. 21) as an ongoing lifelong cycle of learning and creating knowledge.

Figure 1: Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992a, p. 97)



The brief summary of PALAR in Table 1 indicates it is an alternative learning paradigm compared with learning in traditional education systems. Some schools and universities have incorporated characteristics of action learning and action research in their programs. To help readers understand the different frameworks used in educational institutions today, the contrasting characteristics of these frameworks are juxtaposed in Table 2.[2]

Table 2: Comparison between PALAR and Traditional Education (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013, p. 17)

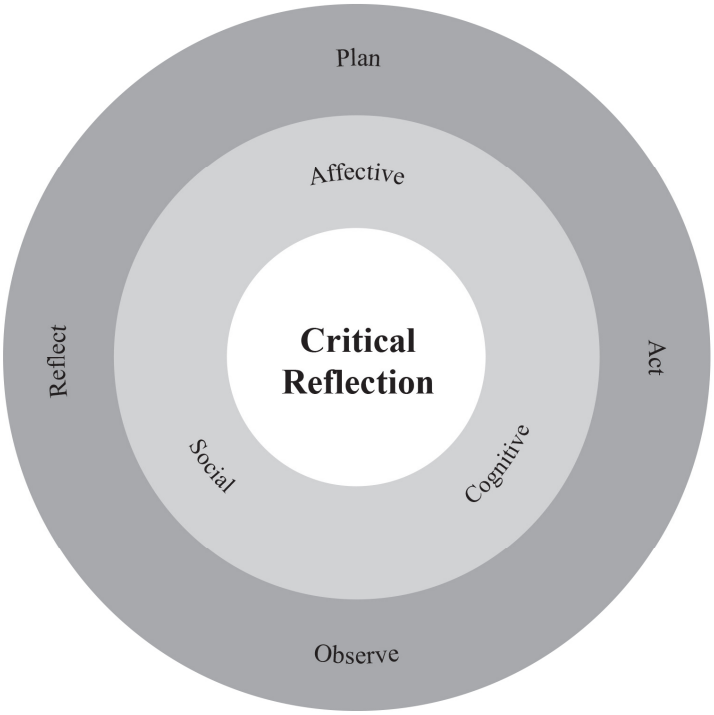
PALAR	**Traditional education**
Learner centred	Teacher centred
Process and project based	Content and curriculum based
Interdisciplinary, problem oriented	Disciplinary, departmentalised
Located in real life/work	Located in classroom/laboratory
Inclusive, accessible to all, aimed at social justice	Exclusive, elitist, social justice not a conscious priority
Informal, self-directed learning	Formal education, policy based
Based on contemporary cultural context	Based on dominant Western values and worldviews
Communities of learning, AL sets	Mainly individualised learning
Collaboration, cooperation	Competition (e.g., in assessment system)

[2] Table 2 is adapted and printed here from Zuber-Skerritt and Teare (2013, p. 17) with permission of Sense Publishers (email of 28 July, 2014 from Peter de Liefde).

Affective-socio-cognitive approach

PALAR is a holistic approach to learning, research and development, recognising and dealing with our emotions, feelings and intuitions (the affective realm), as well as our logical, rational, analytical, and critical thinking (the cognitive realm), and with social influences, contexts, and conditions (the social realm). Within our social relationships, we negotiate meanings through dialogue, dialectics, paradoxes, and discussions among critical friends who trust and respect one another as equals, while each has unique talents and viewpoints. This affective-socio-cognitive approach to PALAR has been confirmed and validated by neuroscientific research. Fletcher (2015) has constructively compared PALAR principles with principles of neuroscience, as Figure 2 and Table 3 below demonstrate.

Figure 2: An Affective-Socio-Cognitive Framework for PALAR (Fletcher, 2015, p. 67)



The Figure 2 diagram emphasises critical reflection as the central requirement for transformation in this affective-socio-cognitive approach and in PALAR's cyclical processes of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Table 3 presents further explanation of Figure 2, comparing the learning principles in neuroscience and PALAR.

Table 3: Alignment of Brain/Mind and PALAR Principles (Source: Fletcher, 2015, pp. 68–69)

Brain/Mind learning principles	PALAR principles
1. All learning is physiological and the brain functions simultaneously on many levels as the entire system interacts and exchanges information with its environment.	PALAR involves Body/Brain/Mind interactions for learning. Mental processes and physical actions interact through the plan–act–observe–reflect cycle and support the inter-connectedness of the body, brain, and mind when researching new learnings.
2. The Brain/Mind is social. We learn through our dynamic interactions with others and through the responses we share.	PALAR is social and we learn together. Professional learning teams and communities work collaboratively, develop social and professional relationships, and engage in critical dialogue.
3. The human search for meaning is innate. We have evolved to make sense of our experiences and to seek purpose in life.	PALAR is an inquiry approach seeking transformational learning through making meaning of our experiences. It is purpose driven and solution oriented.
4. The search for meaning occurs through patterning. The brain creates schematic maps and organises information, making connections with the familiar while creating new and creative links.	PALAR uses observational evidence, drawing on prior knowledge and making connections, organising plans, and taking actions that form the basis for testing novel actions and creating knowledge.
5. Emotions are critical to patterning. Emotions and thoughts shape each other and cannot be separated. Mindsets such as expectancy, bias, and prejudice influence how and what we learn.	PALAR is concerned with emotions, recognising how feelings influence our actions. The critical reflective process seeks to uncover patterns of actions or thinking that may be biased and limiting.
6. The Brain/Mind processes parts and wholes simultaneously as it reduces information into parts while perceiving the whole or big picture. Parts and wholes are conceptually interactive.	The PALAR cycle is an evolving, recursive flexible process. Each aspect of the cycle interacts with the others as we work from a big-picture, goal-oriented question that we then conceptualise and detail in a plan of action.
7. Learning involves both focused attention and peripheral perception. The brain absorbs information directly and indirectly, and codes every sensory input it encounters to create complex meanings.	PALAR demands focused attention throughout the plan–act–observe–reflect cycle. Reflections make explicit the role contextual factors may play in unconsciously shaping our explanations. Tacit knowledge is made explicit through reflection.
8. Learning always involves conscious and unconscious processes. Active processing increases our awareness of the learning.	PALAR is a meta-cognitive process, learning through critical reflection and attending, over time, to those conscious and non-conscious influences that impact on the actions and observations we make while gathering and interpreting data.
9. There are at least two approaches to memory: archiving individual facts or skills (memorisation), and storing personal, connected, and novel experiences.	The PALAR cycle engages the many memory systems the brain uses to move from memorising knowledge to a more dynamic creation of knowledge through exploring personal, connected, and novel experiences.
10. Learning is developmental, building on previous experiences by creating new neural connections throughout life.	PALAR is a cumulative process that builds on previous cycles of planning through reflective observations on our actions and experiences.
11. Complex learning is enhanced by challenge and inhibited by threat associated with helplessness. Perceived threat results in the brain reverting to primitive attitudes and procedures.	PALAR challenges and rewards effort by building a supportive learning environment that empowers participants to search for new knowledge and to transform their practice.
12. Each brain is uniquely organised. We have the same set of systems but we are genetically different and integrate experiences differently so that the more we learn the more unique we become.	PALAR celebrates the talents, skills, and knowledge participants bring to the learning experience. The process emphasises agency and informed choice throughout the inquiry process. The idiosyncratic nature of learning is embraced and participants are encouraged to build on their own strengths and unique talents when designing their action research projects.

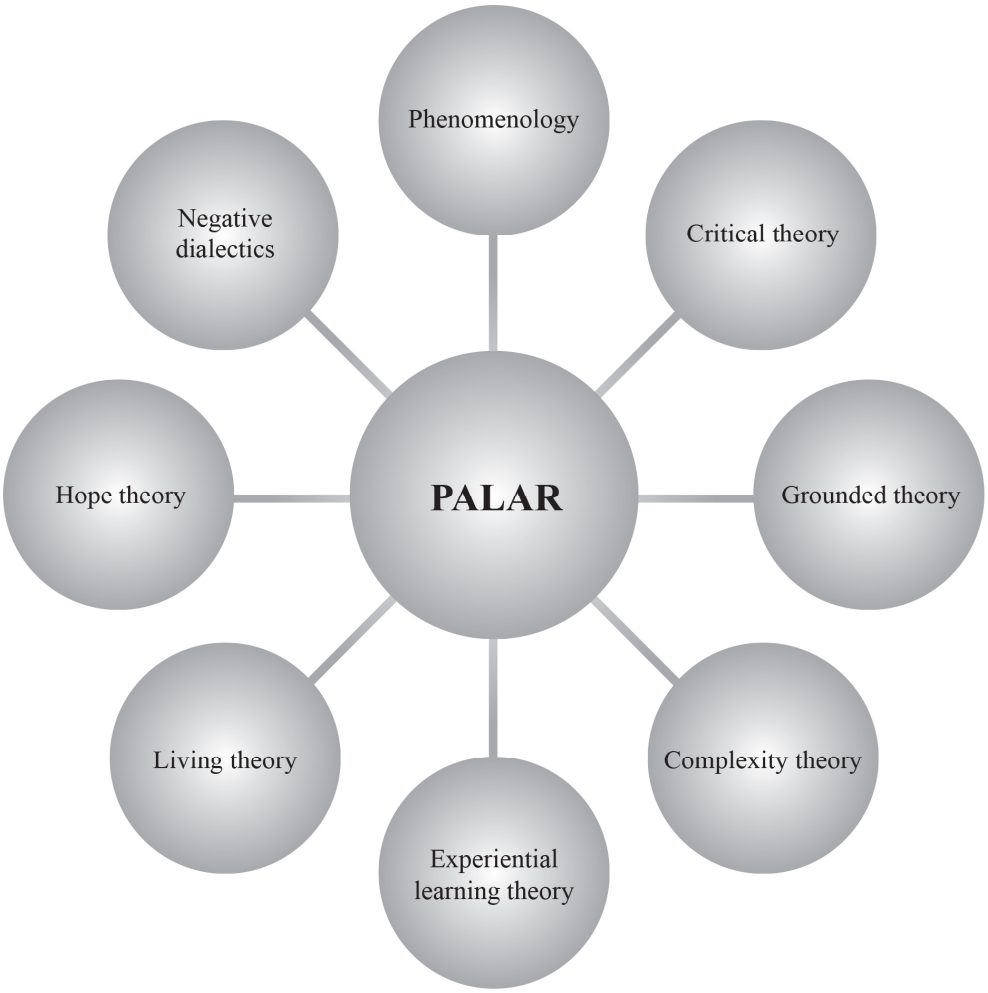
As Fletcher (2015) observed:

> *These Brain/Mind, and PALAR principles have important implications for the design, implementation and facilitation of adult learning programs. The Brain/Mind principles relate to the key principles of participatory action learning and action research through prioritising learners' needs, recognising their prior knowledge, and creating a collaborative, supportive learning space where making sense of experience is an affective-socio-cognitive process. PALAR explicitly acknowledges the emotional and social influences that determine if and how we participate in transformative learning. (p. 70)*

Theoretical embeddedness

Many philosophies and theories, or certain elements thereof, have influenced the wide family of action learning and action research. It is important for us to be able to identify and justify our theoretical framework so we can defend the validity of our research and evaluation. Figure 3 is an example of PALAR's theoretical embeddedness.

Figure 3: Theoretical Embeddedness of PALAR (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015, p. 5)



Because of the scope and limitations of this paper, I can explain only briefly the main characteristics of these theories. *Phenomenology* is a philosophy, research methodology, and the overall PALAR paradigm—the study of phenomena as they appear in our experience and how we understand them in our consciousness from our subjective perspective. Conceptual findings are derived from the research data (e.g., interview data), as in *grounded theory* that uses qualitative data and analysis to elicit meaning, to gain understanding, and to develop empirical knowledge or theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, 2013). *Complexity theory* is another theory relevant to phenomenology, grounded theory, and action research. It can be explained as four main domains: two ordered (simple or complicated) and two unordered (complex or chaotic) domains. It is in complex situations, when the right answers cannot be predicted, that PALAR is beneficial, because in problem solving we make use of trial and error and learning by mistakes or falling forward (Maxwell 2010), that is, using mistakes as stepping stones for success. This is also where *experiential learning theory* is relevant, as already mentioned (Kolb, 1984).

Living theory is an approach to explaining educational influences in a person's learning (Whitehead, 1989). *Hope theory* conceptualises hope as a motivational construct (Edwards & McClintock, 2013) and as an innate and learned pattern of thinking that predicts well-being (Shorey et al., 2002). Snyder (2002) identified three elements of hope theory (goals, pathways, and agency) that are relevant to PALAR because our goals are always directed to the well-being of people. Our vision of a better, freer, more just world motivates and energises us to try various strategies and pathways to achieve our goals as activists. On the other hand, we are also critically aware of hope theory because *critical theory* provides us with an awareness of not only positive but also negative aspects of human agency, such as power, control, and managerialism, which can impede progress, change, and improvement (Habermas, 1978). Kemmis et al. (2014) distinguished between technical, practical, and emancipatory action research. The latter is included in PALAR that takes a critical theorist perspective.

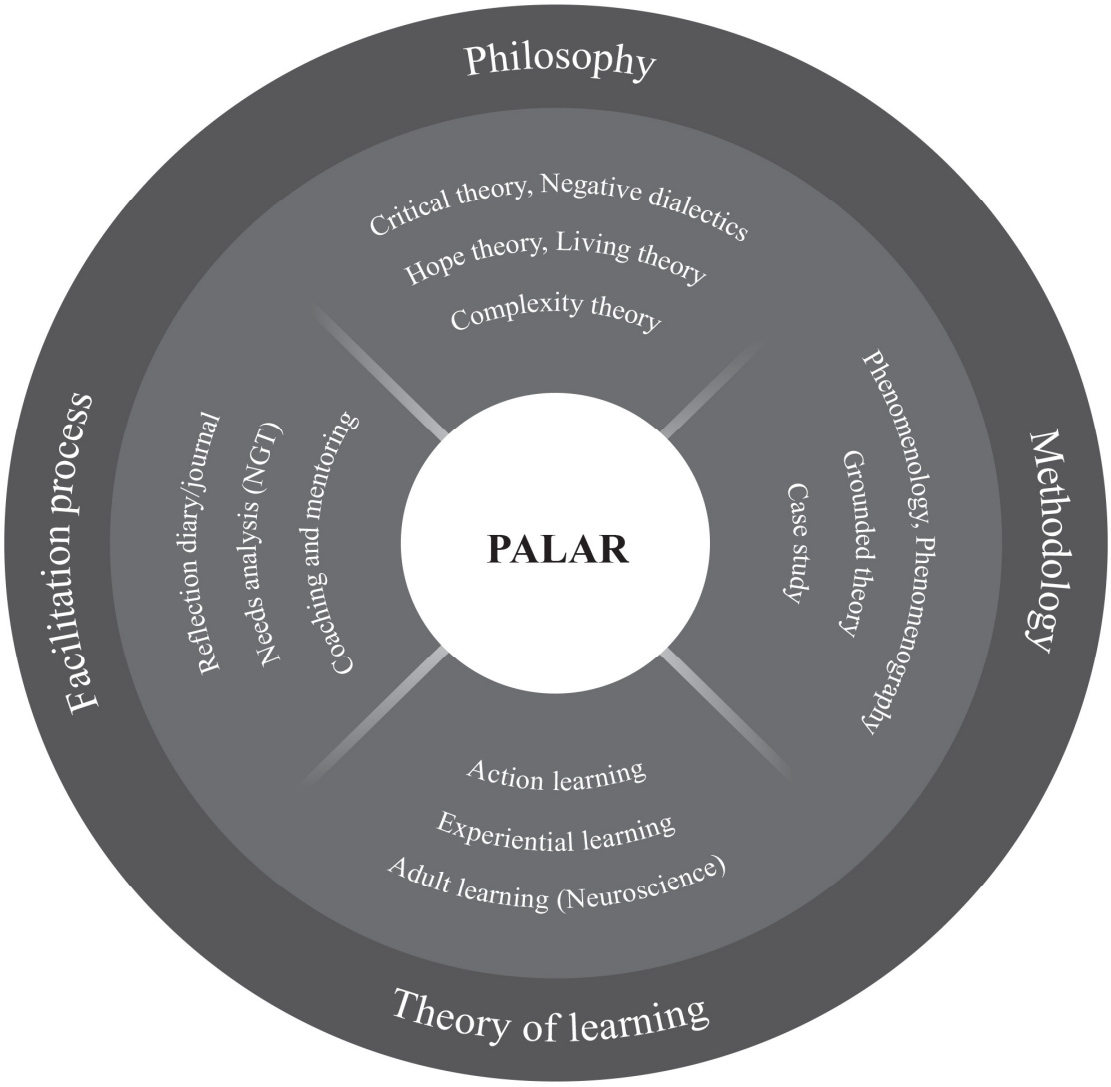
I also include Adorno's (2006, 2008) *negative dialectics*, because it can teach us that the complex, messy, and wicked nature of the social world, including injustice in society and education, should not be simplified in neat classifications and categories but explored by a variety of perspectives and methods of research. Adorno rejected the neat dialectical idea of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis because he did not believe in a guaranteed "happy ending" (as cited in Holloway, 2009, p. 110). Therefore, he has been criticised frequently as a pessimistic thinker; but his philosophy is not of unrelieved hopelessness. As McArthur (2012) put it, Adorno's philosophy is "a rejection of false hope, just as of false clarity. He rejects firmly any concept of dialectics that *promises* victory, emancipation, or peace" (p. 423). So Adorno did not abandon dialectics, but he did problematise it. In action research too, incorporating aspects of uncertainty enhances, rather than diminishes, rigour in research. We accept that new knowledge is tentative, contested, and subject to change, but it is worth pursuing and struggling to find our next "provisional resting places" (Barber, 1992, p. 110). In our findings, we accept contingent, wicked, and multiple meanings, rather than regarding them as personal failures, inexperience, lack of success, or something having gone wrong. This does not mean that any meaning is valid at any time, but that there is space for the unexpected, unusual, and unexplored.

Theoretical framework for PALAR

I have argued that the paradigm of participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) constitutes a philosophy, a methodology, a theory of learning, and a facilitation process, as shown in Figure 4.

PALAR as a philosophy is embedded in the theories outlined above. The main methodologies we have used in PALAR include case study methodology, grounded theory, phenomenology, and phenomenography—a qualitative research methodology with a non-dualist viewpoint (i.e., there is only one world, but one that people experience and describe in many different ways). PALAR's theory of learning includes adult learning theory in general, and action learning and experiential learning in particular. PALAR as a facilitation process has included, among other processes, needs analysis (using the Nominal Group Technique), reflection diary or journal, and mentoring and coaching. For more details of PALAR facilitation processes see my Chapter 2 in Zuber-Skerritt and Teare (2013, pp. 29–63).

Figure 4: Theoretical Framework for PALAR (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015, p. 110)



Why Is PALAR Important Today?

In this 21st century and in a rapidly changing, turbulent world with natural and human-induced disasters, we need a shift in mindsets, paradigms, and skills, including creative, innovative, and dialectic thinking, transformational learning, and change for social justice and sustainable development (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012):

> *In these situations worldwide, traditional research and development strategies alone are not sufficient for problem solving and sustainable development. They need to be supplemented with human initiatives, creative innovations and prompt action, all based on values that are grounded in pursuit of the common good through principles upholding non-hierarchical and democratic processes, personal courage, and a shared commitment to helping others—other-centredness instead of self-centredness. These strategies need to proceed from recognition that people on the ground are invaluable sources of local knowledge, wisdom and insight, which should be called upon for problem solving and new knowledge creation. (pp. 4–5)*

That is why PALAR has an important role to play, not only as a method or methodology but also as an epistemology (our assumptions about the nature of knowledge and knowing), an ontology (our assumptions about the nature of being and reality), and an axiology (our assumptions about ethics and values).

PALAR fosters collaborative problem solving from the inside out, that is, the research and development project is planned and conducted *with*, *for* and *by* (not *on*) the people themselves who are affected by the problem, its solution, and the decisions made as a consequence. So it is participatory and a true alternative to neo-liberalism and managerialism—the control mechanism of bureaucratic systems and powerful people who are interested in economic efficiency over human and social concerns, justice, and environmental sustainability.

Who Can Benefit?

PALAR is inclusive and democratic. Everyone who is willing, committed, and passionate about changing a complex situation can learn how to do so in a PALAR program or project with other like-minded people. We have plenty of evidence that even illiterate or semi-literate people in marginalised or disadvantaged communities, not only in developing but also in developed countries, can benefit (Kearney et al., 2013). They can learn how to help themselves through self-directed, lifelong action learning (LAL). In my concluding chapter (in Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) I summarised:

Because of the explosion of knowledge and new technologies and the blazing speed with which they are created and used, it is impossible to learn 'content' as in the past. We need to learn the 'processes' of learning how to learn. This involves play, trial and error, not being afraid to fail, to try new things, to explore the unknown world, to face unexpected problems and figure out for ourselves and with one another how to solve them. The new challenges for today's and tomorrow's worlds are to create innovators with vision, motivation, passion, purpose and action, who can teach themselves by selecting the right people they can learn from and with. (pp. 235–236)

In the same book, Richard Teare demonstrated large scale transformational change facilitated by GULL (Global University for Lifelong Learning), which helped whole communities and NGOs (including World Vision International and Teare Fund) in over 40 countries across the world to help themselves and to cascade their learning to others with a multiplier effect, using the GULL low cost online learning system designed for the poorest and marginalised—the majority of people on this earth.

How Can PALAR Be Facilitated?

In other words: Can participatory action learning and action research be learned? My answer is, "yes and no". PALAR cannot be fully understood and learned only through traditional, one-way communication or teacher/lecturer-centred methods (the cognitive realm) but essentially through a self-directed, learner-centred approach to learning from experience (the affective realm) and to learning from and with one another (the social realm). The principle is "learning by doing" and critically reflecting on the action, on self, and on and with others. Therefore, PALAR cannot be taught but it can be facilitated through a questioning (Socratic) approach and a new learning system that starts where the learner is, not where the teacher decides what content (curriculum) has to be learnt and how. As an adult learner, one has to decide oneself—maybe with the help of others and a personal coach—what is most important, urgent, and interesting to focus on, and who else could join and would be as passionate about this project as oneself.

If there are several learning sets or project teams working on similar or even different topics or themes, this could become a learning program and could be facilitated by experienced process moderators who ensure that the learning for everyone is experiential, gradual, and systematic. How this can be achieved is

described in my Chapter 2 (in Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) in workshops—preferably residential, away from work or family distractions:

1. A start-up workshop to lay the foundations of knowledge and skills and to experience relationship and team building, needs analysis, action learning, critical reflection, strategic team project planning (see Appendix), and other collaborative processes;
2. Independent team project work with regular team meetings and monthly program meetings for all teams to monitor their progress and answer questions;
3. Mid-way workshop to cover any topics and develop any skills requested by participants at that stage;
4. Independent team project work continued with monthly program meetings;
5. Concluding workshop to share and finalise project results and to prepare for oral and written presentations on "presentation and celebration day" when each team presents its project results and learning outcomes of individuals, the team, and the sponsoring organisation or community. Celebration with drinks, dinner or lunch, dance, songs, and so forth, is important for recognition of participants' contributions and achievements (which enhances feelings of self-worth and worth to the community) and is an award for improvement, hard work and evidence of learning, transformation, and change.

When Is PALAR Appropriate and/or Effective?

As mentioned earlier, participants have to be able to understand and live the PALAR paradigm. This means working effectively in small groups, rather than large ones; using predominantly qualitative research methods, rather than quantitative methods and statistics; and doing research with, for and by the people concerned, rather than research by outsiders on these people. While traditional, positivist research appropriately focuses on prognosis and national trends through large-scale surveys and statistical analysis, PALAR is concerned with identifying, addressing, and solving complex problems for a particular group or community with the aim of a deeper understanding of the situation, practical improvement, transformational learning and change, social justice, and a better world for all. Therefore, philosophical and methodological assumptions need to be different, and the processes and strategies to be used. PALAR is not easier but, if anything, more complex than traditional research yet, ultimately, more appropriate, satisfying, effective, and sustainable because the people involved have learnt to use lifelong action learning (LAL) and PALAR for continuing the work on their own and for addressing and solving future problems. They will also have learnt that participation, collaboration, team spirit, and being concerned for others, rather than only for self, is important in this world of rapid and unprecedented change and natural disasters.

Where Can PALAR Be Applied?

As indicated in the previous section, it would be a waste of effort and time to use PALAR for simple problem solving or for large-scale surveys to study national trends, where quantitative research methods work much faster and more cheaply. However, traditional methods are insufficient to solve complex, unprecedented human and social problems for change and sustainability. Here the PALAR paradigm, processes, and strategies are effective with small groups and can gradually be cascaded to other groups and communities. We have sufficient evidence for these knowledge claims. For example, Dilworth and

Bashyk (2010) evaluated action learning and its applications in health science, government, the military, education, community and civic sector, organisation development, action research, future search, strategy, and business community; and Dotlich and Noel (1991) in organisation and management development. Elliott (1991) and McNiff and Whitehead (2006) advocated (participatory) action research in education; Mills (2000) in teacher education; Zuber-Skerritt (1991, 1992a,b), Passfield (1996) and Norton (2009) in higher education; James, Milenkiewicz and Bucknam (2008) and Eacott (2014) in educational leadership; Zuber-Skerritt (2011) in action leadership; Koch and Kralik (2006) in health care; Fricke and Totterdill (2004) in workplace innovation and regional development; Hunter, Emerald and Martin (2013) in social justice activism in the cultural professions; and McTaggart (1998) in Aboriginal pedagogy, to name but a few.

What Are the Main Successes of PALAR?

PALAR is relatively new in the ALAR family but, already, we have rich data and evidence of transformational learning in studies by Kearney and Zuber-Skerritt (2011, 2012) on sustainable community development, by Kearney, Wood, and Zuber-Skerritt (2013) on community–university partnerships, and by Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013) on community engagement.

In summary, we have evidence that PALAR has changed individual lives when it comes to knowing, doing, and being; it has made an impact on project teams and whole communities and helped them to become more self-directed and self-sufficient so that they do not need us any more as facilitators in programs or projects, only occasionally as coaches or mentors. Some of them have become true action leaders; and we feel successful when we have worked ourselves out of the job as consultants.

What Are the Main Challenges?

Some of the major challenges are that universities are not geared for collaborative and emergent forms of research with participants (rather than subjects) as coresearchers and cocreators of knowledge. Traditional research, which is still dominant, is more standardised, pre-determined, and controlled by the researcher as an "objective" observer and analyst of data. Even if academics are open to a PALAR approach to research and development, they often lack knowledge and experience in the new research paradigm and slide back into their old assumptions or try to comply with the requirements of traditional researchers and their standards, especially in peer review publications.

Another challenge is that community members often resist the idea of "doing research" because they feel they are not knowledgeable and competent enough and want to rely on the academic researcher to take the lead. But a PALAR approach guides them gradually from action learning that they usually thrive on, to collaborative, participative action research—an experience they find extremely surprising at first, but in time exciting, enjoyable, satisfying, and rewarding.

Marquardt (1999, p. 13) has identified seven factors that can make action learning ineffective for problem solving and organisational learning.

1. Inappropriate choice of project;
2. Lack of support from top management;
3. Lack of time;
4. Poor mix of participants;
5. Lack of commitment by participants;
6. All action and no learning;

7. Incompetent set advisor.

This is also true for PALAR for community engagement but these pitfalls can be avoided if participants, teams, communities, and facilitators:

1. Select project topics, issues or concerns that all team members are interested in and passionate about;
2. Plan the projects properly in the start-up workshop, including context and stakeholder analysis (see Appendix) to have both moral and financial support from stakeholders;
3. Allocate sufficient time for critical reflection (Moon, 2006) and learning during the meetings and for project completion;
4. Spend time at the beginning on relationship building and SWOT analysis (see Appendix) to form a "winning team" of participants to cover all necessary attributes and skills;
5. Own the problem or project and be committed to its success;
6. Emphasise learning, research, and evaluation, not just action, and maximise long-term community benefits; and
7. Use only experienced facilitators and set advisors.

From this discussion of what makes participatory action learning and action research programs successful or not, we see how individual participants and teams are instrumental in shaping the process and outcomes of these programs and projects.

Conclusions

Through the new genre of PALAR, academics can produce research outcomes that are rigorous and valid as well as community relevant, practical, and collaborative—therefore more transformative and sustainable. But they need to learn new processes and methods of collaborative and qualitative research. Community members recognise their own potential value as coresearchers. Therefore PALAR has proven to be a useful and beneficial approach to community engagement for universities (conducting collaborative research with, not on, communities) and for community members (learning about how to change their situation and, ultimately, how to help themselves).

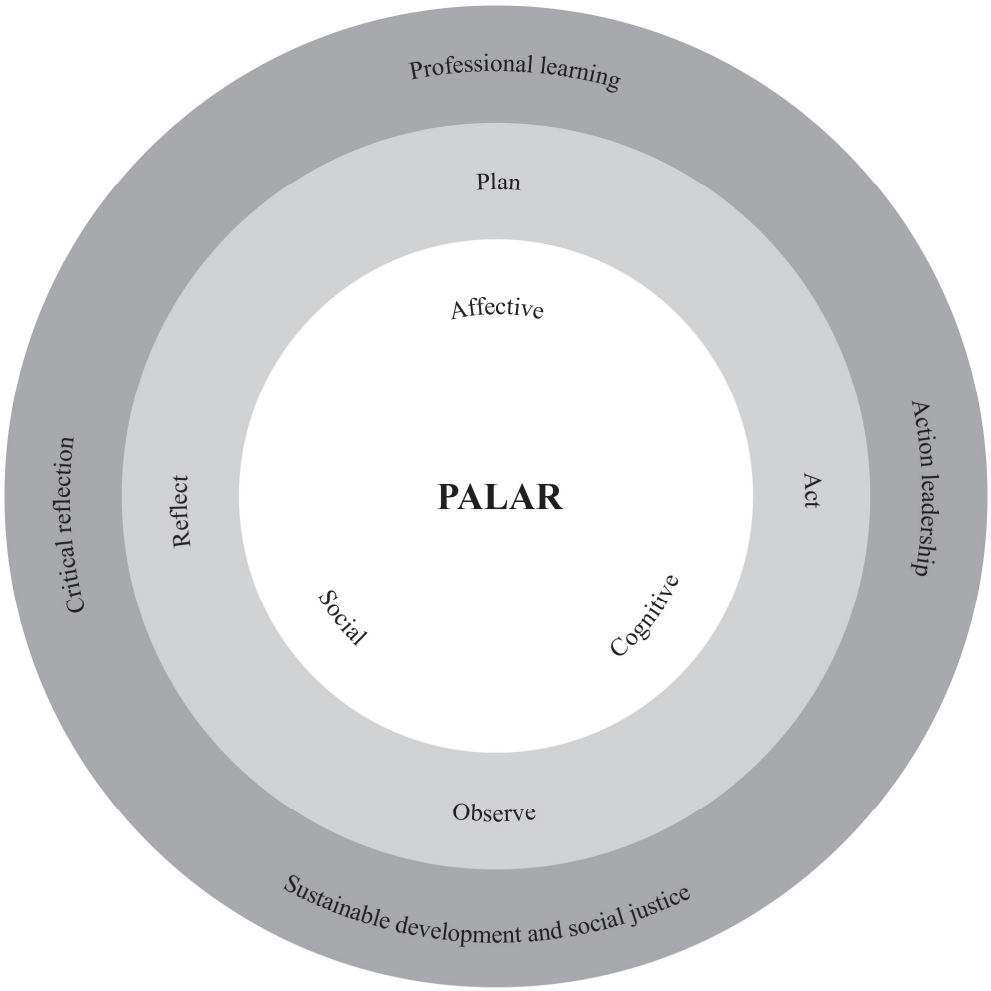
Our research has revealed that in university–community partnerships PALAR can:

- Promote mutual learning and development;
- Cocreate knowledge that is relevant, contextualised, and useful for both meeting community needs and producing research outputs as required of universities; and
- Foster the cascading of learning and knowledge to others with a multiplying effect for sustainability.

We may conclude that PALAR programs and projects are able to develop in participants, core values that determine their action learning culture, which, in turn, enables successful research outcomes. Important elements of a PALAR program include vision and team building, needs analysis, understanding the PALAR

paradigm, capacity building, developing critical and self-critical reflection for transformational learning, and collaborative project design, implementation, and evaluation (Appendix). If any of these elements (activities and processes) are missing, the success of the whole program or project is compromised. Figure 5 summarises the core ideas of PALAR and its holistic affective-socio-cognitive approach to learning, research, and development.

Figure 5: Core Ideas towards a New Vision for PALAR (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015, p. 11)



This holistic affective-socio-cognitive approach to learning, research, and development focuses not only on the head (mind) but also on the heart (feelings) and human (social) relationships. This holistic approach is necessary for the success of the PALAR process and spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in order to achieve the maximum benefit for professional learning and development, action leadership, sustainable development, social justice, and critical thinking, all of which are essential 21st century requirements generally, and for sustainable community engagement in particular.

Appendix: Guidelines for Team Project Design

These guidelines are based on my experiences over 30 years and the work of Ron Passfield (1996) evaluating the Queensland University Action Learning (QUAL) Program as part of his PhD thesis. For more detailed steps and stages of team project planning, I recommend the workbook that he has developed in several editions since then, and more recently in Passfield and Carroll (2012, available free online). The process model in Figure A1 helps teams to design a collaborative, participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) project as described in step-by-step guidelines.

Figure A1: Figure Eight of Strategic Planning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002, p. 145)

This diagram links context with practice through vision. It was developed by a team of consultants in the Tertiary Education Institute, The University of Queensland, Australia, 1991–1993.

It is important that we carry out a context analysis (upper circle) before planning for improved practice (lower circle). But the first activity, preceding and feeding into both context analysis and planning, is vision building.

Vision building

At the very beginning of a team project, it is important to invest time in relationship and vision building in order to avoid team problems later. Although there are many processes and methods that can be used, we have found the following activities effective and time efficient:

1. Relationship building: Using an activity such as *Turning points* (http://www.aral.com.au/resources/turningpoints.pdf);
2. Team building: Using a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis, first individually and then as a team considering implications for the project; and

3. Vision building: Through drawing a picture, assembling a model, preparing a performance, or some creative combination that best enables you as team members to express your shared view of the project results or outcomes, as you envision them in two or three years time, first individually and then as a team picture or presentation.

Context analysis

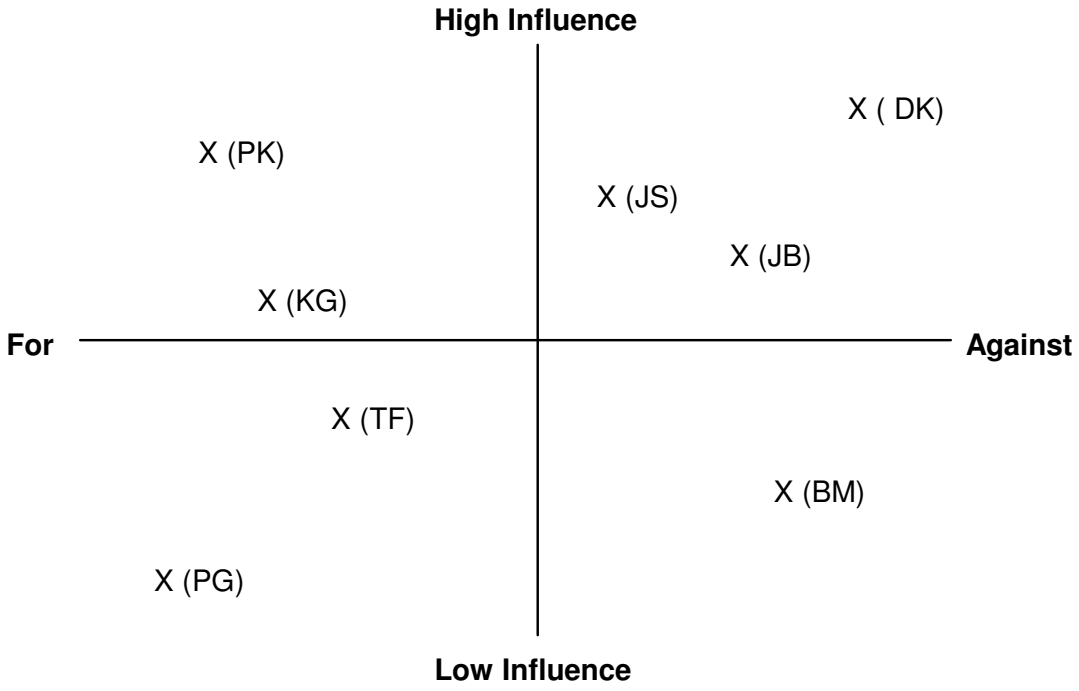
1. Stakeholder analysis

Through brainstorming, you may identify these lists:

- Who are the stakeholders of this project, and what are their wants and needs?
- Who is likely to be for or against this project?
- Who is most or least influential or powerful in this context and how so?

Then place the stakeholders by initials in a diagram to indicate their position (for or against) on the envisioned process or outcome, and the level of their influence on it (high or low). Figure A2 is an example of a stakeholder diagram.

Figure A2: Stakeholder Diagram (Passfield & Carroll, 2012, p. 11)



You may then ask yourselves: What are the implications of your stakeholder diagram for your project? For example, what can you do about stakeholders with high influence who are likely to boycott your project (like DK in Figure A2) to convince them of the value and benefit to them or why they should support the project for the collective good?

Constraints

Now you may identify possible constraints and their sources, for example:

- People: Clients (their needs and demands); others with internal and external vested interests (other groups or people who have some stake in the process and/or outcome of your project); suppliers of resources (who may limit the resources you need); you and your team (current shortcomings, inefficiencies, problems, aspirations)
- Other: Knowledge (needed information that may be difficult to obtain); time (constraints on team members individually and for the project to be completed—in stages and overall).

Now you may rate these constraints according to their propensity for you to overcome them—from absolutely not, fairly rigid, fairly flexible, flexible, to self-imposed or imagined. You may get someone from outside your team to challenge your assessments. Even absolute constraints can be altered more often than we initially think.

Resource inventory

What resources are available for the project?

- People: Who can help you—from inside or outside your organisation or community? Consider the skills, knowledge, connections, and support of your staff, workmates, other colleagues, people from other organisations, communities, networks, and professional associations.
- Information: What books, articles, software, other sources can you use?
- Financial and physical resources: consider budget, equipment, space, staff, resources available for related projects that you could utilise.
- Personal: What skills, knowledge, relationships, and/or other personal capacities do you and your team need to develop to function effectively?

Vision revisited

In light of the above context analysis, you may revisit your vision picture and ask yourselves whether you need to change anything to make your vision more realistic.

Planning the project

The purpose of strategic project planning is to help you focus your project, identify your key objectives, and decide how you are going to ensure success given the resources you can access and time available.

Objectives: Briefly describe what you see as the prime goals and objectives of your project within the timeframe of the implementation period. What do you intend to achieve by the end of the project?

1. Key result areas: Apart from the long-term results identified as your team vision and the specific project goals and objectives identified above, what other intermediate results are critical to the eventual success of your project?

2. Measurement of outcomes: In PALAR projects we call this, more appropriately, proposed evaluation and timeline. Some examples identifying time could be:

    - Action plan to be agreed with project manager by. . . . . (intermediate result).
    - Presentation and paper to be delivered at. . . . . by. . . . . (intermediate result).
    - Learning program to be implemented and evaluated by. . . . . .. All members of target group identify an application in their area.
    - Concurrent pilot project(s) to be implemented and evaluated by. . . . . .
    - Change management strategies to be evaluated by. . . . . ., identifying positive and negative impacts, gaps, unintended consequences, strategies for refinement.
    - Reflection paper on project impact to be prepared by. . . . . ..

Action Planning: Team members may undertake a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting to convert goals and expected key results into a detailed plan of action. I suggest you use a matrix of activities for:

- What needs to be done?
- Why?
- How?
- By Whom?
- By When?

Evaluation: How will you and/or others evaluate the project to identify (1) its impact on and implications for the participants' learning outcomes and (2) the benefits for your community and possibly beyond? What methods will you use to identify the success, limitations and further research and development needed that you recommend? Will you be able to do so within the timeline of your project? What do you expect to contribute to knowledge in the field?

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Challenges for Community Engagement: An Australian Perspective

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Abstract

This exploratory paper identifies three challenges for community engagement in an Australian context. These are 1) institutional perceptions within the higher education sector when engaged approaches are not well understood or valued, 2) community perceptions based on distrust, and 3) a lack of support structures for sustaining engagement. I consider these challenges by reflecting on my own experiences of community engagement. I present a case study of a long-term community–university partnership with data comprising observations and field notes, individual interviews, group discussions, and participant reflections. This partnership aims to enhance educational opportunities for a Samoan-heritage community as it seeks to address significant resettlement issues in Australia. I respond to the three identified partnership challenges as follows. For the first challenge, I consider conditions inside universities that support mutual engagement and suggest how academics might develop as engaged scholars. For the second challenge, I explain the need for a methodology that builds relationships among community and university members, where mutuality and reciprocity, transparency, trust, and respect are valued. For the third challenge, I identify conditions on both sides of the partnership that sustain community engagement practices. The paper concludes with learnings that can usefully inform community–university partnerships and the planning of leadership teams within universities that seek an engaged approach for mutually productive linkages with community.

Keywords: community engagement, community–university engagement, engaged scholarship, higher education, partnerships

Introduction

In Australia, organisations such as the Australian University Community Engagement Alliance (AUCEA, now Engagement Australia) have supported the collective interests of Australian universities by advancing a shared understanding of community engagement as a core responsibility of higher education—within communities and in higher education institutions. AUCEA's (2008) position paper promoted community engagement as "knowledge-driven partnerships that yield mutually beneficial outcomes for university and

community" (p. 1). Contemporary concepts of engagement focus on engaged scholarship (Boyer, 1996), a practice that situates engagement as knowledge creation and learning that are "participatory, process-oriented and relationship-based . . . reflective and iterative", where "quality is both academically defined and socially accountable" (Cuthill & Brown, 2010, p. 130). However, while community engagement and engaged scholarship as an expression of community engagement are commended in practice, they are ideals fraught with challenges for academics and, at times, for communities, both of whom share responsibility for successful and sustained outcomes.

In this paper I explore three challenges that I identify as forefront to addressing for mutually rewarding community engagement. I also consider how each might be addressed. The first two concern misperceptions of community engagement on each side of the partnership. One challenge is therefore within the higher education sector where university agendas traditionally have prioritised research and teaching as scholarly activity and have relegated engagement with community as "community service" (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). As such, community engagement is usually undervalued, poorly supported and rewarded, and not recognised as an alternative form of, and valuable contribution to, research and teaching (Cuthill, 2008; Moore & Ward, 2010). Here the challenge emerges when an understanding of engagement is not clearly articulated or shared within the institution. The second challenge concerns community misperceptions. Where community perceives that a partnership serves a university's interests, rather than or more than its own, the community will distrust the partnership, its processes, and results (Cherry & Shefner, 2004; Holland & Gelmon, 1998). This often eventuates when university members conduct research *on* communities rather than *with* communities. A third challenge concerns sustainability of outcomes (Kearney & Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). How can partnerships and programmes be designed and conducted so that mutually beneficial outcomes for all interested parties can be sustained?

I consider these challenges and ways to resolve them through discussion of a case study where I have firsthand experience. It involves Griffith University where I work in Southeast Queensland, Australia, in a long-term partnership with members of The Voice of Samoan People (VOSP), a community organisation serving the needs of Samoan-heritage families in Southeast Queensland. Data collection involved methods appropriate for the qualitative research of this study, including participant observations, informal interviews, minutes from meetings, field notes, and personal reflections. In this paper, I develop a case study narrative to present experiential learnings that I consider in the context of the community engagement literature.

As context for understanding the community partnership in this case study and why it was begun, the paper first turns to the challenges facing Samoan-heritage families living in Southeast Queensland, especially those who have relocated to Australia as New Zealand citizens through the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement[3] and are thus not legal immigrants per se. It then turns to the partnership between VOSP representing this community, and Griffith University as the local higher education institution. It overviews the initial purpose and outcomes of the partnership and outlines a major strategy to widen participation in higher education, which has been inspired by the partnership over time. This strategy encourages appreciation of, and aspirations for, university study within the community. It builds the capacity of current and future students, and enhances community engagement with higher education. Having set the stage for this discussion, I explore the three challenges that I believe are central to success of community–university engagement and the work of engaged academics. Responding to these challenges, I offer a set of learnings for partnerships developing and sustaining engaged practice as university core business. I then conclude the paper.

3 The Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement legally allows citizens of Australia and New Zealand to live in each other's nation indefinitely and to engage in most types of employment. This residence is not immigration per se because it does not directly involve acquisition of citizenship and the rights, entitlements, and obligations that citizenship entails.

Resettlement Challenges for Samoan-Heritage Families in Australia

Community–university partnerships are usually inspired by mutual need. For the growing Samoan community in Southeast Queensland, concentrated particularly in Logan city on the southern outskirts of Brisbane, the community was growing quickly and their needs were palpable. Since the national government's introduction of the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement (TTTA) in 1973, Australia has been an attractive destination for New Zealand citizens, providing employment and other opportunities and the economic and other benefits these can generate. In 2014 some 650,000 New Zealand citizens reside in Australia (Schultz, 2014). A significant share has Polynesian ancestry, with Samoan ethnicity most prevalent. One of the several places where these people have settled in Australia is Logan, where Samoan is the most commonly spoken language other than English (Logan City Council, n.d.).

Two particular challenges are central to Samoan-heritage families who have relocated in Australia. One is that demographic information for the group is unreliable, making identification of the nature and scale of problems all the more difficult. Samoans with New Zealand citizenship are not obliged to register for voting rights and often don't contribute to census surveys undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, so their numbers are likely to be underestimated. If they do contribute to census surveys, they are likely to identify as New Zealanders rather than Samoans. Without accurate data for Samoan communities in Australia, their needs cannot be identified accurately and are likely to be neglected.

A second major challenge for this community emerged in 2001, when the Australian and New Zealand governments changed bilateral social security arrangements. The move impacted unfavourably on New Zealand citizens arriving in Australia under the TTTA, who included a large share of Samoans with New Zealand citizenship. Reclassifying their visa status as temporary residents of Australia rather than as permanent residents disqualified these people from the many benefits for which permanent residents of Australia are eligible. One valuable benefit of Australian citizenship is the Higher Education Contribution Scheme-Higher Education Loan Programme (HECS-HELP), which entitles Australian citizens to defer payment of university fees to complete an undergraduate degree until they have gained employment with at least a certain level of income. University students without Australian citizenship are not eligible for HECS-HELP and must pay full university fees up front. Many Samoan-heritage families with temporary-resident status who therefore do not qualify for HECS-HELP find this expense prohibitive, so their children are denied higher-education opportunities.

Many who arrive with temporary visas are unable to meet the stringent criteria to qualify for permanent resident status, let alone the costs associated with gaining Australian citizenship. The complex adjustment problems associated with different language, culture, education practices, income earning opportunities, and so forth that the Samoan communities were already experiencing in Australia prior to 2001 were further compounded by the new visa status imposed upon them. In the face of increasing issues, which included a concern about employment and educational opportunities, leaders of the Voice of Samoan People (VOSP) approached the University to assist in resolving these issues.

The Partnership between VOSP and Griffith University

The original aim of this community–university partnership was to improve educational opportunities at all levels for Samoan communities in Southeast Queensland. Partnership participants included diverse members of the Samoan community including titled elders and church officials along with academics and postgraduate students of Griffith University. Working within a framework of participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), participants identified community concerns and agreed on four related goals: increasing parental involvement in their children's education; improving communication among stakeholders, especially teachers, parents and children; enhancing young people's sense of belonging; and promoting cultural understanding across generations within Samoan communities and between Samoan and other cultural groups. With these goals in mind, participants envisaged a process for change and

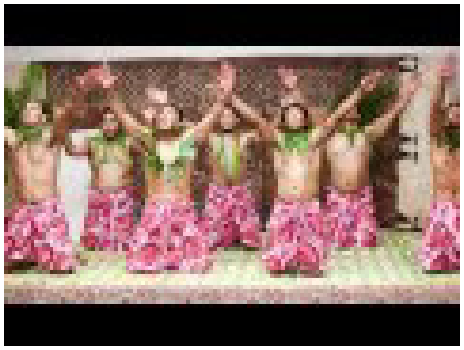
developed and implemented an action plan involving four project subgroups. Each project subgroup focused on one of the four identified goals.

At the end of the first year, programme participants reported a set of intangible learning outcomes. These involved changed attitudes for all stakeholders, especially parents' willingness to engage with their children's education, improved understanding of intercultural issues on the part of teachers, enhanced relationships among parents, teachers and students, improved behaviour and learning outcomes for students, and more confident and capable leadership practices for community leaders. Tangible outcomes identified students' improved participation and performance at school via quantitative measures. Student participation at after-school study centres increased, parents were more involved in school events, grant applications to expand project work were submitted to funding agencies, collaborations were formed with government agencies, and Pacific Island Liaison Officers were appointed in schools and at the university.

The partnership is now in its fifth year and has extended beyond the Samoan community to include a range of Pan Pacific ethnic groups. A participation programme to encourage and enrich Pasifika[4] students' participation in higher education at Griffith University was inspired by the original partnership with VOSP. It currently operates as a University Student Equity Services initiative (see http://www.griffith.edu.au/student-equity-services), and comprises three main initiatives:

- the Griffith Pasifika Association (GPA), which provides activities to facilitate the transition, engagement, and retention of current Pasifika students;
- the Pasifika Cultural Graduation, a significant annual celebratory event for Pasifika students and the wider Pasifika community that honours cultural identity, encourages student progression, and recognises their success;
- and the LEAD (legacy, education, achievement, dream) programme for secondary school students, which is delivered in partnership with local secondary schools.

Video 1: Pasifika Cultural Graduation www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7xjdI5P89s

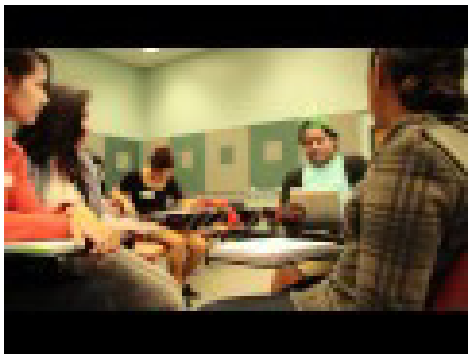


Video 1 includes segments from the inaugural Pasifika Cultural Graduation in 2011. This, now annual, event encourages extended family participation in a valedictory event. It provides an opportunity for community acknowledgment of both the graduand and the family: "Once a student has graduated, the WHOLE family graduates" (Graduate, 2012). Strong evidence of community–university engagement is indicated by the high attendance numbers at the graduations. Venues have been booked to full capacity by attending students, siblings, parents, and community members without need for event advertising. Graduation ceremonies are vital in raising awareness of the educational possibilities and pathways that Pasifika members have successfully journeyed, and to convey that attending university is achievable for community members. As one of the graduands in this clip commented, "the graduation night was so overwhelming for

[4] Pasifika is a term used widely in New Zealand to identify those who identify with the Pacific Islands because of ancestry or heritage. It is now often used in Australia. It equates with the term, Pacific Islander.

me as my family and loved ones celebrated my achievement. My teenage children commented on how they now have a great desire to study at university". This message is particularly important given the significant underrepresentation of Pasifika students in higher education in Southeast Queensland and elsewhere in Australia.

Video 2: LEAD Programme https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYET8fSOP1M



In Video 2, university staff and Pasifika students share key features of the LEAD programme. The target group of Pasifika youth coming towards the end of high school clearly valued the LEAD initiative. This is a typical statement by a LEAD participant in 2012 who had become a university student in 2013:

> *LEAD taught those who were there that higher education is achievable if you have the drive and passion in yourself. . . . I believe that LEAD was that final push that I needed to steer myself towards the university life and prepare myself for it.*

LEAD has produced strong evidence of its intrinsic motivational value and capacity to enhance awareness, aspiration, leadership ability, and achievement of high school students. Including action learning projects was recognised as the optimal means to create ownership, engagement, and authentic learning by students, building on the PALAR model underpinning the initial community engagement strategy with VOSP.

Feedback from the partner schools attests to the positive and sustained impact of LEAD on student engagement and learning. Participating students and school staff reported being inspired and motivated: "None of them had any aspirations to study or to seek higher education, however, that's all changed thanks to the LEAD program" (Cultural Liaison Officer, Secondary School, 2011). The principal of another participating secondary school reported significantly improved aspirational and academic outcomes for Pasifika students graduating from high school:

> *Over 100 of our Pasifika students have attended LEAD over the past three years. LEAD has had a very positive impact on our students and school. It has not only built aspiration for our students to pursue further education but it has also instilled confidence and vision in our young people. Our senior students who participated in the LEAD program in 2012 all graduated with a Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE), some have successfully been offered tertiary placements, and others are engaged in traineeships and apprenticeships. (Secondary School Principal, 2013)*

Surrounding these outreach initiatives is a discipline of engaged scholarship where members of the community and the university work collaboratively with a research agenda in response to community

needs, particularly concerning education. Members have produced collaborative writing and joint publications. On several occasions, the partnership as a collective has contributed to public policy dialogue. One example concerns proposed changes to the Higher Education Support Act 2003 to provide access to HECS-HELP for all graduates of Australian secondary schools, so that dependent minors with New Zealand citizenship are also eligible for this benefit. As another example, members of the partnership coauthored a Samoan cultural profile that is now used as a training document by Child Safety Services, a state government agency within the Department of Community Services. Ironically, this government agency had initially approached academics within the university to provide this information, privileging the university over the Samoan community as a source of expert knowledge of Samoan culture. Our partnership challenged this misguided assumption with a proposal that our members develop the profile collaboratively. Both community and university were involved in the creating knowledge for this cultural profile.

A more recent community–university collaboration explored the postsecondary destinations and educational pathways of almost 500 Pasifika youth. Church communities were central to this research project because the regular attendance of young people from Pacific Island communities in their local congregations meant the churches could provide access points. Through these experiences, I am confident that members of universities and communities can work together as partners in learning, research, knowledge creation, and publication.

The examples discussed above are vignettes of the widespread positive change that has come about in community and university, as pursued collaboratively through partnership activities. The partnership now has many more participants as well. Yet because of what it has achieved we should not simply assume that it has proceeded free of challenges. For example, finding time for collaboration has continued to be a major issue because participants juggle various roles as workers, parents, partners, and members of community organisations and church groups, among other roles and responsibilities. Meetings were scheduled outside work hours so we were usually tired. When meeting, we often struggled to respectfully align different sets of cultural protocols. I was frequently anxious about the amount of time I was spending with project teams and how this might affect evaluation of my performance as an academic subject to competing research and teaching expectations. This concern inspired me to recognise a need within the university and the higher education system at large for better understanding and valuing of community engagement as valuable academic work associated with knowledge creation and learning. Let us turn to consider the three major challenges participants have worked through to strengthen and sustain this partnership and the positive outcomes produced through its programmes.

Challenge 1: Institutional Perceptions

Perceptions of community engagement as a concept and as practice are inevitably vital to the success of community–university partnership programmes. Programmes need to be perceived as legitimate, worthwhile, and with the imprimatur of leaders on both sides—otherwise they cannot gain traction among potential participants. In the context of higher education institutions, community engagement invokes the concept of engaged scholarship. Boyer (1996) proposed this concept as an expression of community engagement and as a core responsibility for American universities. Engaged scholarship—or the scholarship of engagement—is now recognised and used more widely in the discourse of community engagement. According to Barker (2004), it consists of:

> *research, teaching, integration, and application scholarship that incorporate reciprocal practices of civic engagement into the production of knowledge. It tends to be used inclusively to describe a host of practices cutting across disciplinary boundaries and teaching, research, and outreach functions in which scholars communicate to and work both for and with communities. (p. 124)*

Indeed, alongside the expansion of engaged scholarship discourse, engagement of communities and of scholars is reaching ever further across the world conceptually and in practice. In recent times, there have been similar calls to engaged action in the Australian context (AUCEA, 2008). Many Australian universities have expressed increasing interest in community engagement, addressing it at least rhetorically in mission statements and strategic plans (Cuthill, 2008; Winter, Wiseman, & Muirhead, 2006). But mobilising the interest off the page and into practice in Australian universities and communities is quite a different story. In considering the engagement agenda in Australia's higher education system, I believe we need to distinguish not only between rhetoric and actual practice but also between community engagement and engaged scholarship. For academics within universities—those who are potentially engaged scholars—community engagement generally refers to the overall task of the university and community, whereas engaged scholarship entails an intrinsic personal choice for academics. This choice is rooted fundamentally in one's beliefs or worldviews. As such, engaged scholarship is not just an approach to scholarship, but an approach to professional life as an academic and community member.

With multiple work demands upon them, most academics still do not view community engagement as a priority in their work performance (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Neither do they fully recognise engaged scholarship as a legitimate approach that may be appropriate for their own academic practices or for usefully enriching their understanding of scholarship. Resistance to these ideas (Holland & Ramaley, 2008) may be partly because community engagement and engaged scholarship have not been institutionalised within the higher education system. Institutional frameworks to support the engagement rhetoric have been absent (Cuthill, 2008), as is recognition of engaged scholarship in the promotion and tenure process (Moore & Ward, 2010). Without structures to embed the acceptance of engaged scholarship conceptually and in practice—institutionally within the higher education system and personally and/or professionally among academics—dialogue that leads to a shared understanding of engagement will be discouraged. This will hinder the acceptance and advancement of engaged scholarship and engaged scholars in the higher education system, despite the official rhetoric.

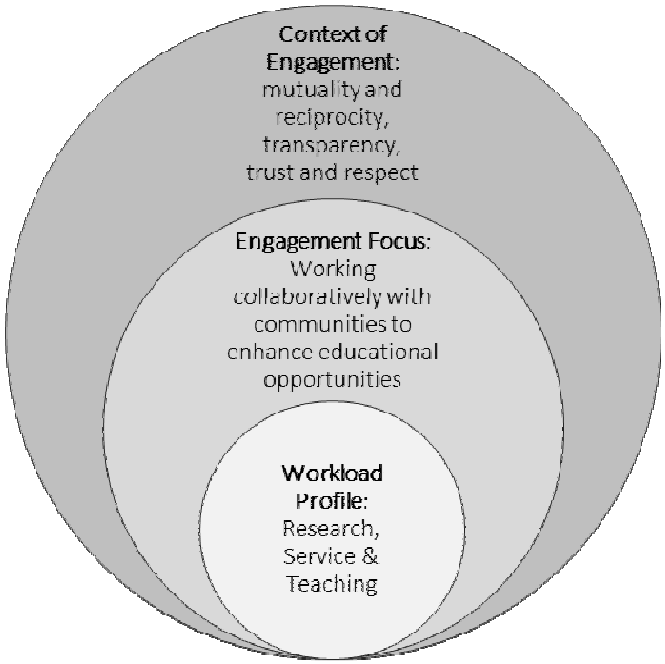
When Cuthill and Brown (2010) investigated senior managers' perceptions of engagement in a research-intensive Australian university, they identified three distinct groups that they called sceptics, utilitarians, and missionaries. Sceptics perceived engagement as outside the core work of the university. They adopted a traditional view of engagement as community service and regarded it as an additional activity that should not affect the "real" work of universities, namely, research and teaching. Utilitarians saw engagement as useful in some contexts and as a strategic means for individuals to achieve research and teaching outcomes. They regarded engagement as the practice of individuals rather than a priority as a university strategy. Missionaries supported the university's civic mission and considered engagement a moral imperative. They emphasised collaboration and respectful relationships that are mutually beneficial. These three perspectives among university senior managers suggest the need for informed understanding of an engaged approach to university work and the distinction between traditional and engaged approaches.

Traditionally, university work has been considered as three separate elements: teaching, research, and service—where teaching and research are prioritised as scholarly activity and service is perceived as giving to the community (Moore & Ward, 2010). Service as a form of engagement is often undervalued relative to teaching and research and not supported or rewarded by the institution or the university system in which it operates (Boyer, 1990). From a traditional perspective, community–university partnerships involve a one-way transfer of university resources and expertise to the community as a gathering of passive recipients (Butcher & Egan, 2008; Holland & Gelman, 1998). Typically, in a traditional approach, the university identifies a research focus and offers a researched solution based on community support. Knowledge is seen as something created within the university for the benefit of communities beyond, and the quality of knowledge is academically defined (Moore & Ward, 2010).

In contrast, an engaged approach emphasises engagement with the community as core business for the university. Here, engagement is perceived as a feature of research, teaching, and service, and as providing a focus for scholarly agendas (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Partnerships sustain a mutually beneficial exchange of resources and expertise where communities are repositioned as experts. Commonly, the community identifies the need and collaborates with the university to achieve a researched response. Knowledge is co-constructed and the quality of knowledge is both academically defined and socially accountable (Holland & Gelman, 1998).

Some observers recognise that an engaged approach brings about positive transformation for both community and university (Butcher & Egan, 2008). However, an institutional context that supports an engaged approach is not achieved easily because it usually requires shifting from a traditional approach that is entrenched and resistant within the university system. It requires a shift in paradigm and in practice where power relations are disrupted and redefined. It therefore reconstitutes knowledge creation processes and thus, what knowledge is created. Nonalignment of institutional context with a context of engagement is a major impediment to community engagement. As illustrated in Figure 1, a context of engagement relies on a climate where mutuality and reciprocity, transparency, and trust and respect are encouraged and valued. This type of context encourages academics to specify an engagement focus. This is similar to a statement of intent and provides a unifying purpose for an academic's work, which in most cases is classified as research, service, and teaching activities. As Figure 1 portrays, an engagement focus facilitates a work profile that features engaged research, service, and teaching activities.

Figure 1. Context–Focus–Profile Model



A university can sustain a context of engagement when its leadership teams favour and institutionalise an engaged approach rather than a traditional approach to university work. This can be identified at first glance in mission statements and strategic plans but it will also be evident in a visible, practicable framework for implementing these strategic plans to promote, realise, and sustain this engagement. It will be acknowledged in a shared understanding of engagement—how it's done and why. It will be evident in opportunities for staff to be recognised and rewarded for their community engagement activities. Community–university partnerships will be valued, for if they are not, an engaged approach will not be sustained. Without these institutional arrangements and philosophy, the stated goals and beliefs are empty

rhetoric. Community engagement will remain a slippery concept and will be practised sporadically only by isolated individuals who are philosophically committed to the approach (Holland & Ramaley, 2008).

If supportive university structures for an engaged approach are in pockets rather than university wide, individual academics may collaborate with like-minded colleagues within their faculty or school. In my school, colleagues agreed on a vision: "To be a dynamic community of scholarly professionals leading socially just educational and cultural change through engaged critical thinking" (see website, http://www.griffith.edu.au/education/school-education-professional-studies). This vision directed collaborative activities that led to our joint creation of the following mission statement:

> *The School of Education and Professional Studies is committed to connecting people and shaping futures. Our mission is to make meaningful and significant contributions to education and allied professions through engaged teaching, research and service with colleagues, students and communities. Committed to diversity and the pursuit of social justice, the School is an agile organisation that can respond to change in uncertain times. We equip students to be future orientated in meeting the complexities of shifting praxis in local and global contexts. We are a sustainable enterprise fostering learning across the lifespan, maintaining high standards of performance, professionalism and the pursuit of social justice. Our graduates are capable, critical and creative. (see website, http://www.griffith.edu.au/education/school-education-professional-studies)*

This statement encouraged a context for engagement. It allowed me to confidently develop an identity statement as an engaged academic. As suggested in Figure 1, my engagement focus was "working collaboratively with communities to enhance educational opportunities". This was the focus that had driven my work with Pacific Island migrant communities for the last five years. I felt passionately about this as a goal for my academic work. It was important to me as the embodiment of my values and professional goals. However, I needed to align my engagement focus with my workload profile so that community engagement provided a unifying theme for my research, service, and teaching. I needed this work to be recognised within the university as a valuable professional commitment towards advancing education for people of need, and to play a major role in shaping my workload profile.

This encouraged me to reflect on my work as an academic with research, teaching, and service responsibilities. My research involved collaboration with communities of need in response to issues of importance that they identified. My service and teaching aligned with my research activity. For example, my service activities often included opportunities to share collaborative research findings in professional and public forums. Much of my teaching provided opportunities to engage preservice teachers in problem solving and discussion around authentic community issues that related to their future work. My teaching also included supervision and mentoring of Pacific Island postgraduate students whose research focussed on community-related issues. I was able to self-identify as an engaged academic and confidently state:

> *As a community-engaged researcher, I work collaboratively with communities locally, nationally, and internationally to address real problems in the public domain, especially equity issues. I therefore use participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as an effective methodology to deal with social complexity. By encouraging communities themselves to identify and explore key issues and enact their own solutions, by favouring transparency, reciprocity, and mutual respect among those involved in the research, by observing possibility rather than deficiency, PALAR has enabled me to achieve significant outcomes. Findings of my research that identify ways to improve schooling and develop educational and employment opportunities for migrant communities are now in practice in schools and community programmes and informing policy decisions. By identifying the settlement challenges these*

> *groups face in Australia, my research has also helped draw needed political attention and is being used to inform policy and action. My research work therefore creates practical and conceptual knowledge, improves intercultural understanding within communities and professional and government agencies, and usefully informs practices and policies. (Personal academic portfolio, 2014)*

Challenge 2: Community Perceptions

Just as university perceptions of community engagement are vital to the success of community–university partnership programmes, so too are the perceptions of communities. Partnership programmes need to be recognised on both sides as mutually beneficial and based on mutual trust and respect. Community distrust in a programme undermines engagement, and is likely when community members perceive that universities or academics are using the partnership primarily for their own ends, such as responding to a community's problems to secure research funding for the academic or university without regard for how the community can benefit from the partnership (Cherry & Shefner, 2004). In such situations, community members are reluctant to enter into collaborative partnerships (Holland & Gelmon, 1998). Trusting relationships need to be restored between communities and universities—rebuilt through mutual trust and respect, and reframed in mutually agreed goals (Bernardo, Butcher, & Howard, 2012). As the partnership proceeds, processes need to be clearly defined (Baum, 2000) and establishing relationships where mutual trust and respect develop will take time (Holland & Ramaley, 2008).

In the initial VOSP partnership, negative community perceptions were not a problem. The community sought collaboration with the university to improve educational opportunities for its members. We were fortunate that the community was motivated by hope and goodwill; it did not feel a need to avoid collaboration with our university because of distrust. Sustaining the community's hope was important for the partnership and its programmes, and participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as the methodology informing our processes enabled us to do this. As explained previously, PALAR involves collaborative action learning (AL) and (AR), participatory action research (Kearney, Wood, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013, p. 4):

> *People involved in PALAR projects are interested in participating (P) and working together on a complex issue (or issues) affecting their lives, learning from their experience and from one another (AL) and engaging in a systematic inquiry (AR) on how to address and resolve this issue (or these issues).*

PALAR values are those associated with a context of engagement: mutuality and reciprocity, transparency, and trust and respect, as noted in Figure 1. This set of values associates with *talanoa* [the sharing of stories, or yarning] approaches advocated by Pacific Island researchers (Vaioleti, 2003) and underscores the need for equality, sensitivity, and relationship building if we are to learn with and from each other. This could have been especially challenging for our community–university partnership because there are many differences among the partners' members in terms of cultural orientations and educational and life experiences. But while we were mindful of this diversity, we also recognised it as a source of strength that would help to sustain our partnership. I noted in my personal reflections:

> *Each of us has learnt about the power of people to bring about change. My university colleagues and I have resources that are necessary but not sufficient to bring about improved educational opportunities for Pacific Island communities. VOSP is in a similar situation. However, when we combine these resources we have a recipe for change: knowledge, networks, energy and beliefs. (September, 2010)*

Challenge 3: Sustaining Community Engagement

Sustainability is a requirement and a challenge for any project. However, in this community–university partnership positive outcomes have been sustained so far for five years. The key factors that have contributed to this outcome have been expressed elsewhere as the 3Rs: relationships, recognition, and reflection (Kearney, Wood, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).

Relationships

Without doubt, the quality of relationships within a partnership is very important. As emphasised in the literature (Butcher & Egan, 2008; Howard, Gervasoni, & Butcher, 2007), partnerships characterised by authentic relationships and strong communication strategies enhance sustainability of community initiatives. In the context of an engaged approach, such relations are emphasised with elements of engagement noted as reciprocal and mutually beneficial (CIC Committee on Engagement, 2005).

Recognition

Also necessary for sustainable outcomes is members' preparedness to track and evaluate outcomes and to recognise what has been achieved. At the end of the first year of our VOSP–university partnership we held a public celebration to recognise our collective achievements. This was well attended by family and friends of community members and colleagues from the university. Before the celebration, I had thought of the event as an opportunity to celebrate what had been achieved and to bring a degree of closure to activities conducted throughout the year. Instead, the celebration created new beginnings as guests from the community asked to be involved in future activities and suggested ways they might contribute. That evening, when members of the partnership reflected on their experience, they spoke about a positive future for the partnership. Their enthusiasm encouraged university managers attending the celebration to allocate resources to a widening-participation strategy, which included the appointment of a Pacific Island Liaison Officer within the university's student equity services team.

Reflection

Perhaps the most critical factor in sustaining the partnership was our commitment to a lifelong-learning approach. We expected to learn from our experiences in the partnership and appreciated that PALAR encouraged an iterative process of reflective learning. As few of us had used a reflection diary, we used a set of resources provided online by the Global University for Lifelong Learning (GULL).[5] The first of these was a template for a personal learning statement (www.gullonline.org/affiliate/getting-started/index.html) that encouraged us individually to consider what we did well in our lives, what we wanted to change, and what we wanted to learn over the next six- to 12-month period. We used a second set of templates to record daily reflections. These encouraged us to consider the following: What had gone well and why? What didn't go well and why? What could have been done differently and how? Additional templates provided on the GULL website allowed us to synthesise reflections on a weekly and monthly basis. Through this process we developed reflective practice, which is the ability to consider experience thoughtfully. We also adopted a coaching process where we made a commitment to support each other in a process of action learning to achieve goals we had set in personal learning statements. In this role, each of us listened carefully and asked questions that enabled colleagues to articulate ideas and their own solutions to problems. The use of particular questions (for example, What have you learnt about yourself? What led you to think this way? How will this affect others?) helped us to become more critically reflective by moving beyond our own experience to appreciating its effect on others.

The coaching component worked well and served to strengthen values of mutuality and reciprocity, transparency, and trust and respect. The process was transforming and allowed us to appreciate the

[5] GULL's mission is to provide an inclusive, practical, affordable, and credible alternative to traditional forms of education and development. As a non-profit, public corporation, it has been operating throughout the world since 2007. See www.gullonine.org

meaning of Leo Tolstoy's words when he claimed, "Everybody thinks of changing humanity, and nobody thinks of changing himself" (1900, p. 255). It seemed very clear to me that transformational change personally, provided the much-needed precedent for transformational change at a community level.

Members of our partnership recognised that changes had been made. When we considered our initial personal learning statements along with our final learning summary statements, we were able to better understand how we had developed as a sustainable learning group that had learnt new ways of doing, knowing, and being. In finding new ways of doing, we had become far better communicators and collaborators, and better able to use action learning strategies to identify and solve problems. We identified new ways of coming to know about our own self and others, especially through processes of reflection and coaching each other. We had discovered new concepts that now informed our partnership work. We also discovered new ways of being. We were able to recognise attributes such as optimism, motivation, resilience, confidence, persistence, and practices such as reflection that helped us to sustain the partnership.

Conclusion

This paper has described the challenges for universities and within communities that may prevent engaged partnerships for effective community engagement. Here I have offered responses to these challenges, illustrating through the case study of a long-term community–university partnership seeking to address problems concerning education for a Samoan community in Southeast Queensland. In this discussion I identified the following needs for collaborative partnerships:

- a vision and associated goals that are defined, shared, and endorsed by both community and university;
- a methodology that nurtures a context of engagement, emphasising values such as mutuality and reciprocity, transparency, and trust and respect;
- a set of goals that can be appreciated in both community and university terms, that is, they are mutually beneficial and their achievement can be identified; and
- a strategy for sustainability that is informed by the 3Rs framework of relationships, recognition, and reflection.

The paper also provides learnings for leadership teams within universities that seek an engaged approach. For this, group planning is required so that:

- engagement is clearly defined within the context of the university's vision, mission statement, and underlying set of values and commitments;
- participants are provided with exemplars of engaged approaches to research, service, and teaching to foster shared understanding of these concepts;
- the university offers opportunities demonstrating that it values an engaged approach; and
- strategies for implementing engagement include ways of monitoring outcomes and impact so that engagement agendas remain responsive to changing community needs.

Certainly, there are challenges for achieving effective, mutually rewarding engagement between universities and communities. Yet as the case study discussed here reveals, those challenges can themselves be valuable learning experiences when participants reflect critically upon them to gain insights for further action and learning. I believe this case study of a Samoan community in Southeast Queensland presents not just useful lessons in community engagement but also recognition that community–university partnerships have great potential to contribute to knowledge creation and to community wellbeing.

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A Hopeful Participatory Engagement with Rural South African Children

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Abstract

Having hope has been described as envisioning a future in which a person would like to participate (Jevne, 2005). What hopeful futures do rural South African children, who live in communities with high levels of poverty, and ravaged by HIV and AIDS and crime, envision? Following a transformative paradigm, with the idea of carving a social justice path, I approached a rural aftercare centre in South Africa and recruited 12 enthusiastic children. Together we embarked on a yearlong journey to understand the concept of hope. Applying a community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology, and using a variety of visual data generation activities, my doctoral study sought to investigate how visual participatory methods exploring rural South African children's expressions of hope could make a difference to their personal hope. This article is a personal reflection of the ups and downs of my research journey, learning about hope and social agency in an African context alongside a group of school-age children. It is based on observations and personal field notes, reflections, and personal correspondence with staff at the centre as well as with my academic supervisor. The experience taught me that three key considerations are essential for a fruitful collaborative research engagement: the community partnership, the data generation process, and working together towards meaningful change and mutual benefit. This discussion tackles both the difficult ethical dilemmas and perceived successes I experienced working with rural children. My contribution is a response to the demand for, and growing interest in, social research literature that investigates complex social issues and produces community-based and collaborative knowledge.

Keywords: community-based participatory research, hope, participatory visual research, rural children

Introduction

Positive psychology posits that a prerequisite for positive behaviour change is a sense of hope (Larsen & Stege, 2010; Yohani & Larsen, 2009). Hope as a virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), a desire (Erikson, 1964), an outcome or goal (Snyder, 1994), a human becoming (Parse, 1999), a dynamic life force (Dufault &

Martocchio, 1985), or an orientation (Jevne, 2005), exists inseparably from human existence (Stephenson, 1991). Hope or hopefulness is multifaceted and can be expressed as follows: rationally—a cognitive dimension; as a feeling—an affective dimension; and as a way of relating or being—a behavioural dimension (Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990; Dufault & Martocchio, 1985; Farran, Herth, & Popovich, 1995). Theories of hope show that how children think about the barriers they face and their access to sources of support can contribute significantly to their sense of hopefulness (Snyder, Lopez, & Shorey, 2003).

Snyder and Lopez (2007, p. 171) remarked that "in the privacy of their personal thoughts, people can imagine wonderful visions of their tomorrows". They can; but what if they don't? According to Snyder (2000), a hopeful person has goal-directed thinking and is able to find the agency and pathways to pursue these goals. But context and circumstances can significantly affect these constructs. In a South African study of national hope levels, Boyce and Harris (2012) concluded that self-perception of one's position in society and status of marginalisation appear to affect individual hope levels. In conditions of poverty, people often perceive otherwise achievable goals as restricted, and their belief in the lack of access to resources or opportunities diminishes their sense of efficacy. Individuals or communities are, therefore, less likely to manifest the motivation or agency necessary to pursue their objectives (Lopez et al., 2000).

Children and adolescents who lack a sense of hope and agency are prone to making poor life choices. Without a vision of future goals, or a belief in themselves to achieve such goals, there is very little reason for children living in the grip of poverty to avoid actions that might cause them further harm in the future (Barnett & Weston, 2008; Burrow, O'Dell, & Hill, 2010). Thus, hope plays a key role in influencing risk decisions, and whether or not a child has hope depends on a range of factors: economic, cultural, social, and psychological. Erikson's (1964) pioneering work on human development posited that hope is based on an infant's early experiences of trusting relationships and her or his cumulative experiences in society. Emerging findings point further to the importance of self-esteem, connectedness, a sense of identity, and social influences on an individual's sense of hope. "Hope has its roots in intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental/sociological experiences" (Farran et al., 1995, p. 16). Hope, therefore, develops and exists within an individual, between individuals, and among individuals in a community or society. Within a collective culture, the interconnectedness of these levels is paramount. An individual's development of hope (or hopelessness) is thus largely determined by the presence of hope, or lack thereof, in her or his society.

Despite the promise of freedom, peace, and prosperity, after more than 20 years of democracy South Africa still has the dubious distinction of being an unjust and divided society (Boyce & Harris, 2012). Furthermore, with high numbers of children orphaned or living in dire poverty, it would be easy to think of South Africa as a country steeped in despair. Nonetheless, several studies have shown that children are indeed hopeful despite living in adversity (Adamson & Roby, 2011; Guse & Vermaak, 2011; Herth, 1998; Makome, 2011; Yohani, 2008; Yohani & Larsen 2009). Peterson and Seligman (2004) believed that even in the most adverse conditions hope is still present and can be found, and Snyder, Cheavens, and Sympson (1997) proclaimed that most children are abundantly hopeful. Adamson and Roby (2011) conducted Snyder's Children's Hope Scale[6] in South Africa with children and adolescents from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds, and reported surprising findings. Contrary to their expectations, orphaned and non-orphaned children reported similar levels of hope and, in fact, the majority of orphaned children demonstrated higher levels of agency than did their non-orphaned counterparts. The authors believed this could be due to the former's reliance on a wider network of support, and concluded that hopeful behaviour, regardless of circumstances, is heavily dependent on access to supportive and caring relationships. Other studies of hope in South Africa have shown similar results (Guse & Vermaak, 2011;

[6] The Children's Hope Scale (CHS) developed by Snyder, Hoza et al. (1997) is grounded firmly on Snyder's theory of hope, which defines hope as future goal oriented, and thus measures it according to two key constructs: pathways thinking and agency. The 12-item scale consists of four questions targeting the pathways component, four questions aimed at the agency component, and four neutral, filler questions.

Isaacs & Savahl, 2014; Makome, 2011), highlighting the ubiquitous and universal nature of hope. My personal experience as an educational psychologist working with children and families in disadvantaged communities around the country is that hope is always present to some extent and once discovered and nurtured, becomes contagious and can be used as a tool for building therapeutic wellbeing (Larsen & Stege, 2010). It is noted, however, that not all literature considers hope a strength and positive virtue. To some, hope is merely an illusion seducing people towards false beliefs and promises (Snyder, 2000). Jevne (2005) believed that the concerns about the detriments of hope exist because the construct is most often manifested in times of suffering and despair. In more recent literature, Larsen and her colleagues provided an interesting reframing of the concept of working with a client's false or unrealistic hope, referring rather to the possibility of unshared hope between the client and counsellor (Larsen, Stege, Edey, & Ewasiw, 2014). In my view, this study considered hope as a human process or orientation of being, rather than an outcome, therefore it was not about *what* one hopes for, but about simply *being hopeful* about oneself.

The Benefits of a Hopeful Community

The two components necessary and essential for successful hopeful thinking are motivation (having a goal or vision) and a sense of agency. But can hope itself build thoughts of self-efficacy that can then be transformed into action? Farran et al. (1995) claimed that continuous success in one's life, such as achieving goals or solving difficult problems, builds a person's sense of confidence and ability to solve future difficulties. With increased hope, people's altered self-image propels them towards further opportunities to develop, test, augment, and maintain their basis for hope. This fuelled my curiosity about the ability of hope to nurture and inspire children to becoming social agents of change.

Hope literature focuses mainly on the domain of the individual, but there are also significant commentaries on the power of hope in bringing about social or collective wellbeing. It is understood that hopeful thinking reflects a way of interacting with other people as well as with one's environment (Snyder, 2000). If hope is a learning process, inherently interactive, then it is possible to say that hope begets hope (Snyder, Cheavens, & Sympson, 1997). If hope plays such a significant role in personal growth and the wellbeing of an individual, what impact then, could building hope have on the wellbeing of a community or society? Webb (2007) argued that resolute hope (a form of hoping against the evidence) is not only personally transformative but can serve a "socially conservative function" (p. 76). When a person accesses her or his hope to facilitate psychological wellbeing, the consequence can well be a reduction in personal despair and disillusionment, thus sustaining social stability. Webb presented an additional form of collective hope that he named utopian hope or transformative hope (2007, 2012). This mutually efficacious mode of hope sustains the belief that members of a group or community collectively share: that their voices will be heard and their shared goals achieved, thus bringing about social transformation, or as Webb (2007, p. 79) put it, "the transformative power of collective praxis".

Literature further demonstrates that making hope explicit during interventions or therapy, opens doors for individuals to think about, and intentionally access, previously unexplored sources and benefits of hope available to them (Larsen, Eddey, & LeMay, 2005; Yohani & Larsen, 2009). From the readings and my experience as a psychologist, I was confident that exploring hope with children could open possibilities for their personal growth, but I wanted the research to be meaningful on a communal level too.

Research that Makes a Difference

The transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2009) highlights that research that is grounded in assumptions that prioritise social justice and human rights, and makes use of methodologies that encourage collaboration and involvement, has the potential to realise greater social change. The conceptualisation and execution of this study was driven by current literature that asked: What difference does academic inquiry make, and what relevance does it hold for the community that participated in the research? (Ferreira, 2013; Mertens, 2009; Mitchell, 2011). This endeavour followed two interrelated paths of inquiry: first, to explore how rural

South African children experience hope, and second, to investigate how the visual and participatory nature of the data generation process could increase the participants' personal hopes, and thus perhaps spark future positive thinking, behaviour, and interactions.

My readings on building therapeutic hope, and extending that to collective community hope, connected with Freire's (1970) ideals of critical consciousness and praxis in research. His conviction that people are experts of their own learning underscores how an emancipatory research process can facilitate individuals to realise they have the power to make changes in their life or society. This ideology, I felt, was best encapsulated in the methodology of community-based participatory research (CBPR), which promotes the practice of research and action done *with* people and not *on* or *for* people (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). According to Reason and Bradbury (2001), using a participatory methodology in a study is not just applying a theory of knowledge, but making a political statement as well. It implies building democratic relationships as the primary form of inquiry. The political dimension of participatory research affirms the participants' rights and abilities to engage with decisions affecting them, instead of just contributing to research that generates knowledge about them. This article tells a personal story of engaging a community through research. It outlines the process, critical reflection points, perplexing ethical dilemmas, as well as some of the challenges and successes observed. As the study is not yet finalised, a discussion on the emerging themes and the relevance of working on hope with rural children will be presented in a future article.

Engaging With a Community for Meaningful Change

In CBPR it is crucial to create and sustain collaborative, equitable partnerships with various community stakeholders throughout the research process, which in turn builds community confidence and trust. This study taught me that fruitful collaborative research engagement requires three key components for a solid foundation: community partnership, the data generation process, and working together towards meaningful change and mutual benefit. I will elaborate further on how these components were considered and unfolded in the study.

The community partnership

As a key role player in the study, it is imperative that before speaking about the selected community, I position myself. On qualifying and registering as an educational psychologist, I was fortunate to join an international faith-based organisation working in the field of HIV and AIDS. In my capacity as project officer, I travelled regularly, providing therapeutic services to vulnerable children and families, and conducting informal training with staff members carrying out community programmes. My work with both rural and urban communities imparted to me the value of collaboration and the strength of the human spirit, while shaping my work towards positive psychology and solution-focused therapy. Thus, my beliefs as a social researcher, that even the most marginalised groups have the power to effect change when afforded opportunities through respectful, participative processes, have strongly influenced this study.

I selected St. Kizito Children's Programme, situated in a rural community centre in South Africa, with which I had developed a close working relationship over the years working as a psychologist in the NGO field (Image 1).

Image 1: St. Kizito Children's Programme serving the village of Tsheseng, in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District Municipality, QwaQwa, Free State. Established in 1998, it has become a Centre for community care and support.

I knew that the level of trust and rapport that existed between myself and the staff would allow for a creative and participatory research environment. I have learnt in my fieldwork that traditional leadership is very important when working in rural communities and, having met with the traditional chief's son on a previous occasion, I knew that he (on behalf of his father) would support my research endeavour. After gaining consent from the Office of Batlokoa Traditional Council and the board of St. Kizito, I conducted a workshop with the adult community carers at the children's programme to discuss the nature and purpose of the study, as well as to demonstrate some of the visual participatory activities I intended to do with the participants. Participant selection was then left to the community carers. My only prompt was that it be a mixed group of boys and girls who possibly needed hope, and could benefit emotionally from working with me on hope. A group of 12 participants was agreed on, with ages ranging from 9 to 13 years (the most predominant age group attending the aftercare programme). There was no mention of language capability because it was agreed that there would always be a community carer to facilitate the workshops and assist me with translation. Unfortunately, it was early in my research process and eagerness got the better of me. I did not record the group conversation around participant selection. It would have been extremely valuable and interesting to understand what their criteria entailed.

Engagement with the data generation process

The process of learning, sharing, and understanding was iterative because data creation is a reflective and relational process (Suzuki, Ahluwalia, Arora, & Mattis, 2007). Although I had in mind the type of activities that I felt would engage the participants and elicit information and sharing in a fun way, once we started the engagement sessions, I had to be flexible and innovative. Working with children required me to be creative and adaptable, even more so because there was no shared language or culture, so I refer to this stage of the study as *knowledge creation* rather than *knowledge extraction* (Clark & Moss, 2011).

Choosing to use a multi-modal approach, which incorporated written words, visuals, and verbal expressions through a variety of arts-informed participatory tools, allowed the group to bring together a collection of extensive, information-rich, and colourful data to deepen our understanding of hope (Clark & Moss, 2011). I expected that exposing the group members to multiple activities and modes of expression would also play a role in the transformative agenda I had in mind. As both language and culture were potential barriers in the study, I examined how children's identification with an image or self-presentation through a generated image could provide a powerful way of capturing their emotions and experiences, thus reducing their reliance on verbal articulation (Reavey & Johnson, 2012). In this study the visual tools often enabled the participants to communicate their ideas and feelings symbolically, and provided a "springboard for more talking, listening and reflecting" (Clark & Moss, 2011, p. 8). Within the arts-based umbrella, participatory visual research is social research influenced by, but not based in, the arts (Cole & Knowles, 2008). It can serve as a mode of inquiry, of representation and dissemination, and as a mode of transformation

(Mitchell, 2011). It is a methodology that pays attention to the process of engagement and expression as integral to the data generated. Combining participatory research with visual data generation enabled me, as an adult, to view the world through the lens of childhood, which was less intimidating for the children and more importantly, acknowledged the children's rights through respecting their views and, also, their silences (Clark & Moss, 2011). Visual methods are less obtrusive, more inclusive, and incorporate an element of confidence building by handing over agency to the participants rather than having them think about and answer researcher-defined questions (Literat, 2013; Reavey & Johnson, 2012).

From my first meeting with the children, we organised subsequent 3- to 4-day engagement sessions that continued over a period of almost a year, mostly during school holidays. The lengthy nature of the study meant that the group size fluctuated, and that not all the participants were present for all the sessions. With every visit, I brought along two large plastic crates filled with a wide variety of stationery, craft materials, and drama props (Image 2).

Image 2: CBPR is messy and chaotic. Below are the boxes with materials and stationery as well as all the audio-visual equipment.

The children had to initially be told, and reminded, that they could freely dig into the crates and access whatever they needed, however, as the engagement progressed, they soon helped themselves without prompting. I believe that offering the children choices gave them a sense of power and control, orienting them towards taking ownership of what they were creating (Driessnack, 2006). At the end of our hope engagement, I left all the crates and their contents at St. Kizito for the staff to use for the benefit of the children's programme.

Over the months together, we drew our hopes, made collages on hope, modelled our hope experiences in clay, and mapped out our community. We participated in a photo-voice activity taking photos of places that were hopeful and not hopeful to us. We made posters, we talked, we played, we argued, and we laughed, and together we learned about our hopes and those of the community. At the end of each day, the participants could choose either to take their work home or to paste it on the walls of the centre to exhibit to other children. In most cases, participants scrambled to proudly display their work and, after a year's worth of photographs and posters, there was a desperate shortage of wall space, and a reorganisation was in order (Image 3).

Image 3: Participants proudly hanging up their work at the centre to share with other children.

Because of the complexity of managing a video camera, two cameras, and two audio recorders, as well as my tendency to forget to switch any of them on, the staff recommended a 16-year-old youth who also attended the children's programme to be my technical assistant. During the first week, I explained how everything worked, how to charge batteries, and how to frame certain activities. In the beginning, he would focus solely on close-ups of the drawings we were making rather than zooming out and capturing the children actually making them, and the group interactions. So it was also a learning curve for me to instruct and guide him on valuing the process (conversations and presentations) rather than only the end products (visual material generated). Over the weeks of our engagement, the technical assistant became an integral member of the group and often facilitated translations and even joined the participants in several of the hope activities adding his own ideas and posters to the group. The participants all knew him well and his walking between the children and engaging them with the video camera while they were busy with the various activities, generated familiarity and conversations.

The participants were also taught how to use the camera and video camera and were often encouraged to make use of these to capture their own creations as well as any aspect of the research engagement. I always made sure to place two cameras in the room; they were circulated amongst the participants and community carers who facilitated the sessions. This proved to be a valuable source of visual data, especially at times when I was participating in group activities and not always able to pay attention to what was going on around me. It was always a delight and surprise in the evenings, to go through all the data from the day's work and pick up casual snippets of the children singing into the audio recorder, having fun posing in front of the camera in funny costumes, and sometimes even delivering private messages of thanks to me or one of the staff members.

On my final visit to the centre, I brought T-shirts printed with "Hope Champions" as per requests from the group (including the community carers who had become part of the group). I also provided each participant with a folder containing photographs of themselves through our yearlong engagement, photographs of the data each child had produced, and the photographs they themselves had produced in the photo-voice activity. A discussion was held about the importance of sharing knowledge and especially sharing with others everything we learned about hope and being hopeful. I showed them an example of a university dissertation and an academic journal, explaining what academic dissemination entailed, and asked them to look carefully through their personal folders and let me know what we, as a group, were going to share (Image 4).

Image 4: At the end of the research engagement, every participant was given a personal folder containing photographs of themselves and the data she or he created, opening discussion on issues of anonymity versus recognition.

I also asked how they intended to teach others in their school and community and share our new knowledge, and how this knowledge might improve the wellbeing of their families, friends, and the community. It was decided by the centre management, community carers, and participants that the Hope Champions should host an open day to present their work and teach others, so that the hope sessions could continue and expand. At the time of writing this article, the group were rehearsing a drama, writing a poem about hope, and preparing their posters.

Working towards meaningful change and mutual benefit

In transformative research, participation is not just espoused as a key value and characteristic, but should be seen as the purpose of the research (Mertens, 2009). Thus, this research engagement was more than a study "about" the children's conceptions of hope; the process of mutual learning became vitally intertwined with their developing sense of self and identity as competent Hope Champions within their community, as well with as my own growing identity as a young academic researcher. As a psychologist my work entails facilitating positive change, and I was adamant that my doctoral research should do the same. Freire (1970) championed the potential of social research to foster conscientisation or consciousness-raising, and it was my intention to engage in a research process that produced knowledge that afforded the participants an opportunity to critically reflect on their inherent strengths.

Various studies have demonstrated that working with hope indeed makes a difference to psychological wellbeing. Yohani and Larsen (2009, p. 260), exploring hope with refugee children in Canada through art-based activities, remarked that the actual process of talking about hope allowed the children to "begin the process of intentionally accessing strategies" to enhance their own hope. They also observed that when children can identify and access sources of hope (whether internal or external) it provided them with a sense of support and belonging. A feeling of empowerment in turn fuelled further activity, resulting in stronger relationships to others. I too, witnessed how the children's confidence in interacting with me and other children in the programme seemed to increase as our engagement extended. While I discuss below some personal observations and examples noted in my research journal, which I feel might demonstrate the participants' movement towards an increased sense of hope and becoming social change agents, my comments are of course speculative. Without the final analysis of the entire engagement and inclusion of the children's own views on their hope development, what follows is a collegiate sharing and reflection.

An incident that stands out clearly in my mind started me thinking about how participating in this research study might be affecting the children's sense of self. A quick 2-day visit had been arranged at very short notice, but unfortunately, only half of the participants got word that I was there. The children's programme itself was undergoing several changes at the time and subsequently there were only a few children hanging

around the centre keeping themselves busy with games. As the group participants excitedly greeted me and proceeded to grab things out of the crates and search for the cameras, other children stood in a corner staring on with total befuddlement. Seeing the hesitation and shyness of the other children, three of my fellow researchers (child participants) on their own initiative took them by the hand, sat them down at the table and instructed me to take out some paper and crayons for everyone to draw on. Later that afternoon as the children ate their lunch, I enquired about the giggles and conversations taking place and was told that two of the younger (new girls) said they wanted to join "our" group because we were doing fun things that are important, but the rest of the group had explained to them that you have to first learn about hope and become a Hope Champion. Another example occurred at the end of the school year when I was invited to attend the year-end St. Kizito Christmas party, and was seated at a long, beautifully decorated table reserved for important guests. I noticed that the Hope Champions group had been allocated the decorated table next to ours instead of sitting on the floor with the rest of the children. It seemed to me that within the community their value and status had been elevated, and I couldn't help wondering if perhaps, in some way, the engagement had managed to erase (or at least blur) the label of vulnerability that hung over them at the start of the research.

I also found that as the engagement progressed, the participants became more concerned with ensuring that their artwork and voices were adequately captured. Somehow along the way, my focus on ensuring that audio tapes were recording, that voices were sufficiently loud in noisy rooms, and that artwork was being photographed, had shifted. Before presenting their work, the participants would remind me to put the recorders on, and made sure the red light was on before speaking loudly and proudly. On many occasions, I would spot one of the group members putting their artwork on the floor and then photographing it themselves, or proudly pointing to their work on the wall and explaining to another child what it was about, and why it was important (Image 5). These instances made me wonder if the children had moved beyond being group participants into the realm of coresearchers, taking ownership of what was being produced.

Image 5: Participants taking ownership and agency over photographing their own art work for inclusion as research data.

Reciprocity and generativity in social science research involves creating authentic partnerships, give-and-take relationships, and benefit (Swartz, 2011). Thus, "if a researcher takes participants' ideas and time, he or she is expected to give back in the way of resources, skills, employment, or training" (Mertens, 2009, p. 74). I tried to reciprocate in various ways. When visiting the centre I not only conducted research activities, but also provided much needed free counselling services to the community as well as training and support

for staff at the centre. As the children started to become more critically aware of their own capacity to hope, how they could make positive differences in their community, and started to question existing norms and power imbalances that hampered their rights to participate in their life planning, I simultaneously gained a more critical awareness of my identity as a social researcher. I started thinking how I might make a positive contribution in the field of academia, and questioned the practices and guidelines that I felt might be hampering the rights of marginalised people to participate in, and contribute to, research affecting their lived realities.

Thinking Critically about Research Ethics

There were times when I had to critically reflect on conventions and guidelines of ethics in social research, and question their value and relevance within transformative, participative community engagements. For instance, issues of consent and anonymity become thorny issues for a researcher aspiring towards social action and emancipation. One argument opposing anonymity is that it demeans the notion of agency. For example, Baez (2002) stated that confidentiality is framed by concerns for a person's choices, rights, and freedoms and thus, according to participative and transformational frameworks, scholars should advocate giving individuals the right to choose and argue for personal control rather than obscurity. Similarly, it can be said that anonymising participants chips away at the ideals of autonomy (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). Transformative research stands for exposing and resisting oppression that undermines equality, and sometimes to do so requires openness, transparency, and risk-taking—all of which are weakened by secrecy, often veiled as protection (Baez, 2002; Mertens, 2009; Prosser & Burke, 2008). Embarking on a visual participatory study with children and aimed at nurturing critical consciousness further caused me, at times, to question established codes of practice in research. Matters of informed consent and ownership must be negotiated on a completely different level when taking into account the exposed nature of visual research (Reavey & Johnson, 2012). I should note here, that I am not dismissing the legitimacy of anonymity for maintaining ethical practice within certain types of research. However, I believe that in this particular study, as might be the case with similar CBPR, the principle conflicted with the nature of the study, the authentic dissemination of the knowledge, and with my obligations to the community and participants (see Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011).

Informed consent is central to following a path of good ethical practice (Prosser & Burke, 2008), and was continuously reflected on with the participants and community carers at various stages of the engagement. I began the process of gaining entry and consent from the community several months before initiating the fieldwork, ensuring I was following the tacit rules of the culture and community. Once I had gained the support of the "gatekeepers" to the community, I worked with the community carers to attain consent from the guardians of the selected participants. At our first round-table discussion, the children were presented with a visual consent form (Mitchell, 2011) ensuring that the information was conveyed in an age-appropriate and fun manner. I felt that presenting the children with something visual was not only in line with the visual and participative nature of the study, but would also be fun and simple to follow—breaking some of the formality of academic research. It was also a way to accommodate the possible barriers associated with gaining consent where language, culture, and education levels differ. The same process was taken with the board members of the children's programme who requested that the name of the organisation be mentioned in all published material and thus, their involvement be acknowledged.

The dynamic nature of social research with communities invariably leads to changes in context, culture, and methods, which forced me to think on my feet. Mertens (2009) urged that ethical choices in research must connect to the realisation that discrimination and oppression are pervasive in all communities, and that researchers have a moral responsibility to understand the communities in which they work and to challenge the maintenance of societal processes. Viewing children as competent coresearchers or collaborators also carries the understanding that the participants have intent, and are thus able to voluntarily choose what (and when) they want to share or participate in. Anyone who has ever worked with children in any capacity knows all too well that children of all ages choose to participate, or not. I trusted

that, given appropriate and sufficient information, the participants had the capacity and right to make considered decisions. The children were always informed ahead of time what activities would be conducted the following day and their relevance, and it was always made clear to them that participation (and attendance) was their choice. Towards the end of the engagement, the group was presented with the data generated in visual form and we again resumed a discussion on consent, permission, ownership, and anonymity. The participants and community carers were shown examples of both a picture that blurred the faces of those in it, and one which showed faces and names. This was accompanied by a discussion on possible negative or positive consequences to each of the choices. After much thought and deliberation, the children unanimously agreed that they wanted full acknowledgement for their contributions and participation.

A final consideration when embarking on community-based participatory research is the debate surrounding concepts of trustworthiness and authenticity, as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Many advocates of participatory visual research view these criteria as simply another form of restrictive gate keeping on legitimate knowledge (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Mertens, 2009). I too felt stifled at times, struggling to fit my research process and interests into the rigid boxes of standards and criteria. There were different questions swirling in my head about whether my research was fair and authentic, not just trustworthy. How would I know if it was? Was I aware of my own biases and assumptions, and how would I know what I did not know? Was I providing an environment for building trusting relationships and encouraging quality interactions, and how could I best honour everything that the participants and I were doing together, so that other readers and reviewers would understand, appreciate, and value what we had created and shared? I decided to venture beyond these criteria and consider alternative guidelines to ensure that my research was respectful, fair, and significant (see Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001; Mertens, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). I faced these challenges by ensuring that I spent the quality time needed for developing trust and openness, which allowed me to deal with the different levels and types of power and agendas that arose (Mertens, 2009). I revealed information about myself in conversation and in drawings, and shared with the participants personal photos of my life, family, and home. Advancing from a position of wanting to learn and share, I was open to the children's questions and to building authenticity and trust. I was always mindful that "although 'doing least harm' and 'doing most good' must surely remain as the cornerstones of our work as researchers, these clearly are interpretative areas in and of themselves" (Mitchell, 2011, p. 13). In the end, it came down to a balancing act between my role as a researcher and my duties as a psychologist.

Discussion: Engagement and Collaboration is No Easy Task

Jevne (1991) suggested that people who cope well but hope little are flat and lack inspiration, while people who hope but cope poorly lack the ability to transform their hopes into action. This comment resonates well with what I believe I have often seen in rural South African children and youth; there is hope in abundance but very poor coping and motivation to act on it. Perhaps Snyder and Lopez (2007) are correct; wonderful visions of tomorrow do exist in all people but need a platform to be shared. However, modern society has increasingly bound up knowledge with power, and power with expertise (Field, 1991; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Working according to the assumption that knowledge is relational, I had to find ways to encourage and nurture collaboration; working together for the benefit of all. This meant I had to reinforce the notion that each and every person involved in the study contributed different roles, abilities, and expertise, all of which was valuable and necessary for the inquiry to proceed successfully (Akerstrom & Brunnberg, 2012). This created an environment of meaningful alliance in which neither the participants nor the researcher were sole experts, but the power and possibilities lay in the experience of sharing knowledge and ideas (Coppock, 2011). The focus was not on holding on to power or giving the children more autonomy, but rather on creating an environment in which both the children and the adults felt comfortable participating side by side (Wyness, 2012). The result was a symbiotic collaboration where the participants and researcher mutually empowered and strengthened each other's understandings, and together strove for agency and growth.

The engagement was also dotted with moments of triumphs and achievements. The principle of action and "change efforts" is a complicated one in the field of psychology and community development, and proved to be so in this study as well. Critical thinking about oneself is by no means inconsequential, and I embraced the notion of research that opens up local possibilities for movement (Baez, 2002). What I could not have foreseen was what the participants and community stakeholders would do with this movement. During the research, one of the community carers who had been very involved with the group from the beginning secured full time employment in a large non-government organisation, and embarked on furthering his education in leadership and management. It also transpired that St. Kizito Children's Programme had mentioned its involvement in the university research study in detail when applying for new funding, and when reporting back to existing stakeholders. Members of its management had also been invited (by the chief's office) for the first time, to attend a local traditional council meeting. This was a sign that they had gained status in the eyes of the local governing structures, and that the programme was regarded as playing a valuable and vital role in the community.

Conclusion

There has been a call in the field of social science (for example, De Lange, 2012; Ferreira, 2013) for academic research endeavours to descend from their ivory towers and engage meaningfully with the communities around them, with an eye to mutual benefit and sustainable social change. I believe this article study sheds light on the potential of such a venture.

This learning engagement was not an easy one, especially for an adult researcher attempting to enter a foreign world—not only that of children but of the lived realities of rural African Sotho-speaking children. I am none of these; I am a white English-speaking woman raised in a middle-class neighbourhood in Johannesburg during the apartheid era, now pursuing a graduate degree. There was no question that issues of power, privilege, and race were front and centre in this study and had to be engaged with constantly. The experience has taken me into unchartered personal territory, pushed me way beyond my comfort zones, and exposed me to a kind of knowing and relating that I had not known before.

Conducting transformative, community-based research is far from a simple linear process. It is characterised by close collaboration between the researcher and the study participants as well as other community stakeholders, and such relationships can offer many challenges and surprises. This article pays homage to the remarkable children and community members who took this journey with me, and taught me so much more than they will ever know. I believe it is also a benchmark for other students in the social sciences to brave the academic waters and seek new ways to conduct authentic and meaningful research that truly matters. As the philosopher Habermas noted: "in the process of enlightenment, there can only be participants" (1974, as cited by Wallerstein & Duran, 2010, p. 29).

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Exploring Experiences of Preservice Teachers in Community Engagement: Let Us Work in Communities!

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that community engagement forms an essential part of preservice teachers' preparation. A curriculum that includes authentic learning experiences in communities complements and completes a purely theory-based curriculum. Community engagement prepares undergraduate students for the reality of teaching in diverse communities and takes them out of their comfort zones. However, this can only be achieved if the students perceive community engagement as a valuable and integral part of their professional development. We describe preservice teachers' perceptions and reflections over a 7-year period during which a community-based project was implemented in an existing module and developed into a service learning module. The project was embedded as an integral part of the module and enabled application of theory taught in the lecture hall. Data were generated by means of a questionnaire in Year 1 and supplemented by portfolios, reports, and reflections in subsequent years. New insights from analysis of the data every year shaped the planning of each successive year. Findings indicate that students perceived community engagement as not only beneficial, but an essential part of their professional development before they start their teaching careers. Based on these findings, we recommend that community engagement projects be included in teacher education programmes.

Keywords: community engagement, academic service learning, course design, impact study, reflective practice

Introduction and Context of Study

One of the goals of higher education is to prepare students to participate in civic life (Iverson & James, 2010). Several studies attest to the importance of community engagement (CE) for student learning (Billig & Eyler, 2003; Boyer, 1996; Kolb, 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2005), claiming that students' involvement in communities enhances their commitment and prepares them emotionally and socially to make a contribution to society. Service learning is defined by the Council on Higher Education in South Africa (CHE) as an operational component of CE providing:

> *a structured learning experience that combines community service with preparation and reflection. Students engaged in service learning provide community service in response to community-identified concerns and learn about the context in which service is provided, the connection between their service and their academic coursework, and their roles as citizens. (CHE, 2011, p. 76)*

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) pointed out that academic service learning is an approach that universities can utilise to strengthen democracy through education. It also reflects a university's commitment to its local community. Service learning enhances citizenship, and develops and tests personal and social responsibility (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) which, as Iverson and James (2010) pointed out, seem to be development goals particularly relevant for student teachers. Service learning "compels educators and students to analyse educational issues in interdisciplinary ways and to consider not only the cognitive development of students, but also other facets of students' development" (Billig & Eyler, 2003, p. 27). Students understand the world outside the lecture hall better when they are able to apply theory to practice and learn through real-life experiences.

Universities were developing social responsibility and community awareness amongst students through community service programmes long before the White Paper on South African Higher Education policy (Department of Education, 1997) called upon them to do so. Over the last decade, a "scholarship of engagement" was promoted across South African Higher Education in official documents such as the good practice guide for managing the quality of service learning by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC, 2006, p. 10). Academic Service Learning (ASL) was one response to the call for engagement.

ASL, as described by Furco and Root (2010), incorporates a community engagement project within a credit-bearing module to provide students with authentic contexts in which to apply theory while simultaneously working with community partners to address identified needs. This enhances student learning and creates a meaningful symbiotic relationship between the university and local communities (Vickers, Harris, & McCarthy, 2004).

In this article, we explore perceptions of preservice teachers in their second year of study at a South African university, about their service learning experience. The study covers a journey of 7 years, during which we gradually incorporated a community engagement project into an existing undergraduate module. The project formed part of the compulsory module *Language across the Curriculum*, which focused on preparing students to teach any subject across the school curriculum through the medium of English. The rationale for the development of the module was embedded within an ecological framework of teaching: the student teacher needs to develop language skills to function well as an individual, in the classroom, the

school context, and the wider community (Dippenaar & Peyper, 2011). It required students to apply their knowledge of English as medium of instruction to identify and overcome communication barriers between educators and learners in their future classrooms. Students were introduced to language diversity, which is part of the South African teaching context, and were encouraged to look for alternative ways to communicate with learners from various backgrounds and languages.

According to Gibbons (2002, p. 119), language is learnt most efficiently in meaningful, authentic contexts. This was the aim of incorporating a service learning project in the module. Students had previously never been exposed to the social diversity of the communities where they were likely to teach. Based on student criticism of the module as being too theoretical, we wanted to provide students with an opportunity to develop language skills in an authentic social setting (Van Rensburg, 2007) and chose to do this through integrating academic service learning and language development. The preservice teachers were required to complete a 7-hour service learning project, which was extended to 15 hours after the first year, and then to 30 hours, based on students' and community partners' feedback. Student numbers were large; most were non-native speakers of English who would have to teach in that language, and most of their prospective learners were very likely to be non-native speakers of English.

The project was conceptualised when a colleague in the university's Social Welfare department, having noticed that learners who are not native speakers of English struggled with it as the official language of instruction, suggested Education students join her students to work in a local primary school. A partnership was thus formed between the two faculties concerned, providing Education students with an authentic context in which to apply theoretical knowledge, gain a better understanding of teaching, and develop civic responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222).

Not all the Education students could be accommodated on this project and an additional project at a nearby prison was introduced. Students tutored prisoners who were enrolled for the final Grade 12 examination. Students visited the prison weekly to tutor prisoners in various learning areas. In both projects, students had weekly scheduled sessions and were transported there and back by bus. Each group consisted of 60 students.

The rest of the class were allowed to find their own projects, subject to approval by the lecturer. Students worked mostly at children's homes, aftercare centres, or outreach programmes during the July holidays. Students had to identify a teaching and learning opportunity in a community where they would be able to apply and practise the communication outcomes of the module. They were expected to engage with a local community, assist learners with their homework, and develop their own English proficiency while teaching these learners English through games and activities. They were given an authentic context for learning, which would simultaneously expose them to many culturally and linguistically diverse populations in South African communities (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Pessate-Schubert, Thomas, & Lehman, 2006).

After the first year, we conducted a survey to determine whether the students and communities perceived the inclusion of the project as beneficial and whether the preservice teachers had attained the learning outcomes of the module. We thought that it was essential to find out how students perceived the experience because it was important that they considered it worthwhile and were enthusiastic about it if learners were to benefit (Human-Vogel & Dippenaar, 2012). The study was adapted and repeated twice over the next 7 years, based on our findings.

The research question addressed in this article is as follows:

- How do preservice teachers perceive community engagement initiatives with regard to their own professional development?

Theoretical Framework

Service learning was defined by Furco (2001) as a pedagogy that introduces meaningful, community based interactions into academic programmes to enhance academic learning, civic and social responsibility, career development, and personal self-efficacy. Both quantitative and qualitative international studies have found that academic service learning has positive effects on academic performance, values, self-efficacy, leadership, choice of service career, and plans to participate in service after college (Vogelsang, Ikeda, Gilmartin, & Keup, 2002, p. 16). Service learning improves teaching efficacy, commitment to teaching, service ethic of teaching, acceptance of diversity, and intent to engage and utilise service learning in own classrooms (Root, Callaghan, & Sepanski, 2002). This study is embedded in the work of Furco and Root (2010) who indicated that students' "academic, civic, personal, social, ethical, and vocational development" are positively influenced by the introduction of service learning in a programme (p. 16). They identified four of these domains as especially noteworthy, namely, academic achievement, improved student engagement and learning, civic responsibility and citizenship, and enhanced personal and social skills (Furco & Root, 2010). These four categories form the theoretical framework we used to analyse student perceptions and to determine whether the students thought community engagement positively impacted on their professional development as teachers.

Research Methodology

All the students enrolled for the module participated in the quantitative study (Table 1, n = 1084). In 2008 and 2009, the quantitative study was not conducted due to time constraints. However, qualitative data were analysed over a 7-year period to determine the perceptions of preservice teachers towards community engagement projects and service learning as pedagogy. Clearance was obtained from the faculty ethics committee, attesting to the stringent ethical considerations of the study.

Data collection (Table 1)

At the end of the first year of implementation (2007) all students and site managers or student supervisors on sites of participating projects completed questionnaires on the viability and benefits of the projects. Every student completed a questionnaire on his or her own perceptions of the project, using a Likert scale of 1–4. These surveys were completed again at the end of 2010 and 2011.

Table 1: Summary of Data Collection

Year	Quantitative data	Qualitative data	Participants	Sample size	Reason
2007	Questionnaires	Portfolios, reflections, final presentations	Students	333	Determine perceptions about value of project
2007	Questionnaires		Site supervisors	299	Determine viability of project
2010	Questionnaires	Portfolios, reflections, blogs, final presentations	Students	414	Determine perceptions about value of project
2011	Questionnaires	Portfolios, reflections, blogs, final presentations	Students	337	Determine perceptions about value of project

Qualitative data were gathered through the students' portfolios, reflections, blogs, and final presentations. Students compiled a portfolio of evidence on the project where they described their experiences in reflections and field notes on every session. Lecturer and site manager or supervisor notes on learner participation, attitudes, and involvement of learners during each intervention were included. Students described their own, personal experiences during the project. From 2010, students also created blogs, which they included in their portfolios of evidence. These formed part of their final assessment for the module.

The students' perceptions were categorised according to the identified categories of Furco and Root (2010). Their perceptions on improving their own English proficiency, their social responsibility, career development as teachers, and their own personal growth, were identified and highlighted. Quantitative data were analysed by the researchers and the Department of Statistics of the institution. Conclusions were drawn to determine the students' overall perceptions of the value of the service learning projects.

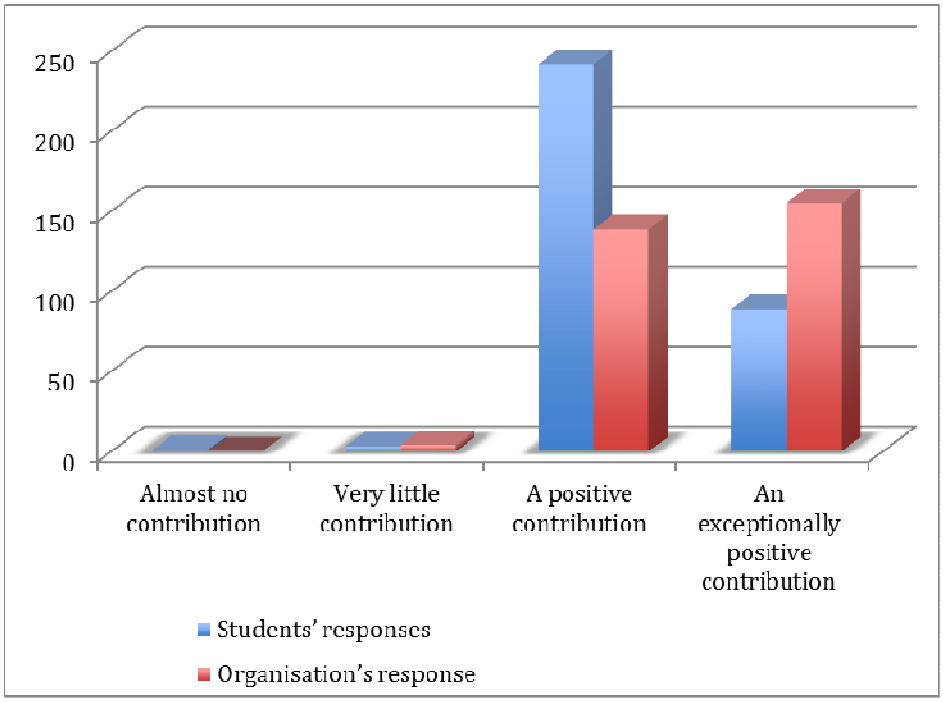
Results

Quantitative data: Questionnaires

Results, end of 2007

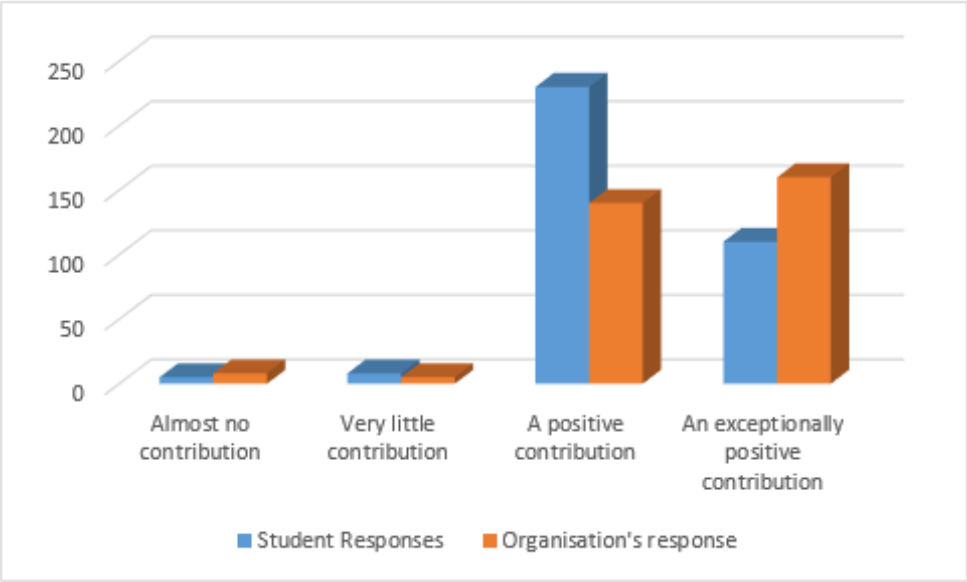
The following graphs (Figures 1, 2, and 3) show feedback received from site supervisors and students. Information is presented on the same graph to compare the results of site managers or supervisors with students. The first question addressed the extent to which the site manager and student thought the project made a positive contribution to the organisation. The second question addressed the extent to which the site manager and student thought the student contributed to the successful outcome of the project. The next question determined the involvement of the student for the full duration of 7 hours for the project.

Figure 1: Extent of Project's Contribution to the Organisation



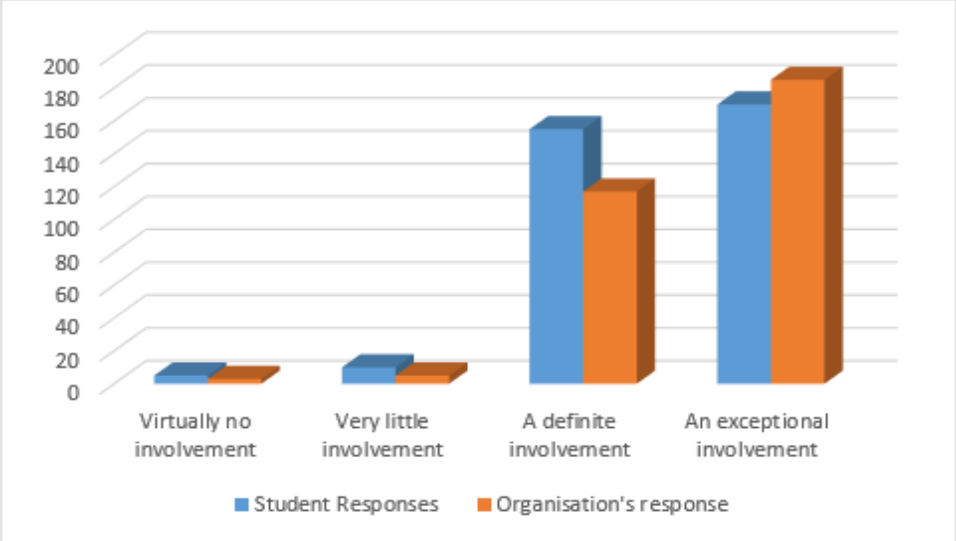
As seen in Figure 1, both students and site supervisors clearly indicated a positive contribution by the project, while the site supervisors indicated an exceptionally positive contribution. Figure 2 illustrates the contribution by the students to the positive outcome of the project. Results were very similar and both students and site supervisors clearly indicated a positive to exceptionally positive contribution.

Figure 2: Extent of Student's Contribution to the Outcome of the Project



In answer to the question of whether students were actively involved in the project, almost all students and site supervisors indicated a definite or even an exceptional involvement by the students (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Involvement of Student over the 7 Hours



Following that, the site supervisors and students were asked whether they thought the project was a success (Table 2). They were asked whether they would be prepared to establish a partnership with the institution with a view to having students participate in future projects of a similar nature to that just completed. In addition, they were asked if student hours at the organisation could be extended in future.

Table 2: Students' and Organisations' Responses (2007)

	Question	*Yes: Institutions*	*Yes: Students*
1.	Do you think the project was a success?	97%	99%
2.	Would the institution be able to form a long-term partnership with your organisation?	95%	98%
3.	Would students be able to work at the project for longer hours?	95%	98%

As seen in Table 2, almost all the site supervisors and students evaluated the project as a success. A similarly high percentage of site supervisors and students expressed their willingness to establish a long-term partnership with the university to continue the project. Most of the site supervisors and students indicated that students' hours could be extended. Based on the feedback, hours were extended in the following year.

Results, end of 2010.

At the end of 2010, questionnaires were completed by all students enrolled for the module (Table 1). About 80% of the students spoke Afrikaans or an indigenous African language as home language. Of these students, 96.6% said they valued service learning as an important part of their professional development.

Table 3: Results from Questionnaires (2010)

	Statement	***Agree***
1.	I improved my own English proficiency through the project.	62.3%
2.	My own communication skills in English improved through working on their projects.	65.9%
3.	My own speaking and listening skills improved.	79.4%
4.	My own reading and writing skills improved.	65.7%
5.	I learnt more about interacting with learners.	93.3%
6.	I made a positive contribution in the learner's life.	82.1%
7.	My learner improved in his or her academic performance.	78.4%
8.	My learner's English proficiency improved.	66.4%
9.	My learner gained emotionally by participating in the project.	67.1%
10.	My learner was happy to see me.	81.8%
11.	I benefited by taking part in this project.	82.1%
12.	The project made a difference to my professional development.	78.0%
13.	I made a difference to the community.	89.1%
14.	The project should continue in future.	88.9%

As seen in Table 3, students indicated they had improved their own English proficiency and communication skills by working on their projects. Their own speaking and listening skills improved more than their reading and writing skills, which could be because of their oral interactions with learners. This gave them opportunities to use English in authentic contexts. The students indicated they learnt more about interacting with learners, which is the essence of being a teacher, and made a positive contribution in their learners' lives. Although they indicated that their learners' academic performance improved, they thought that their learners' English proficiency did not improve as much. Emotional development on the part of the learners was not the main purpose of the projects, however, the students indicated their learners gained

emotionally by participating in the project, which was an added benefit. A positive aspect was that the students perceived that their learners were happy to see them, which made students feel valued as teachers and motivated them to go to the projects regularly.

The overall conclusion was that students thought they benefited by taking part in this project and that the project made a difference to their professional development. Students perceived that they made a difference to the community and the project should continue in future. Based on the data, the number of hours was increased to 30 hours. Although these findings are only based on students' and site supervisors' perceptions, and these constructs were not objectively measured, perceptions are important because positive experiences promote deep learning (Biggs, 1989; Kolb, 2014).

*Results, end of 2011*Questionnaires were distributed after all students had completed their service learning projects for 2011. They were requested to complete questionnaires anonymously and hand them back during their final presentations. Most students had never tutored learners before, but some had worked in a disadvantaged community. This questionnaire aimed to address questions by the lecturers after reflecting on the module at the end of the previous year. The questionnaire dealt with four sections: the demographics of students, students' perspective of the CE project, their perceptions of the CE project on learners, and the influence of the module on students' professional development as teachers. In addition, the students were requested to reflect on the module itself. Questions relevant to this article are posed in Table 3.

Table 4: Students' Perceptions of the Service Learning Project (2011)

	Statement	***Agree***
1.	The project has inspired me to do more community work after the module has ended.	89.27%
2.	I was able to apply this practical experience to my theory-based modules.	94.47%
3.	My tutoring helped learners to improve academically in the subjects I tutored them.	94.09%
4.	My tutoring helped learners to improve academically in their other subjects.	77.88%
5.	The project has inspired me to remain in the discipline of Education.	92.21%
6.	This project made me a better teacher.	92.70%
7.	The practical component helps me to understand how to teach.	99.02%

From the data it was deduced that the experience reinforced the students' desire to be teachers and to serve their communities. The practical experience they had gained provided them with the opportunity to develop their teaching skills that their theory-based modules did not allow. The dichotomy between theory and practice in teacher training is a problem which is well documented in the literature (Darling-Hammond, 2006) and service learning could be a way to address this. As seen in Table 3, most of the students indicated that the project had inspired them and made better teachers of them.

Qualitative data

Results, end of 2007

All participants were asked open-ended questions on what they considered to be the most important suggestions for future projects. Students perceived the project as beneficial and enjoyable. Almost unanimously, they reiterated their suggestion for longer hours in the communities. However, students indicated they did not think they were prepared for the project beforehand and suggested that students should receive more guidance. To address this, assessment criteria were refined and clear guidelines were put together for students. The Unit for Community Engagement at the university was contacted to assist with emotional, logistical, and practical preparation of students before going out the following year. The

contact time was extended as suggested by students and site supervisors. Community partners and previous students were invited to lectures to explain the context and requirements of projects. Many students volunteered to do extra hours, or to assist new students in the following year. These students received certificates of commendation for their positive contributions.

Results, end of 2010 and 2011

Student reflections showed that students still felt unsure about aspects of the project. One assignment required students to gather evidence as proof of the learners' progress. They could choose their own research strategy because they were working across a wide spectrum of projects with varying learner demographics and needs. Some students decided to do a pre- and post-test, while other students provided a written report of their observations of the learner. As part of their portfolio, they had to submit a baseline assessment and contextual description of their learners. This was in the form of an assignment and included their observations of the social, cognitive, and communicative context of their learners. They had to plan a strategy that would result in progress for the learner and had to include all worksheets, activities, and results in the portfolio. The final items in the portfolio were a written report and each student's own reflections of the project. Lectures were adapted as time was allocated to discuss difficult situations that students encountered. Examples, such as the language barriers experienced by students, were used to show how theory could be applied. During lectures, students discussed theory on language barriers and brainstormed solutions in their own contexts. In 2011 and 2012, contact time was increased to 30 hours, based on student feedback.

From the preservice students' reflections it was clear that it was a moving experience for them to work closely with learners. Student comments include observations such as:

- I never knew this would be such a changing experience.
- My learner was always glad to see me and taught me much about other cultures.
- My experience was life changing. I feel all students should have this opportunity.
- I learnt a lot about myself. I had doubts whether I could make an impact, but now I know I can.
- I have learnt so much: about patience, to prepare properly and to communicate with learners.

From 2010 onwards, students created their own blogs, which were included in their portfolios of evidence. These blog entries displayed similar experiences. Overall, they felt they were better motivated and prepared for their teaching careers. Students felt that the project prepared them to think on their feet and to be more aware of societal issues and cultural demands. Other comments included an awareness of professional and academic growth as well as opportunities for reflection and planning. Students felt they were given opportunities to get to know themselves as teachers and to reflect on life. They were given opportunities to interact with other students and to plan activities and interactions with their learners.

Discussion of Findings

The findings are now discussed in terms of the four categories identified by Furco and Root (2010): academic achievement, improved student engagement and learning, civic responsibility and citizenship, and enhanced personal and social skills.

Academic achievement

As seen in Table 3, students thought their English proficiency improved through their participation in the project. This could be because all the projects were completed through the medium of English. Although students thought their speaking and listening skills improved more than their reading and writing skills, they thought their overall English proficiency had improved through the project, which was the main aim of the module. Students could code-switch to a learner's mother tongue where possible, but used English for any activities or worksheets. As suggested by Van Rensburg (2007), students develop language skills in a social setting. Most of the students' time was spent talking to learners and explaining learning materials.

Although no single intervention was necessarily the only reason for students' academic improvement, the students' perceptions were that the project gave them more opportunities to use English in an authentic context. Developing English language proficiency was mentioned in most of the students' reflections and final presentations. The assessment opportunities in the module, which included oral presentations and portfolios, were relevant to the students. They were able to develop their English proficiency skills in a meaningful and authentic context (Gibbons, 2002, p. 119). They prepared for sessions, wrote reflections, and compiled portfolios—all additional opportunities to develop their own skills. However, the students observed that they did not make enough of a difference in their learners' English proficiency. They realised that more than 30 hours of teaching would be needed to improve their learners' language skills.

Preparedness as teachers

When looking at the data over this period, it became clear that students themselves felt they were better prepared for their future careers by working in diverse communities (Iverson & James, 2010). It was interesting that a very high percentage of students (93.3%) indicated that they learnt more about interacting with learners, which is what teaching is all about (Freire, 1970; Gass, 2013; Korthagen, 2004). In all instances, students indicated that community engagement formed an important part of their preparation as teachers. Although emotional development on the part of the learners was not the main purpose of the projects, students felt valued and motivated as they perceived that their learners were progressing. This was verified in their pre- and post assessments of their learners. They became immersed in their teaching and enjoyed it, which enhanced their development as teachers (Billig & Eyer, 2003). Most students thought that the module inspired them to be better teachers and explain concepts more clearly to learners. They were actively engaged in their own development and learned more by teaching others.

Civic responsibility and citizenship

Students developed a sense of responsibility and awareness of social and civic responsibility, which is an important benefit of service learning (Iverson & James, 2010; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). They thought they had a positive influence on the overall academic progress of their learners and that the experience prepared them to be better teachers. This was illustrated by the number of students who volunteered to work more than the allocated hours on their projects, and their suggestions of more hours. Students were taken out of their comfort zones and had to spend hours away from campus yet, in their presentations, they emphasised the contribution they made to their learners' lives.

The students showed pride in their learners and identified with their progress. Some students found it difficult to withdraw from the learners when the project was over because the learners were always so happy to see them, which made it difficult for students to leave. They worried that the learners might feel abandoned and might not be able to sustain their academic progress. This is a significant finding because it reflects on the professional development and developed sense of responsibility of the preservice teachers—similar to the findings of Root et al. (2002). One of the challenges identified was the need for more guidance for both students and learners to prepare them for the temporary nature of the projects.

Enhanced personal and social skills

Most of the students thought they benefited by taking part in this project and that the project made a difference to their personal and professional development. This resonates with research that shows civic engagement is beneficial to all parties concerned (Boyer, 1996; Bringle & Hatcher, 2005; Furco, 1996; Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna, & Slamat, 2004). Most of the students indicated that they made a difference to the community and that the project should continue in future. Results from the 2011 survey show that the overall feeling of the students towards the CE project was positive, and that they wanted to be actively involved in community outreach projects in the future. They were able to apply the theory of their other modules to this experience and learnt to work cooperatively. Students were exposed to teaching-learning situations in diverse contexts, which prepare them for the world of work. They felt valued and experienced satisfaction from helping others in meaningful community engagement projects (Human-Vogel & Dippenaar, 2012).

Challenges Experienced

Although service learning projects have a positive impact on students, there are risks that need to be considered in implementing such an intervention. Any situation where students are taken off campus involves risk, which needs to be addressed in the initial planning. The challenges experienced in the curriculum design of the module are monitoring of students, logistics due to high student numbers, time constraints (one lecture per week), and students' mother tongue, which is generally not English. An additional challenge is that students need to be prepared to teach learners who are not mother-tongue speakers of English.

Good monitoring of students in the projects ensured that students and communities benefited. Successful partnerships with community leaders, site supervisors, and peer student monitors are essential: the lecturer cannot monitor each student individually. Transport and funding are challenges that most community engagement project managers have to face. There are many benefits to implementing service learning projects, but they need careful planning and support for students and staff by the institution.

A very important finding was that a service learning project should be sustainable and longitudinal. Unfortunately, projects are often dependent on the enthusiasm of individual lecturers and projects are therefore not embedded into the undergraduate programme but often seen as an "add on". We argue that academic service learning should be an important part of the preservice teachers' curriculum. More research is needed on how to embed academic service learning into programmes in a way that it could be sustained and supported.

Conclusion

In this article we argued that it is beneficial to include an academic service learning project in the curriculum of preservice teachers because it prepares them for the reality of the classroom. The findings were discussed in terms of the four categories identified by Furco & Root (2010): academic achievement, improved student engagement and learning, civic responsibility and citizenship, and enhanced personal and social skills. In the service learning project completed by the preservice teachers, they perceived that their academic development was enhanced as they were able to apply theory to practice. They had the opportunity to develop language skills in a social setting and learned more by teaching others. From their feedback, it was clear that they developed civic responsibility and citizenship. They developed personally and socially by interacting with their learners and their peers in authentic contexts. By implementing ASL projects as part of students' learning experience, the theory of teaching taught in the lecture hall was made relevant and authentic. Student participation in these projects impacted positively on teaching and facilitation of the module. Module objectives were met through constant reflection in authentic contexts. The lecturer was able to facilitate the development of practical skills relevant to the teaching profession and future workplace. The university aims to educate students in community outreach. This project

provides an excellent opportunity for students to reach the outcomes of their programme and learn more about wider communities. It is therefore argued that service learning should form an integral part of the undergraduate curriculum in every Faculty of Education. It provides an opportunity to the institution to participate in academic scholarship while implementing service learning in teaching and learning. Although the projects were perceived by the preservice teachers as impacting positively on their learners and their communities, further research has to be conducted to verify the perceptions of the learners and community partners on sustained benefits for all parties concerned. Service learning is a reciprocal intervention where community partners and institutions work together to the benefit of students and communities.

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Developing Academic and Community Research Participation in a South African Township and Rural Community

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Abstract

Participatory action research (PAR) has been promoted as an important collaborative methodology for addressing local concerns. This article reflects on two community engagement PAR projects, one in a township and the other in a rural community, and the issues I faced as an academic researcher coming from the "ivory tower". Historically, community engagement projects caused significant distress, and led to mistrust and misunderstanding of research within communities. In the South African context, academics and researchers are not usually trained to work with communities as partners. When I involved the respective communities, I realised how critical it becomes that participatory researchers understand the extent to which their academic–scientific approach differs from, as well as converges with, community members' practical–experiential perspective. I also outline implications for developing future successful partnerships between the university and the community.

Keywords: ivory tower, academic, community, participatory action research, township, rural development

Introduction

During the past decade of democracy in South Africa, the need for higher education institutions to venture beyond the academic "ivory tower" was affirmed in government policy documents (Fourie, 2003). When contemporary educators use the term, ivory tower, pejoratively, as we often do, we seem to condemn not only its legacy of exclusivity but the purity of ivory and the isolation of towers. Consciously or unconsciously, we express hostility toward the ivory tower's esoteric quality: the fact that it defines an inner circle set apart from the rest. Of course, in an age where greater access to higher education is often described as a national priority, and where educational goals are frequently defended with reference not to individuals' intellectual gains but to the revitalising economic effects that advanced training will bring to our communities, it is not surprising that an esoteric and disengaged educational metaphor would be rejected as antidemocratic and reactionary.

The question that arises is, how do we bridge the gap between university and schools—which are viewed as a basic stepping-stone in life where children can receive much needed emotional, social, and spiritual support and guidance? Introducing preservice teachers to participatory action research projects with transformative agendas can go a long way towards promoting community–researcher partnerships. In recent times, there has been an increase in community-based participatory research and service learning in institutions of higher learning with regards to education and community development (Pine, 2009; Westfall, Van Vorst, Main, & Herbert, 2006). A shift toward community-based experiential learning can result not only in enhancing student learning and civic engagement, but also in altering the epistemological priorities and methodologies of the university. Furthermore, engaged scholarship can expand the social, cultural, and human capital of both local communities and universities—and generally improve our attempts at understanding and addressing social ills.

In this article, I reflect on how I attempted to inculcate the capacity for critical inquiry and reflection, as well as the integration of theory and practice, amongst preservice teacher-researchers by exposing them to participatory action research projects. I describe and reflect on two community engagement projects, one in a township and the other in a rural area, and explore both the building blocks for, and critiques of, engaged scholarship and the ways in which teaching techniques can be critically reimagined to include an experiential learning pedagogy of social change. I also suggest how future partnerships between the university and the community can be developed and nurtured.

Perspectives from the Literature

Forging mutually beneficial relationships between field workers in the community and academic researchers from the ivory tower has proven to be a challenging enterprise. The communication gap identified by many educators and researchers highlights the rift between what the research says and what practitioners do. Historically, educators and academic researchers have established their own worlds, their own communities of practice, their own ways of operating and communicating. As Hayes and Kelly (2000, p. 454) pointed out, “the emphasis on research in higher education helped establish a division of labour between those who did conceptual work (academic researchers) and those who executed the ideas established by others (educators or community workers).” Furthermore, some educators feel they have been treated as subjects in educational research with unrealistic demands of what they can and should do (Vaughn, Klingner, & Hughes, 2000). One approach to closing the gap between teaching and research includes direct involvement of educators in research, and direct involvement of academic researchers in teaching. This has been taken up most significantly by participatory action researchers (Sagor, 2005: Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). Community-based participatory research and service learning are recent attempts to reconnect academic interests with education and community development (Ennals, 2004; Pine, 2009).

Service learning is a closely related process designed to encourage students to actively apply knowledge and skills to local situations in response to local needs and with the active involvement of community members (Moely, Billig, & Holland, 2009). Many online or printed guides now show how students and faculty can engage in community-based participatory research and meet academic standards at the same time (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2007; James, Slater, & Bucknam, 2011; McNiff, 2010; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, 2009; McTaggart, 1997).

Research into the impact of the use of action research in teacher education indicates that teacher candidates can benefit significantly from engaging in the process of inquiry and reflection that action research demands (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Schulz & Mandzuk, 2005). According to Brown and Tandon (as cited in Babbie & Mouton, 2001), participatory action research can be seen as an integrated activity that combines social investigation, educational work, and action. The goal of participatory action research is to work with stakeholders to generate knowledge in order to initiate change (O’Leary, 2004, p. 98).

Participatory action research (PAR) in the 21st century has emerged from the community research initiatives of Kurt Lewin (1948) and the Tavistock Institute in the 1940s, and all formulations of PAR underscore that research and action must be done *with* people and not *on* or *for* people (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Swantz, 2008).

My PAR projects were inspired by the ideas of Freire (1972), who utilised and implemented critical pedagogy and dialogical reflective methods in his adult education classes in Brazil. The approach implies that "the silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world" (Freire, 1982, p. 30). I was also attracted to the way Fals Borda utilised PAR in promoting popular knowledge in his uneasiness within conventional academic circles in developing literacy (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Quigley, 2000). He was also an advocate of counterhegemonic education as well as youth development on issues such as violence, racial or sexual discrimination, educational justice, and the environment (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Fine & Torre, 2008; Noffke & Somekh, 2009).

For Cornwall and Jewkes (1995), the key element "lies not in methods, but in attitudes of researchers, which in turn determine how, by, and for whom research is conceptualised and conducted" (p. 1667). Researchers must critically realise that they are not coming to save or rescue the needy and the poor; rather, they must see the community as a place of learning and as an equal partner in the exchange of knowledge, service time, and sharing of resources. Researchers also need to manage expectations and tread a careful path between generating sufficient interest for participation and not raising false hopes.

Placing the Two PAR Projects in Context

During the 2012 academic year, I was involved with two PAR projects. One project (safety schools enrichment project) was with a township school classified as "dysfunctional" on the Cape Flats; the other project (career guidance for Grade 11s) was with a master's student and in a rural area in the Western Cape.

The township safety schools enrichment project

The township project was *Sport against Crime: Chess for Change!* and one of the main objectives was to use the game of chess as a vehicle to promote positive lifestyles amongst the learners and to make them aware of the dangers and social ills they faced in their everyday lives. In this township school, a group of five preservice teachers and I engaged Grade 7 learners as part of a school enrichment development project.

The township project was an initiative that came from our BEd 4th year Research Methods class to support and enhance safer schools and to enrich these schools through practical innovations.

First, the preservice student teachers had to identify a problematic issue they intended to address at a school, or an innovative classroom approach whereby they would seek to introduce change into the classroom, school, or community. They had to write up a brief outline indicating:

- What the problem or innovation is.
- Why they are concerned or keen to introduce the innovation.
- What they intend to do.
- What kind of evidence they could collect to help them make a judgement about what happens as a consequence of their action, and how they intend collecting such evidence.

Next, they had to plan an approach that would address the problem or bring about the desired change—preferably done in collaboration with one or more colleagues who shared some of their concern. This outline had to be handed in by the preservice teachers on 10 March 2012 as a research proposal. In the next stage, they had to put their plan into action over a period of time and monitor or observe how their actions were experienced by all involved. It was emphasised that not only would their action require careful preparation, but the means by which they monitored and gathered evidence of what was happening would need to be carefully thought through and set up in advance. In other words, they had to reflect on (1) what happened in the light of what they originally planned, and (2) their original plans and thinking in the light of subsequent experience. As far as possible, they had to write up their actions, evidence, and reflections as they proceeded—at least in rough draft. The project had to be completed and recommendations submitted before the end of the semester.

At a staff meeting held at the school, the student research group I chaired was given an opportunity by the principal to present our proposed project. After my input, we had a short question and answer session, which I recorded in my diary. The meeting was concluded by the principal, who said he looked forward to the outcome of the proposal, and that the school fully supported any project that would enhance the status and safety of the school.

The theme for the project was *Sport against Crime: Chess for Change!* and the objectives of our township enrichment project were to:

- Use chess as a vehicle to promote a positive lifestyle and to make learners in schools and communities aware of the dangers and social ills facing them.
- Train teachers and learners in playing, coaching, and administering chess activities.
- Increase cognitive skills and improve learners' ability to think rationally.
- Promote in young players, a sense of self-confidence and self-worth.
- Promote gender equity—chess allows girls to compete with boys on a non threatening, socially acceptable plane.
- Promote healthy competition and socialisation in a safe environment.
- Teach children to try their best to win, while accepting defeat with grace.

The rural school career guidance project

The rural school project was conducted by my master's student over a period of two years (2011–2012) and I mostly played a participant–observer and advisory role; we engaged Grade 11 learners from the Boland rural district, Saron, regarding career guidance and life skills. Amongst the characteristics of this rural school are the following:

- Its distance from a town.
- Transportation, and the state of repair of the roads and adjacent bridges.
- Access to communication and technology.
- Access to basic services and facilities (electricity, water, sanitation).
- The education, health, and economic status of the community.

All these characteristics become challenges in the stark reality of teaching in a Saron rural classroom. This action research project was an attempt to improve the student's classroom practice in Career Guidance, a subdivision of Life Orientation. The need for the study arose because matric learners at this rural school

appeared confused about their future careers. They lacked the capacity to do self-planning, and did not really comprehend how to plan their future careers—in line with Cuseo's (1996) view that education is guaranteed not only by giving form to the structure of the curriculum, but by what happens between learners and educators in the classroom. To quote the master's student, who completed his action research thesis towards the end of 2012, "I believe that any attempt to improve the education and conditions of our rural and disadvantaged schools would go a long way in addressing the inequities prevalent in our society".

Ethical Considerations Regarding the Two Projects

Whitehead and McNiff (2006) emphasised the need to gain permission from all participants involved in the reflective exercise. Before we started with the projects, we felt it would be ethical to discuss our work with the various participants involved in the PAR projects, and negotiate the scope of their engagement. We could not possibly claim to be empowering the students and the school community if we did not involve them from the outset of the research process.

Regarding the Cape Flats project, the negotiating procedure was quite lengthy because five candidate teachers were involved. Although all these preservice teachers had agreed to participate, I nevertheless questioned them as to why they were willing to engage in the research deliberations during class and with the challenging school concerned. Their responses meant a lot because they were key participants in the project. These are some of their comments:

- Projects are thought provoking and make teaching and learning more meaningful.
- As participants, we become more mature and begin to see realities.
- Reflecting on our actions improves our future practices.
- The possibility of adding value to a local township school makes one feel good.
- Time spent on projects is time spent on building constructive communities.

These expressions by the students regarding their involvement in the project conveyed a positive response and gave me, as facilitator and teacher–researcher, a clearer notion of what the students wanted and expected from the proposed project. It was conveyed to the students that as coresearchers they had to be actively involved in conceptualising and designing the project, collecting, and also analysing data. They had to be prepared to be interviewed by stakeholders, complete survey forms, keep a diary and, if they were comfortable about it, to hand in their diaries to be scrutinised and analysed at the end of the project. Although we were approached by the school to bring our school enrichment project to them, we nevertheless first met with the principal, teachers, learners, governing body, and an official from the Department of Education for the approval of our safe school project. In our deliberations with them, we highlighted the ethical issues involved. Mouton, (2009, p. 238) indicated that ethics is the science of what is right and what is wrong. De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, & Delport (2007, p. 61) and White, (2005, p. 210) all indicate that the most important aspects of ethical issues in research to be addressed are violation of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. In our project, we also took the advice of Chevalier and Buckles (2013) that norms and ethical conduct and their implications may have to be revisited as a project unfolds, and that PAR cannot limit discussions about the ethics of the design and proposal phases.

Regarding the project that focussed on enhancing the career paths of Grade 11 learners at the rural school, I was invited together with the master's student to address the principal and the governing body on 5 June 2012. Initially the student felt apprehensive and he conveyed to me that the exercise appeared rather technical, and that the application letter we had sent to the governing body earlier was informative enough. Here we were cautioned by Chamber's (1994, p. 1253) point that, in a rural context, practitioners and researchers should guard against rushing the research processes. Once the meeting was finished and the governing body had given their stamp of approval, we felt some sense of achievement. The main

caution from the school was that in our reporting and writing we must not portray the school in a negative light. In his deliberations with the principal and the governing body, the student quoted McNiff (2002) and conveyed the following:

- I intend reviewing and reflecting on our contemporary ideas regarding career guidance.
- Once I detect the problem/s, I will try to modify and improve certain aspects.
- I will monitor and evaluate [. . .] until some sort of satisfaction has been reached.
- I will constantly engage with [. . .] and give feedback to [. . .] regarding my findings.

Methodology

Regarding both the township and the rural projects, the research methodology used for collecting the data was qualitative and interpretive. Our projects foregrounded social issues concerning social justice in our attempt to empower these economically deprived quintile schools. Interpretivism aims to move away from obtaining knowledge through experimental manipulation of human subjects towards understanding by means of conversations with subjects. Social reality is viewed as socially constructed based on a constant process of interpretation and reinterpretation of the internal, meaningful behaviour of people (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The data collection techniques we used were our field notes, student reflections, video recordings, interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups. In these research projects, the focus group technique was especially useful. The focus group technique is one of the most effective qualitative methods for studying ideas in group contexts. In particular, it can explore group interaction, attitudes, and cognition and arrive at a synergy of ideas because the whole is greater than the sum of the parts (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). The data we received via the focus group discussions was audio recorded, and the transcriptions were timeously unpacked and rigorously discussed. This was time consuming because we also wanted to extrapolate the tone of the feedback discussions. During our feedback discussions, we invited the principal, the teachers, and representatives of the school's governing body to participate, and this ensured the trustworthiness of both PAR projects.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the research are discussed below to give an overall perspective on the developmental needs for academic and community research participation in South African township and rural school communities.

In both the township and rural projects, patient communication became essential as planned activities had to be altered and adjusted on a regular basis as a result of the constant changing of the schools' schedules and timetables. The challenge of adjusting planned activities prepares the researcher for the unexpected occurrences or misfortunes that rural or township learners have to deal with in their daily lives. In my own reflection, I realised that my efforts spent on teaching and preparation of evaluation and especially feedback for students, far exceeded the actual instruction time allocated for the project. Therefore, most of my gains (learning to know my students better) also exceeded the lecture time frame. Very often, I wondered whether the PAR project in the township was really going to make a difference to the crime statistics in South Africa. However, the motivation and enthusiasm of the university students and the learners of the schools gave me a sense of achievement. The career guidance lessons and motivational sessions with the Grade 11 learners in the Boland rural school exposed us to the dreams and visions of the Saron learners. It was gratifying to see the enthusiasm and commitment of these rural learners despite the challenges they faced in advancing and furthering their education careers. Three themes emerged from the analysis of the data collection.

First, the township and rural projects successfully bridged the gap between the university and the schools. This was expressed by participants in both township and rural projects.

Participants expressed these sentiments regarding the ongoing township project:

- We sometimes think students live in their own world, but these students genuinely want to improve the situation of our township children . . . they want make a difference. (Participant 1)
-
- I find it rewarding working in this township project. I learn to know them (community) and they learn to know me. (Participant 2)
-
- As an academic and researcher, I now know how important it becomes for rural students to engage with university academics. They make the unknown and the dreams of certain career paths a reality. (Masters student, 2012)

The preservice teachers were able to articulate the steps in the action research process, and were able to describe how to use them in their everyday classroom practice. It was uplifting to see university students and school learners engage with each other regarding the future of crime prevention and community safety issues. The preservice teachers found working collaboratively made the project so much easier and more interesting. Whilst individuals were assigned specific duties, the common goal kept the preservice teachers attached and committed to the common cause. They reflected on, and demonstrated, how they were able to more fully understand their teaching for community improvement by engaging in this PAR project. Two participants confirmed that the PAR projects were not just words and sayings, but were words put into action:

- As future teachers, we got to understand the learners better by going into their households and meeting some of their parents. (Participant 3)
- I would never have engaged with the community on my own if we did not do this as part of our class group work action research assignment. (Participant 4)

Second, both the teachers and learners were immersed in the respective projects. In the township school, the playing of chess was linked as a Life Skills project. During the first activity performed during the study, it seemed that the project immediately captured the attention of the learners concerned—as recorded by Participant 5:

> *Very interesting! You have to be alert, think and concentrate. The learners were very attentive and hungry to learn how to link the game of chess to crime prevention. They were very eager to start the game of thrones . . . They could relate the strategy of the game to their everyday lives. My conclusion of today's lesson is that this is a game that gets you thinking, can boost your self-confidence and keeps you positive.*

The interaction between us, the teachers—and the enthusiastic involvement of the learners in demonstrating strategic moves—strengthened my perception that the learners of this school, branded as dysfunctional, had been empowered. The rural school project in Saron received positive feedback regarding the empowerment of the learners. On Wednesday 15 August 2012, at a teacher and learner meeting as a participant observer, I recorded the following input from learners:

- I never realised the importance of working together as a group.
- The life skills lessons are so interesting that it doesn't feel like school.
- Career guidance is essential especially in isolated places such as ours.
- In the other classes we must remain absolutely quiet, but here we can discuss and talk freely.

In both the rural and township schools, it became apparent that the learners were still lacking the self-confidence to question the singular voice of the teacher. Cullingford (1999), a qualitative researcher who has worked at a variety of schools, would have found reinforcement of his ideas in the experiences of both these rural and township learners; as he put it:

> *When one studies children's experiences of school rather than the curriculum, management or teaching styles, some personal and consistent insights emerge . . . indeed one of the most fundamental insights that children have of school is their own powerlessness, their helplessness in the face of a given system. (p. 195)*

Finally, it was evident that the township safe school project and the rural school's career guidance project were not without constraints. Because more students were working on the township safe school project, the feedback regarding this project was more in depth. This was also evident from the comments of my student assistant and from the feedback from the learners in their journals and teacher interviews. Amongst the comments of the student assistants were the following:

- Playing games in class is not real learning and cannot stop crime.
- If we as teachers must try to become so innovative at this school . . . the principal would have reprimanded us long time for ill-discipline.
- Time constraints don't allow us to always visit schools.

This last point was also emphasised in the focus group discussions as it underlined the idea that the PAR project needed to be small and manageable. Another limitation of the project was that the preservice student teachers (PSTs) involved were at different levels of understanding action research and, more so, PAR. This was evident in some of their comments and student diaries when we reflected on the various stages of our action research process.

Together, the community of PSTs, learners, and I as teacher–educator found new ways in which to think about township schools and schooling, that is, new ways in which to think about the work of teaching and learning, and specifically about teaching in an emerging economy such as South Africa. According to some of the PSTs, this collaborative participatory action research project gave them a reality check about what to encounter within schools, and also gave them a more critical perspective as future teachers and researchers.

Reflecting on the Significance and Implications of the Two PAR Projects

For all of us, and here I include the master's student, these PAR projects were significant because they provided us with evidence that action research, if done collaboratively and in a participatory way, can empower PSTs by giving them the necessary tools to become effective practitioner researchers. Also, the project enhanced the students' action research experience and bridged the theory–practice divide when we integrated the theory-based curriculum studies course with their practice teaching experience. Simultaneously, by implementing collaborative action research, we grew professionally ourselves. Such experiences help PSTs to be flexible in their teaching and to modify lesson content according to changing community contexts, which leads to a better understanding of the complexities of teaching (Butcher et al., 2003).

Regarding the significance of the projects for preservice education, analysing the final reports indicated to me that PSTs are capable of selecting and carrying out projects beneficial to their learners. The cooperative inquiry approach empowered each of us to challenge ourselves both personally and professionally in our quest to make the university project school- and community-based—beyond the ivory tower. Furthermore,

as trainee teachers, they indicated their enjoyment in choosing an issue that was significant for them as well as the satisfaction they derived from the implementation and analysis of their project; they also indicated that they intended to actively research their practice as in-service teachers. Most of all, the PSTs felt empowered and uplifted as future educators who will go on to work in, and influence, township and rural schools.

In collaboration with both the township and rural communities, our PAR projects significantly built trust and an understanding of research amongst the relevant communities. Historically, this has caused significant distress and has led to mistrust and misunderstanding of research within communities (Davis & Reid, 1999). It became obvious in the communities that we were not just outsiders coming in as academics from the ivory tower, but that we were giving of our professional selves to enhance their sites of learning.

My experiences in collaborating with these two projects confirmed my belief that a teacher's devotion to teaching can indeed motivate most students to learn actively with boosted confidence. In return for the teacher's dedication to teach, students provide fair and constructive feedback for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning. As the old saying goes, "Example is better than precept." If teachers do mean what they say and set explicit examples, students will appreciate that and be willing to take responsibility for their own learning. For me, the township and rural PAR projects were indeed meaningful learning experiences for all the role players involved. Our action research projects were fruitfully conducted, generating benefits for me and my students—just as suggested in the field (Bartels, 2002; Kember et al., 2006).

Conclusion

As is evident from the two projects, my students and I became more aware of the day-to-day challenges that schools and communities face in the township and rural areas in South Africa. The students, as well as I, realised the value of participatory action research as not the only solution to solve the multiplicity of problems facing education, but certainly as means to support and transform the paradigms of service learning—so that the assets rather than the deficits of a community are strengthened in reciprocal and respectful community–campus partnerships. Finally, in nurturing and empowering our diverse communities, I believe we have moved beyond the confines of the ivory tower.

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Reflecting on Reflecting: Fostering Student Capacity for Critical Reflection in an Action Research Project

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Abstract

Participatory forms of action research for community engagement require researchers to continually, critically reflect on the process and emerging findings. Yet, for many academic supervisors and students, this is a relatively new experience. This article is an account of the learning of one supervisor as she attempted to help doctoral students master this skill essential for the successful implementation of any action research project. A qualitative analysis of the data generated from students' written and oral reflections reveals that the various interventions were helpful in fostering student capacity for critical reflection on several levels, but also highlights the challenges students experienced as they grappled to learn the skill. This account of learning may be beneficial as a guide to other supervisors and students who are struggling to master the elusive skill of critical reflection.

Keywords: critical reflection, participatory action research, postgraduate student development, self-study

Introduction

The obligation for universities to take on community engagement as a core activity (Council for Higher Education, 2010) presents an opportunity to conduct applied research that is responsive to societal needs (Favish, 2010). I proceed from the viewpoint that this requires the adoption of democratic and participatory paradigms that promote engagement *with* people, involving them as coresearchers, rather than taking knowledge *from* them to create theories *about* how they should deal with their problems. Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR; Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013) is one such methodology that allows academic researchers to partner with people to help them learn how to improve their own situation,

drawing on their lived experience and intimate knowledge of the challenges they face. HIV and AIDS, teenage pregnancy, gender-based violence, substance abuse, and poverty, to mention a few, are all thorny social issues that require education researchers to engage with school communities to learn how to take action to reduce social barriers to learning and development (Wood, 2014). Such research can be regarded as a process of social change in itself (Schratz & Walker, 1995) because participants learn skills and acquire knowledge that will enable them to sustain and build on the research outcomes. However, the academy tends to cling to more traditional and objective research approaches, based on technorational paradigms (Odora Hoppers & Richards, 2011), which are unsuited to dealing with the complex problems facing social scientists today. For this reason, the capacity of academic researchers to engage in this form of research still needs to be strengthened (Favish, 2010; Wood, 2014).

This article focuses on the experiences of a group of doctoral students and their supervisor as participants in a research project that aims to generate knowledge about the usefulness of PALAR as a means of community engagement. One of the main purposes of the project is to explore how the capacity of academic researchers can be developed to enable them to engage in democratic, collaborative research partnerships with community participants. Although there are many different definitions of and approaches to action research, they all stress the centrality of critical reflection to the process of learning and development (Bradbury & Reason, 2008; Kemmis, 2010; McNiff, 2013) for both the academic researcher and the community participants. PALAR is no exception; in fact, the explicit inclusion of the term *action learning* in the term, as opposed to the more usual term of *participatory action research (PAR)*, is a clue to the importance that this approach affords to learning that leads to ontological and epistemological transformation as a precursor for sustainable change. As Kearney, Wood, and Zuber-Skerritt (2013, p. 115) explained:

> *The concept of PALAR integrates action learning and PAR in a holistic way. People involved in PALAR projects are interested in participating (P) and working together on a complex issue (or issues) affecting their lives, learning from their experience and from one another (AL) and engaging in a systematic inquiry (AR) into how to address and resolve this issue/issues.*

A central component of the PALAR process is the action learning set, where the participants regularly come together to collectively reflect on their experiences and their learning (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). In this particular project, the action learning set is made up of the postgraduate students on the project and their respective supervisors, who are all pursuing the goal of completing postgraduate studies using PALAR methodology. The students each have individual action research projects in different communities, with different research foci, but they come together in this action learning set once a month. In this group, they are encouraged to reflect on the symbiotic relationship between their values and their ontological and epistemological paradigms, and how this influences the research process and their interaction with the community participants. The role of the supervisors is not only to guide this process, but also to critically reflect, themselves, on the learning taking place within the set. The purpose of the action learning set is to encourage participants to critically reflect on the research process, and on how they may be influencing it. This "inward gaze" (Pithouse-Morgan, Mitchell, & Pillay, 2013, p. 1) helps them to work more sensitively and effectively with community participants towards a shared purpose. The action learning set also provides a space to share these reflections with others engaged in similar processes, to promote collaborative learning through dialectical critique (Winter, 1989).

However, critical reflection does not appear to come easily to students (or supervisors) who are used to fulfilling a more objective and neutral role in the research process. The purpose of this article is thus to share the mutual learning of three of the doctoral students from the larger project who are under my academic guidance, regarding the importance of critical reflection for the success of their study. I will also report on my own learning of how this reflexive capacity can be nurtured through the creation of a supportive learning environment in the form of an action learning set. The narrative account will focus on

the challenges, successes, and learning of the student researchers as they develop their identity as action researchers, working in education contexts characterised by socioeconomic disadvantage, within an education landscape that is in turmoil (Spaull, 2012). The article is thus a critical self-reflection on my part, to show how I attempted to move students from explicit knowing about actions, to deep tacit knowing about their influence on the process (Polanyi, 1958), to allow them to acquire the "I" knowledge that will enable them to better understand their influence on the research process. As such, it is written in the first person, but, true to the democratic and participatory principles on which action research is based (Piggot-Irvine, 2012; Somekh, 2008), the doctoral students are listed as coauthors to recognise the fact that it is their knowledge that made this article possible.

I start with an explanation of the theoretical importance of critical reflection to PALAR before outlining my research methods and ethical procedures. I then systematically answer questions based on McNiff (2013, p. 91) to guide my self-reflective enquiry into my research question, namely, "How can I foster critical reflection on the PALAR process?" I end with some concluding thoughts that may be useful to other academics who are struggling with doing or teaching critical reflection in action research.

Theoretical Positioning of Critical Reflection within PALAR

Rejecting a technorational paradigm, which has guided most of Western academic thinking to date (Polkinghorne, 2004), PALAR subscribes to a reflective rationality (Kinsella, 2007). This assumes that specific responses are needed to improve specific situations, that the best people to make such improvements are those who are most affected by the issues, and that all participants in the process are able to make worthwhile contributions using symmetrical forms of communication. That is not to say that propositional theories should be rejected, but that their implementation needs to be tempered by critical reflection on personal experience so that personal transformation is as much an outcome of the process as practical change and theory generation. This emancipatory outcome helps to ensure that change is sustainable; once a person "sees" differently, it is not so easy to revert to former understandings (Polanyi, 1958). PALAR also draws on aspects of complexity theory that recognise that improving problems is a process of trial and error where learning occurs as we take action (Preiser & Cilliers, 2010). In complex situations, outcomes cannot be predicted; therefore constant critical reflection on action is needed (Norberg & Cumming, 2013). Complexity theory recognises the transdisciplinary nature of human issues, the importance of knowledge production in situ (as opposed to applying predetermined theories), and the desire for practical change (Sumara & Davis, 2009), all of which are foregrounded in participatory action learning and action research.

PALAR emphasises the importance of action learning (Revans, 2011), using individual and collective critical reflections to move learning from single-loop learning to double-loop and triple-loop learning. This cognitive shift is necessary to ensure that espoused theory, for example, professing the principles of PALAR (see Figure 1) and theories-in-use—how researchers actually act in the research process—(Argyris & Schön, 1974) are congruent. According to Argyris (2002), single-loop learning occurs when perceived errors are corrected without a concurrent change in value systems or future actions—a simple problem-solving process that focuses on *what* we do. Double-loop learning leads to questioning of our underlying assumptions, beliefs, and goals—a reflection on *why* we do what we do. Triple-loop learning, a later concept inspired by Argyris and Schön but never explicitly explained in their work, occurs when a reflexive stance towards learning becomes second nature and permeates all aspects of our life, not just research (Yuthas, Dillard, & Rogers, 2004). Yet Argyris (2002, p. 206) stated:

> *We find that many people espouse double-loop learning, are unable to produce it, are blind to their incompetencies, and are unaware that they are blind. This pattern is so common that we call it a generic "anti-learning" pattern.*

The PALAR requirement to critically and continually reflect on the research process and how the researcher may influence it, and then to open this learning to dialectic critique within the action learning set, exposes such anti-learning, leading to congruence between what the researcher preaches and what she or he practises.

Research Method

I adopted the useful outline provided by McNiff (2013, p. 91) for conducting a practitioner self-study to present an explanation of my learning about how I help students to critically reflect on their research process. I first explain why the inability to reflect is a problem for students conducting a PALAR study, and I present evidence to show that my concern is real; I then explain what I did to try and improve this situation, presenting evidence of student learning to back up my claims to knowledge. The data set comprised the following: students' written responses to specific questions designed to deepen their reflective capacity, which were posed by me after reading their reflections and transcriptions of their interaction with their respective project participants; transcriptions of action learning set meetings in which the students were involved; their monthly written reflections for the project, including emails with their responses to each other's reflections; and a transcribed audiotaped focus group discussion about their experiences of doing reflections and sharing them within an action learning set. The data were then thematically analysed, using action learning as an analytical lens, to discern student experiences of the reflective process and how they learned about it (Joffe, 2012). Once I had done this, I came together with the student participants to check that I had correctly interpreted their learning. This was done to enhance trustworthiness of the findings by ensuring that my voice did not dominate in deciding what they had learned. The criteria of catalytic (how has the research motivated people to change?), dialogical (were participants able to listen to, debate with, and learn from each other?), rhetorical (how convincing is my report?), and process validity (have I described the research process adequately?) as espoused by Herr & Anderson (2005) are used to validate my claims to knowledge. I then conclude the article with a reflection on my own learning and the significance of this learning for developing capacity for enacting reflexivity when conducting participatory forms of action research.

Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the North-West University Research Ethics Committee (ethical clearance number NWU-00022-13-S2), which is evidence that the study conformed to the strict ethical requirements set by that body. The students' names appear as authors therefore confidentiality is not possible, but because they were involved in the data analysis, they were automatically involved in the decision about which excerpts to include and which not to include. The students also gave written permission for their data to be used for research purposes.

Justifying my Concern about the Students' Reflexive Capacity

Critical reflection can be defined as the capacity to examine and contest the validity of our prior assumptions and evaluate the appropriateness of our knowledge, understanding, and beliefs in our current contexts (Mezirow, 1990). In action research, it involves thinking about why we think, act, and feel the way we do in certain situations or in response to certain experiences, and then making changes based on this meta-analysis to promote more socially just and humane outcomes (Kemmis, 2013). The ability to critically reflect is essential in action research, particularly the skill of self-reflection, given the subjective role of the researcher, who is emotionally, socially, and cognitively immersed in the research process (Zuber-Skerritt, Kearney, & Fletcher, 2015). The transformative potential of action research (McNiff, 2013; Wood, 2010) applies just as much to the researcher, who has to be open to learning from diverse epistemological and ontological stances, as it does to the community participants. PALAR involves a

> *deep, structural, purposeful and highly self-critical change in people's learning and consciousness, which also enables others to learn from or through the transformation process. This transformation is intentional. To be transformative, action research needs to include the whole person who learns from experience and action by critically, consciously, intentionally and purposefully reflecting on this experience with others. (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015, p. 10)*

The action learning set is thus an important vehicle in which transformative learning through critical reflection takes place. Three distinctive features of PALAR are the formation of the three Rs: trusting, mutually respectful *relationships*, the creating of space for collaborative critical *reflection*, and *recognition* of participants' achievements (Kearney et al., 2013). The action learning set meetings provide opportunities for the three Rs to be operationalised, in that participants forge trusting relations as they share their critical insights on their own and each other's work, as well as providing positive feedback on one another's successes.

I noted at the beginning of the project that reflections tended to be superficial, concentrating more on actions or events rather than on a meta-analysis of what students learned about themselves, the participants, and the process, and how this learning influences their future research decisions. For example, Student A, in one of the first reflections, wrote:

> *The meeting was a success and the participants cooperated well during the meeting and looked interested. Their comments sounded genuine. Most of the information I got from them was vague and was not focussed on instructional leadership, though the questions were based on instructional leadership. I actually did not expect to receive irrelevant information such as information about budgets, school governing bodies, renovation of the school and so forth, because the booklet itself is written in bold letters: "NARRATIVE: MY EXPERIENCE AS AN INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER", and I also explained to them what they should do. Furthermore, they did not give information in a narrative form, they listed their points. I should have explained what instructional leadership is to them, but I did not do that because I wanted to get their level of understanding regarding instructional leadership before I could work with them because at the end, I intend to request them to narrate about instructional leadership, using the same hints and thereafter compare the two narratives. (April 2013)*

This example highlights the importance of being able to think about how the researcher's agenda might derail the research process. The student was focusing more on reporting on her participants' failure to provide her with the information she needed, rather than on why this happened, and how her actions might have influenced the process. She did not question her assumptions, namely, that the participants knew how to write a narrative and that they knew what instructional leadership meant. Although she realised that explaining the term, instructional leadership, to the participants before asking them to respond would have made the task easier for them, she deliberately did not do this so that she could compare their understanding of the term at the beginning of her project with their understanding at the end of the project. Thus, she was more focused on her research needs than on how her interaction might have exposed the lack of knowledge of the participants, and made them feel ignorant. McArdle and Coutts (2010) warn that there is a dire need in educational research to encourage critical reflection on the power balance between researcher and participants. On reading this reflection, I immediately gave feedback that she needed to be more self-reflective in terms of her role in the research process, but by then the damage had already been done—after two sessions, all the participants withdrew from the project due to "other commitments". This was only one example of many which showed that students were finding it difficult to enact the democratic and participatory principles of PALAR. They were focusing on what they did, rather than on how their actions might impact on the participants, and were stuck in a single-loop learning mode, rather than questioning their assumptions, beliefs, and purposes—which are outcomes of double-loop learning (Argyris, 2002). I was aware of a significant gap between the principles of PALAR that students

claimed to follow and the actual embodiment of them in the research process. This made it clear to me that I needed to check my own assumptions about student capacity for critical self-reflection, and urgently find ways to help them to improve.

Deepening the Capacity for Critical Reflection

Initially, I had given the students some guidelines as reflection aids, which I assumed would be enough to guide them. I used a simple format, where I suggested the questions, "What happened?", "What went well?", "What did not go so well?", and "What would I do differently?" Only one of the students chose to use this format, and, produced an equally simple, and superficial, reflection:

> *My last meeting with the participants was a success because one of the participants helped me to organise it. This taught me that when the participants are involved, what you do with them becomes possible. This clarifies that having a good relationship with the participants solves many of your problems. (Student A, March 2014)*

This is typical of single-loop learning (Argyris, 2002)—the student has learned that involving participants increases attendance, but there is no reflection on her learning about her need to better embody democratic and inclusive values in the process. She is also focused on solving her problems, rather than on focusing on the needs of the participants, and how to develop her situational understanding, which is one of the main aims of action research (Somekh, 2010). However, this is not the fault of the student. I had assumed that the students knew how to reflect at a deep level. It would seem, however, they did not know how to do this. By asking "what" questions, I had actually influenced them to concentrate on actions, rather than on probing deeper to ask "why". I therefore spent time at the following action learning set meeting, discussing reflections and the need to reflect on personal expectations, values, and experiences, and how these might influence the research process. An extract from the April 2014 learning set meeting indicates my attempt to do this:

> *For instance, F, in your reflection you say things like "The different roles that I play, lead to conflict in my life. I have learned that because of my commitment I must work every day." Give an example. What are the types of conflicts you have? Why are they emerging? How does this influence you and participants? How difficult/easy is it to live out the values of PALAR? If you say: "I have learned to listen to the youth", how did you learn that? Explain how you came to know and how this links to the principles of PALAR.*

To help decrease the gap between the theories that the students claimed to follow and how they were leading the research process in actual practice, I decided to ask them to use the three Rs and seven Cs (communication, commitment, competence, compromise, critical reflection, collaboration, and coaching) of PALAR (see Figure 1) to guide their reflections.

The seven Cs, as reported by Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013), are the underlying principles that should guide the PALAR process. I asked the students to try to constantly reflect on how they were living out these principles in their interaction with the participants, in an attempt to help the students to reflect on their underlying beliefs, assumptions, goals, and values, and how they were impacting on the research process. This approach seems to have enabled some of the students to think more deeply about how their personality impacted on the research process:

I know that one of my weaknesses is that I tend to step in and take over. This often robs others of the enjoyment of finding solutions to their own problems. I am very aware of this and it is counterintuitive to inclusiveness. I find it easy to get others involved to say their say and make joint decisions but when implementation comes I want action immediately and if others don't respond I will get in and do it. I know where it comes from; my mother constantly said if you want something done, do it yourself. I cannot handle laziness. My research is hampered because I have too many irons in the fire. I need to pace myself, and prioritise what is urgent and important rather than attending to just what is important. (Student C, May 2014)

Figure 1: An Example of a Template to Guide Reflection

The 7 Cs of PALAR for character building	Consider the following questions: How well did I live out these characteristics in my project? What successes/challenges did I encounter? What do I need to change in my thinking, acting? How can I improve these aspects?
Communication	How dialogical, how symmetrical, and how inclusive is my communication?
Commitment	How committed am I to the project, the participants, and the outcome?
Competence	As facilitator of the process, and as researcher, what do I need to learn?
Compromise	How willing am I to listen to other points of view and reach mutual agreement?
Critical reflection	How do my feelings, thoughts, motives, and values impact the research process?
Collaboration	How collaborative is the process? What role do I and the participants play? Who holds the power at each stage?
Coaching	How directive am I? How can I improve my mentoring/facilitation skills?
3 Rs	
Reflection	How can I help participants to reflect on their own learning?
Relationships	How can I improve the research relationships?
Recognition	How do I recognise and value participants' achievements?

As Mezirow (1990, p. xvi) explained, critical reflection on self and others builds capacity for transformational learning, which "results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating and integrative understanding of one's experience. Learning includes acting on these insights". As students become transformational learners through critical reflection they, in turn, are better able to facilitate such learning in others—in this case community participants. My task as supervisor of students using a PALAR methodology was to help them to develop their own potential and that of their participants, to attain the outcomes generic to every action research project. These aims are generation of knowledge leading to the attainment and sustainment of positive change, not only in the particular circumstances of a specific community, but also in their thinking and behaviour. This emancipatory outcome of action research is not easy to attain, and it requires careful critical reflection on the part of the student researcher.

The above-mentioned structured template was, however, not used again in the reflective writing of the students in this study. I realised that reflective writing is a very personal exercise, and that I would have to allow students to develop their capacity in whichever way they felt comfortable doing. I wanted to

encourage writing, not to constrict them, and while some students found the above template helpful, some did not. When I queried this with my students, one explained:

> *It is just my personality; I don't like structure and I am relaxed enough to do my own thing. I still struggled to know how much of my own experiences, pain, to put in—probably because of my past learning about "research must not be personal"—and also how much of my own opinion is relevant, but I prefer to do my own thing. (Student C, May 2014)*

I appreciated that I would have to find another way to help these particular students. To improve their capacity for self-reflection, I posed questions to each student that were designed to make them think more critically about how their self, in terms of their race, class, gender, occupation, family history, beliefs, values, and world views, might influence their interaction with the participants, and either promote or hinder achievement of the research goals. They first reflected on these questions individually, then we came together as a group to discuss their responses and what they had learned from this exercise—about themselves, their relationship with the participants, and the research process—and how they envisaged translating this learning into action. My role was to play devil's advocate by offering an outsider perspective and questioning their explanations and assumptions (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). I did this both orally, in our meeting, and electronically by using the comment facility in Microsoft Word to pose questions on the reflections. For example, one student explained how she decided to read out a lengthy portion of her thesis proposal to participants at their first meeting, as a way of explaining the need for the study, rather than concentrating on finding out what issues these particular teachers had, and what they would like to focus on. My comment to this was:

> *Why do you read this? Might you not be intimidating them—your thesis is not important to them—and it implies that research is something they might not cope with. What need did you have that led you to read this out verbatim? Did you want to prove something?*

Student C then reflected further:

> *I was not aware of my domineering tendency until L questioned me about it. I was actually shocked to realise how I came across to participants when, in fact, my aim was to emphatically establish my role as a facilitator. On reflection I realise my need to justify my position comes from two places. The first is that I did not want participants to see me as the professional with all the answers and that PALAR literature suggests that they are equally skilled to find solutions. Yet my presentation was not at all collaborative; I thought that collaboration process would follow my initial introduction of the research project. The second need to justify my position comes from my personal history. Coming from a very traditional patriarchal community where women's opinions hardly mattered, I got into the habit of being forceful and verbally very challenging so as to be heard. After I left home as a young adult, my life circumstances changed and it took some time for me to move from being forceful to adopt a more collaborative approach with spouses, in-laws, children, and friends who valued my opinion without conditions. I am not so sure if my current interaction with people is still affected by my earlier need to be heard. (April, 2014)*

Thinking about my questions, the student was able to stop and consider how her past experience might be influencing her current interactions with the participants. This degree of self-awareness would help her to think more carefully about how she could manage future interactions in terms of power relations. As she shared in our later meeting:

> *The reflections have really helped me to learn that if I don't reflect honestly, don't become aware of my "hidden agendas" then it comes out in other ways in my interaction with participants and that could be bad for the process. (Student C, May, 2014)*

Similarly, when I queried with Student A that her past experience as a teacher and a subject advisor had developed in her a need to be directive and to transmit her own knowledge to others, rather than acting as a facilitator where she would help others to create their own knowledge; she explained how my critical insights and her writing of deep reflections had helped her to accept responsibility for her actions as a researcher:

> *That was what I was used to doing. The questions you asked helped me to understand other points of view. This interview we are having now is a learning process itself, which does not happen enough in traditional research; it is a safe space to reflect and grow. The series of discussions with you acting as a critical friend, trying to find out why the project has collapsed—those were the most painful moments of my professional life as a teacher, school support visit facilitator and now as a researcher. At the end, our discussions helped me to gradually realise that indeed, I was wrong, even though it was hard to understand and to accept that. I was eventually healed, and from the bottom of my heart I admitted all the mistakes I made without being forced to do that, but as a result of the evidence from data that I generated (with the participants) and I analysed myself, and the reflections that I wrote with my own hand. (November, 2013)*

Student A had also started to think about how she could increase participant capacity for reflection, now that she was more critically aware of how her own experience could also be used to help promote the process rather than hinder it:

> *In a group I am easily overpowered no matter how safe is the environment. I can contribute more when I write. Therefore I will allow participants to reflect individually in writing, and also allow group reflections at other stages. (June, 2014)*

At the beginning of the project, true to PALAR principles, I obtained consent from all the participating students and supervisors that we share our reflections so that anyone could make use of them for publication purposes. We also shared our reflections at our action learning set meetings. It was something that all the students found helpful in developing their capacity to reflect on their own projects. Student B, in response to my question about what the students found challenging in doing reflections, wrote:

> *I am aware that reflections are not reports of what happened when and by whom. It is thinking about thinking. At a meta-level I think we all battle as we do not take a second or third party position on what is being said. By this I mean, first person is seeing yourself do ABC and stating it (reporting). Second person is explaining, giving reasons for your choices and what and why you made those choices (reflection). Third position is like listening in on a reflection on your practice as if you were a fly on the wall and commenting on what the second person position is actual saying from an evaluation point of view. I enjoy reading the other action learning set members' reflections for validation of what I am doing, that I can check not only that I am doing what is right, but also becoming aware of pitfalls to be avoided before they even arise because others are ahead of me in the process. I have had to help my own action learning set with reflections and have produced a template with my own reflection in it of the collage activity that we did. I found this exercise enriching as I had to deal with what I wanted by way of reflection that would generate data, but that I was not limiting or leading the participant to*

reflect on what I wanted to hear. It has to be open for personal input but it must also be done in support of an outcome. (February, 2014)

The above response helped me to realise that promoting reflection is not an easy process, but it is nevertheless a vital skill for leaders of action research projects to master, because they will have to teach it to their participants. This ability to meta-reflect is central to achieving the emancipatory outcomes of action research. At the time that I wrote this article, both the students and I were satisfied that we had developed significantly our capacity to promote and to write critical reflections:

After all this, I viewed the whole situation with a different perspective. Instead of seeing myself as a failure, like I did, I am proud about a rich knowledge that I acquired. I was ultimately amazed when I realised how immeasurable a researcher's thinking can be. Thank you Prof, for having been so patient with me, you walked this long challenging journey with me up until the very last moment, where I noticed my development in my research path. (Student A, June 2014)

I have begun to reflect daily, namely, "What am I learning about myself, others, and my workplace and praxis". I want to thank you all for the learning that has come from your reflections and from sharing the "participative space" together. I have experienced our group of bright-minded colleagues that are nonjudgemental and who have the same ups and downs of balancing research, work, and family matters in such a way that we can be resilient. Prof has walked the talk and only demonstrated PALAR principles in action. (Student C, June 2014)

I believe that another important element in the reflection process that was highlighted, and perhaps in the past I didn't take notice of, is to include the report (the raw details—facts), the emotions and existential elements of what one felt while observing/hearing, what meaning was attached and what understanding was gained in the event plus the process of reflection that may change the first response, understanding of the original stimulus. I also learned that to "future pace", reflection is needed. It's not only what happened, how I existentially reflect on it but apply it to future scenarios. In other words in reflection one has a loop back into the time and place when it was happening and a loop to the future when it may be useful to apply the learning (part of systems thinking). (Student B, June, 2014)

So, What Have I Learned?

Reflecting on my interaction with the students and their reflections has helped me to know how to better promote reflection in doctoral students employing a PALAR process. Unlike the more objective researcher stance which is usually required, even in qualitative studies, in the PALAR process the researcher is part and parcel, so to speak, of the process. As a supervisor, I have to ensure that the research process stays true to the guiding principles of PALAR, which is a difficult thing to do for novice researchers who are used to a more traditional researcher-driven form of study. Student reflections thus constitute an invaluable tool, a window through which I can look into a research process, without having to be there physically.

When reading reflections and responding, it helps me to use the guiding principles of PALAR (see Figure 1) as my standards of judgement. For example, if I think they are being too directive, I will ask them about their lack of dialogue with participants, and ask how this might be affecting the relationships, committment, and collaboration of the participants. Driven by their own anxieties about their study, students at first tend to take a too directive approach; they worry that the process will be too slow for them to meet deadlines for proposal submission or completion of the study; they try and influence participants to focus on the research questions that they have already identified for proposal purposes, rather than letting community members choose the topic; they worry that examiners might think that their research is not "valid" if they include their own reflections. By critically commenting on such fears, as expressed in their reflections, I could help them to be more aware of how they might be unconsciously dominating the process, and how this might increase participant dependence and compliance with

traditional power relations, rather than result in the emancipatory outcomes that they envisaged. This was appreciated by Student B:

> *Reflecting* made me aware of how my own background impacts on the research process—you learn *a lot about yourself and change the way you think about yourself, sometimes painful. . . . it makes you stop and acknowledge things you missed. (May, 2014)*

I also learned the value of collaborative reflection within the action learning set. Within the sustainable learning ecology (Mahlomaholo, Nkoane, & Ambrosio, 2013) of collaborative learning, such learning is beneficial in helping students to understand the complexities inherent in a PALAR process, and how their selves impact on it. Dialogue around shared critical reflections forms the core activity of the action learning set meetings, both the virtual ones and the actual physical ones. The action learning set meetings create a space for the exchange of ideas and the refining of reflection skills, as well as being an experiential learning exercise to hold up as a model to students of how they should facilitate action learning set meetings with their own respective participants. Evidence of this can be seen in the following extract from a reflection by Student C (June 2014):

> *I am aware that I am fine tuning my reflection skills continually. The reason for this is that I am becoming more aware of my own shortcomings in relation to the group's dynamics. . . . I am also becoming aware that the values which will become my standards of judgment in developing my living theory are genuine and pervasive of whatever I am doing—not just my work values, but they are what I am. In writing this reflection, my values of honesty, respect, and inclusiveness I hope are discernable. . . . I believe "tell like it is, with dignity and respect" something which I do not find in my toxic workspace at college. It is such a fresh breeze hearing us be honest with each other in this group. Working within the framework of the action learning set I have learned so much from my colleagues' success narratives as well as their challenges and frustrations. Particularly about the way, the approach, the standpoint of getting an action set together.*

Reflection is also an important cathartic tool for postgraduate students, who hold many life roles, and sometimes experience the attendant stresses of holding so many roles. Action research is an affective process, it is value driven and value laden (McNiff, 2013), and interaction with participants can often cause added stress Because they also have life issues and commitments that can stall the research process:

> *From week to week I experienced hope, despair, elation and pure frustration regarding my personal and academic progress. I become elated when my research participants actually turned up and we could progress albeit slowly, but was also regularly disappointed as there were always two or three not there, and others had to leave after half an hour for very valid reasons. (Student C, May 2014)*

Reading the student reflections, I can discern when a student needs more emotional support, as can the other members of our larger action learning set. By sharing the reflections with the whole group, other students can step in and offer support, which helps to increase group cohesion and trust. This has taught me to stand back and let the group provide emotional support and motivation. An email sent to the group by Student A in response to the reflection from Student C above illustrates this:

> *I also admire you R. You are a strong woman. Ever since last year, when I read your reflections, I always become motivated to carry on regardless of the load I am pulling. You have this technique of balancing the social/personal life and the academic one. This is one of the learnings that I am seeing and acquiring from your reflections. Unlike the mistake that I made, you happened to be patient with the participants and you devoted your time to them, listening to them regardless of your time constraints. Well done. (May, 2014)*

Something else that I learned is that the identity of students as action researchers is developed through reflection. Engaging in a PALAR process takes more commitment, patience, creativity, and energy than is required in traditional forms of outsider research (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015). It is a new experience for most students, who have been trained to be more objective and impersonal in their research:

> *I have had so many thoughts about my purpose as a researcher and the purpose of the topic I have started exploring. The relatively new methodology allows for so much flexibility and growth but the participants and I, in our individual and collective histories, are not accustomed to this kind of "structureless" program. Yet I am convinced that PALAR is the way for me. I wonder how people can still continue to do human research the old way where they are disconnected from who the research is actually about. (Student B, April 2014)*

Finally, I learned that I have to be sensitive to the needs of each individual student in terms of the support that they need with writing reflections. Each student learns at a different pace, and comfort levels differ. Therefore, I have to provide structure when needed, but withdraw it as the students develop their own unique style of reflection. It is important to provide structure in the beginning, as reflection is a difficult skill to master:

> *I liked the way L structured our early days of our PALAR meetings giving some pointers for reflection. If we had not had that framework we may have only reported and never started the learning process of reflection. (Student B, June 2014)*

Validation of my Claims to Knowledge

I believe this account of my learning has met the criteria for quality action research, as proposed by Herr and Anderson (2005), but ultimately the rhetorical validity of this study is determined by you, the reader. Have I reported my learning in such a way that I have convinced you I was able to improve my practice of promoting the capacity of postgraduate students for critical reflection? Have my attempts to improve the reflective skills of students positively influenced their motivation to continue to conduct research that conforms to the guiding principles of PALAR, and to take action to help others to improve their quality of life (i.e., catalytic validity)? Have I clearly explained how I engaged in this process of improving my own practice with regard to the rigour of my study (i.e., process validity)? And, finally, have I provided evidence to convince you that dialogical validity has been established, meaning that I encouraged open, transparent, critically reflective interaction with and between the students?

Concluding Remarks

In this article I have demonstrated how I attempted to improve my capacity for helping student researchers to develop their capacity for critical reflection on their roles as researchers in a participatory action learning and action research design. The purpose was to enable them to better engage with communities to address the complex social issues facing education today, ensuring that they adhere to the characteristics of an effective PALAR process. It is clear from the evidence presented that critical reflection is a skill students have to work hard to master, and that they experience significant growing pains along the way. It is also clear that it is a skill we have to continue to develop as long as we conduct research. This account of my learning will hopefully assist other supervisors, as well as postgraduate students, to better understand how

to foster and use critical reflection to promote the emancipatory outcomes of their studies. I end with the following extract, which succinctly summarises the value of reflection and engagement in an action learning set for novice researchers, justifying the importance of being able to develop the capacity to foster these skills in those under our supervision:

> *At our meetings I learned to pay attention to detail and I am not a detailed person, I much prefer the big picture. . . . I listened with an intention—that is a skills set that has been refined this year for me—I listened to how the set members were battling, or succeeding with the intention of not making the same mistakes. I noted and strategised on how I would do it differently. Probably the set doesn't even know how they contributed to my learning, because it is in the dialectical and dialogical debates, formal and informal interaction with the monthly reflections of the group that learning takes place. It is also in the spaces, the gaps, the silent moments when no one said anything that I learned. It is in these silent moments that I believe the deepest reflection takes place as the mind becomes busy. I think this is important for facilitation of sets. When there is silence let it be. . . . Give time for self-reflection in the light of what has been said—we seem too often to want to hear the chatter—we become obsessed with wanting to hear voices. Hence, I have learned and will include some ideas of mindfulness into my research. (Student B, April 2014)*

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Book Review
The Community Development Profession: Issues, Concepts and Approaches

By Frik de Beer and Hennie Swanepoel
Pretoria, South Africa: Van Schaik, 2013. 176 pp.
ISBN-10(13): 9780627030673

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De Beer and Swanepoel's book, The Community Development Profession: Issues, Concepts and Approaches, is truly a reflection of the authors' two decades of experience in the field of development studies. The book draws on their experiences as well as on the academic aspects of community development. The authors talk about the issues, concepts, and approaches from two different angles: real world experiences and classroom-based experiences. The message of the book is summarised in the opening pages where the authors state that "genuine development work is that which empowers people; which enables them to build organisations that, like a hydro-electric dam, pool their resources and generate power where previously there was none" (p. 8).

Community development is about working with people, and the authors argue strongly for the need to remember that community is made up of people—with their own ideas, experience, and knowledge. They offer evidence to show how many community developers forget this and try to impose their own ideas and policy onto communities rather than working in partnership to help find ways to initiate meaningful and sustainable change. Indeed, many organisations impose change that is "inconsistent with their objectives" and implement policies that "do not correspond with their principles and aims" (p. 65).

In their book, de Beer and Swanepoel discuss the key themes of "participation, institutions, project management, training, community, coordination, funding and the influence of politics on community development" (p. 1). They describe attempts to design human-centred development approaches that they position as best practices in community development. The authors emphasise the need for a participatory approach where the community is actively involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating change so that they will be able to sustain projects to improve their quality of life. Concepts such as human orientation, sustainability, participation, empowerment, total transformation, and compassion underpin their argument for authentic collaboration with community—and are positioned as requirements for success.

South Africa is a global leader in terms of policy making as far as community development is concerned. However, the translation of these very appropriate policies into practice is often problematic. The authors decry the, often paternalistic, approaches to development visible in many government and not-for-profit interventions. Such resource-based approaches provide "disadvantaged communities with goods in the belief that having goods that were in short supply is equal to being empowered—and that includes being

provided with skills" (p. 41). What is needed, is help to build up human capacity within communities to give them a sense of ownership and commitment to working towards the best interests of their society.

The book is well structured with clear and concise headings that allow the reader to follow the argument, which is well supported by relevant literature on the contemporary debates in the field. This allows the reader to view the issue from different angles and to see the bigger picture of development studies. A powerful feature of the book is the use of a strong case study to summarise their arguments and illustrate their point that what is recommended in policy is not always implemented faithfully on the ground. Democratic, inclusive, and collaborative ideas are more usually supplanted by authoritarian, Western-based, one-sided interventions that are not helping people to develop capacity for true and lasting change. Hopefully, this book will make the reader take a step back, reflect on their own practice, and begin to align it with the democratic and participatory principles that should underline community development.

A helpful feature of the book is the glossary of definitions at the end of each chapter. Discussion questions provoke the reader to self-reflect on own practice in light of the chapter content. Another helpful tool is the addendum, which comprises of a bank of questions, designed to make community development practitioners self-reflect as an aid to ongoing evaluation of their own projects. This book is well suited to postgraduate or final year students in the field of community development or community-based research. It is also relevant for practitioners already in the profession of community development as well as for community development workers.

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REPORT
Connecting Researchers, Connecting Communities—CARN Conference, 2014

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"Connecting researchers, connecting communities" through engagement with action research approaches in different settings, was the theme of the annual Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) conference held in the lively city of Gateshead on the east coast of England, 31 October 2014–2 November 2014.

The aim of the conference, in keeping with an action-learning paradigm, was to provoke thought rather than find definitive answers. True to the democratic and participatory ethos of action research, the conference afforded us the opportunity to engage in meaningful learning with some of the leaders in the field. As PhD students, this was our first experience of an international conference and we were rather daunted at the prospect of presenting in front of those we perceived to be seasoned "experts" in the field. However, the collegial and welcoming atmosphere put us at ease. This conference was designed to enable greater exploration and understanding of our many different starting points, and celebrated the:

- diverse professions of health, education, and community development
- multiplicity of roles as practitioners and academics
- variety of regional and cultural locations.

With 118 action researchers in the fields of education, health, social work, community development, and organisational development from more than 13 countries converging on Gateshead College, it was a lively, innovative, and enriching experience. The format of the conference allowed delegates to engage in dialogue, reflection, and critical friendship around these provocations raised by the keynote speakers:

- John Eliot, Emeritus Professor (Educational Research) from the University of East Anglia and a founding member of CARN in 1976, raised the need for theory to underpin teaching as an ethical practice. His contention was that little has changed since this was asked some 20 years back—and what should we do about it?
- Tina Cook, Reader in Inclusive Methodologies (Community Research) from the University of Northumbria, questioned the "neatness" of many collaborative action research project reports and wondered if this was an indication of not really meeting the requirements for authentic collaboration, which is a "messy" activity. The messiness of action research should not be seen as something to be resolved; rather, collaboration must be a bumpy, wandering, disturbing, sticky process.
- Carol Munn-Giddings, Professor of Participative Inquiry (Health & Social Care) from Anglia Ruskin University, employed a metaphor of action research as a tango to provoke thought about the inclusion of participants in the dance of research. Just as with learning to

> dance, we need to learn to work with participants, and this might mean making wrong steps or stepping on toes occasionally but in the end, when we learn to work in harmony, the result is breathtaking.

There were keynote provocations every morning, and seminars, workshops, round tables, paper and poster presentations, artistic performances and practitioner–new researcher workshops. The administration of the conference was slick and well executed with adequate time for refreshments and tea breaks. The social events provided ample time for networking and making new friends.

Our experience as doctoral students was that the underlying value of conferences such as CARN is sometimes not so much what we learnt from listening to presentations, but in what we learnt by interacting informally with other researchers over lunch and in the hallways. True to the nature of action learning, as we debated, so we were forced to think about new questions and explore different perceptions before testing our emerging answers. This networking of practitioners and academics was an invaluable asset to our PhD journey of learning.

There were eight conference subthemes, designed to provoke thought:

- Beginning to research my own practice: Challenges and opportunities.
- Engaging others to participate in change.
- "Starting over": What would I do differently next time in my action research?
- "Am I doing it right?"—Reflecting on AR methods and methodologies.
- Ethical dilemmas for the action researcher.
- What does "collaboration" mean? How do we learn to collaborate?
- What can I learn from approaches to action research used in different settings?
- (How) Should we assess Action Research studies?

Time was also afforded to CARN's six regional group meetings for discussions and planning as to how the action research network can be expanded to improve our practice, to ensure greater justice in the uneven landscapes we work in.

The presentations and group sessions we attended were interactive and reinforced the importance of sharing our knowledge, something that we have learnt in our action research journey and that makes it such an enjoyable and humanising methodology. We learnt that, although our contexts appear to be different, there are many similarities between the problems facing action researchers in developed countries and what we are facing in South Africa. The experience of attending CARN was invaluable to us and reinforced our desire to attain our degrees so as to continue to contribute to improving education through our work as action research scholars. The conference certainly lived up to its theme of connecting researchers as we made many contacts and forged relationships with like-minded people from around the globe. It has also whetted our appetite for attending the Action Learning and Action Research (ALARA) World Congress in South Africa, 4–7 November 2015, where we will be proud to be part of the host team.