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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

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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,

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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, commitment, 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

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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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