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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

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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.

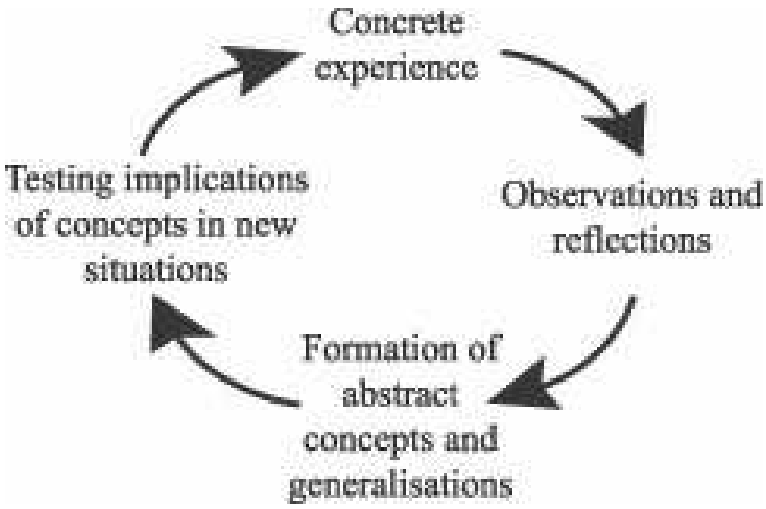
Assumptions about learning and knowledge creation.

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)

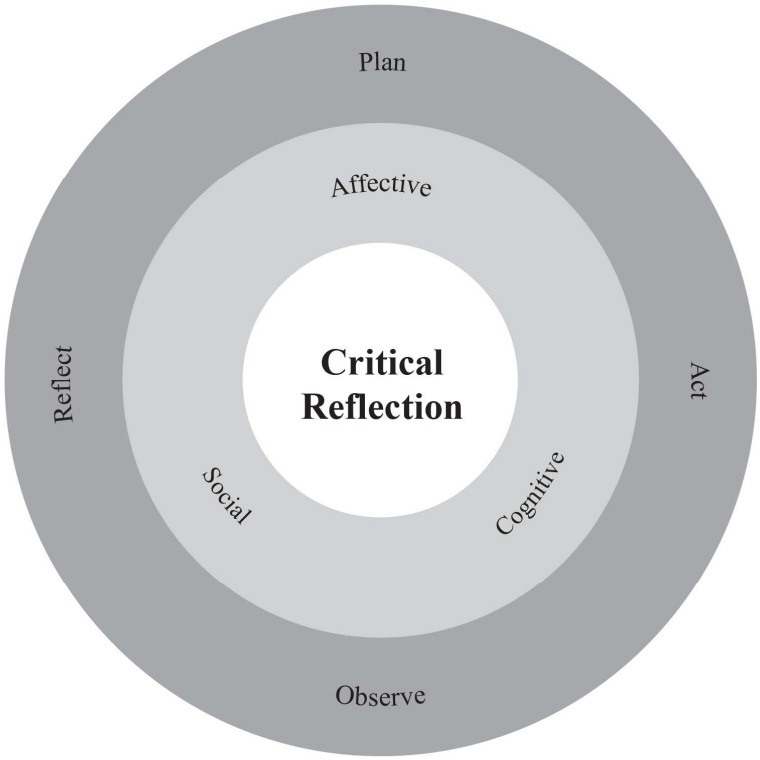
PALAR	**Traditional education**
Learner centred	Teacher centred
Process and project based	Content and curriculum based
Interdisciplinary, problem oriented	Disciplinary, departmentalised
Located in real life/work	Located in classroom/laboratory
Inclusive, accessible to all, aimed at social justice	Exclusive, 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.

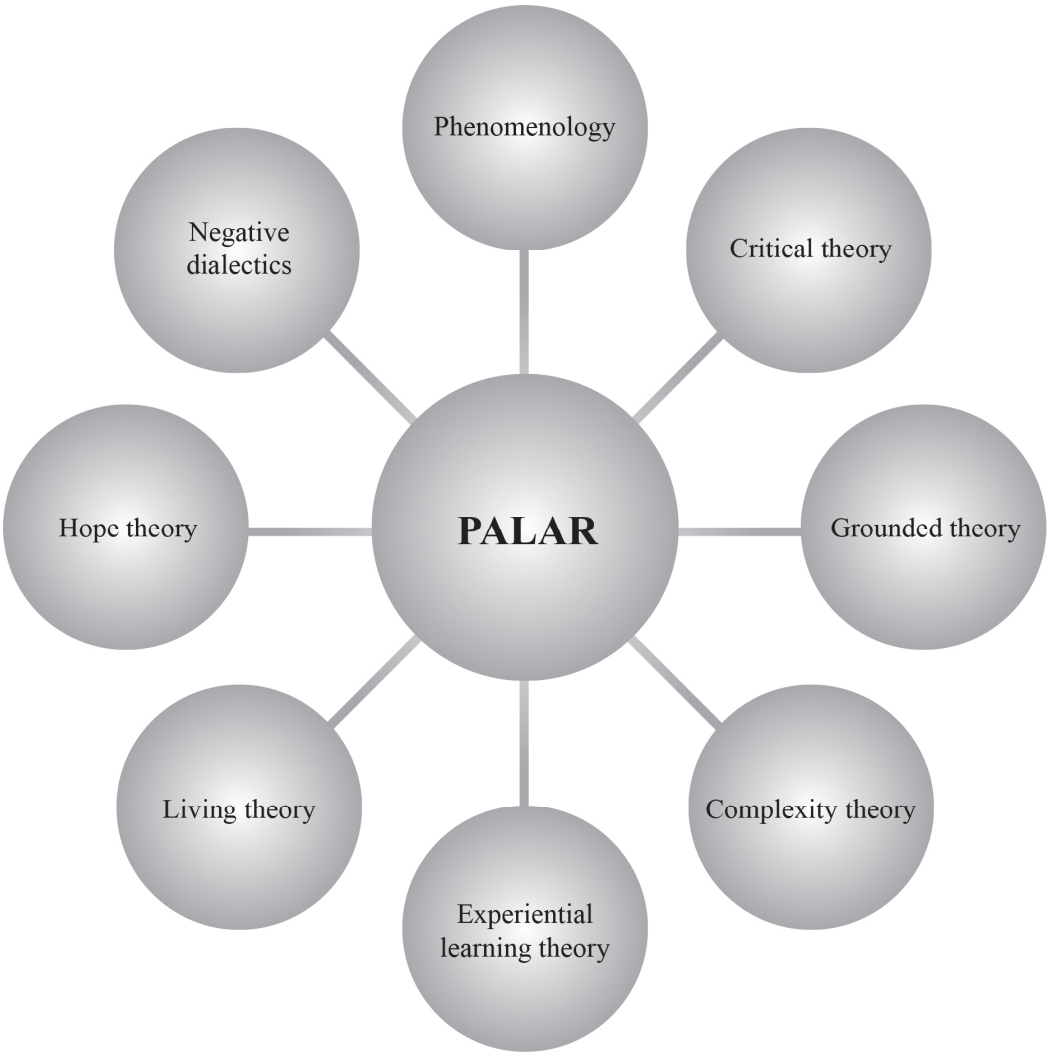
As Fletcher (2015) observed:

> *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.

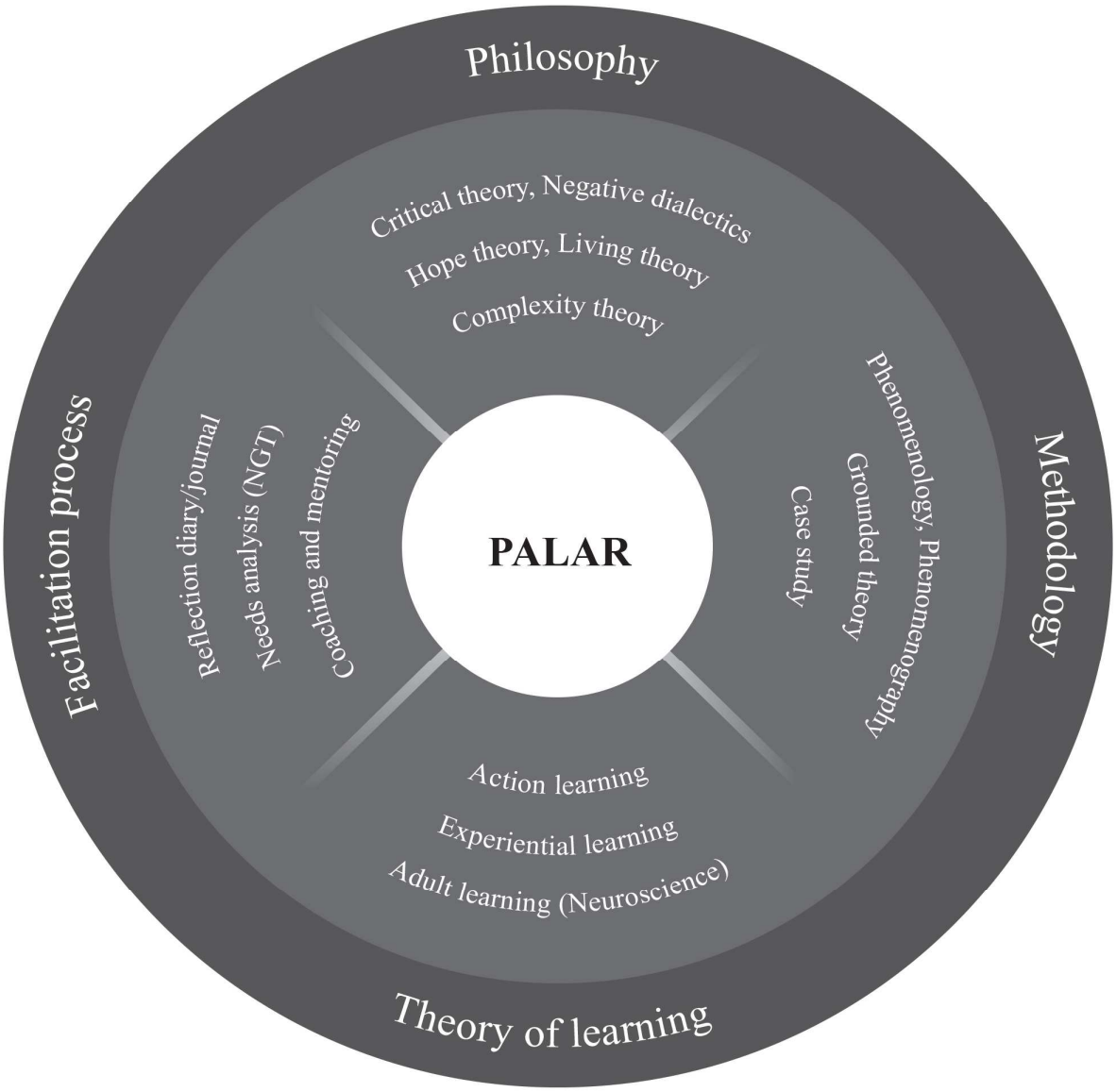
I also include Adorno's (2006, 2008) *negative dialectics*, because it can teach us that the complex, messy, and wicked nature of the social world, including injustice in society and education, should not be simplified in neat classifications and categories but explored by a variety of perspectives and 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).

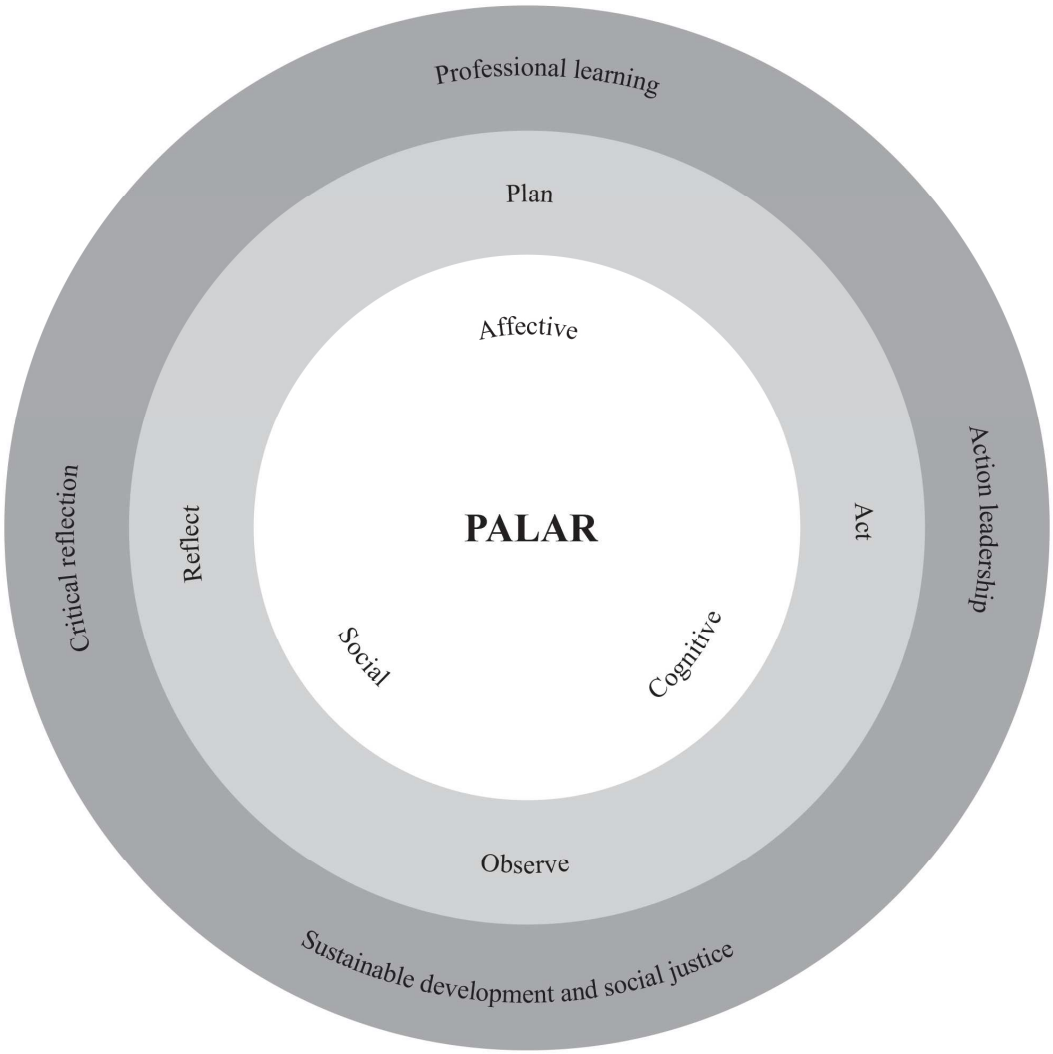
Our research has revealed that in university–community partnerships PALAR can:

- 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.

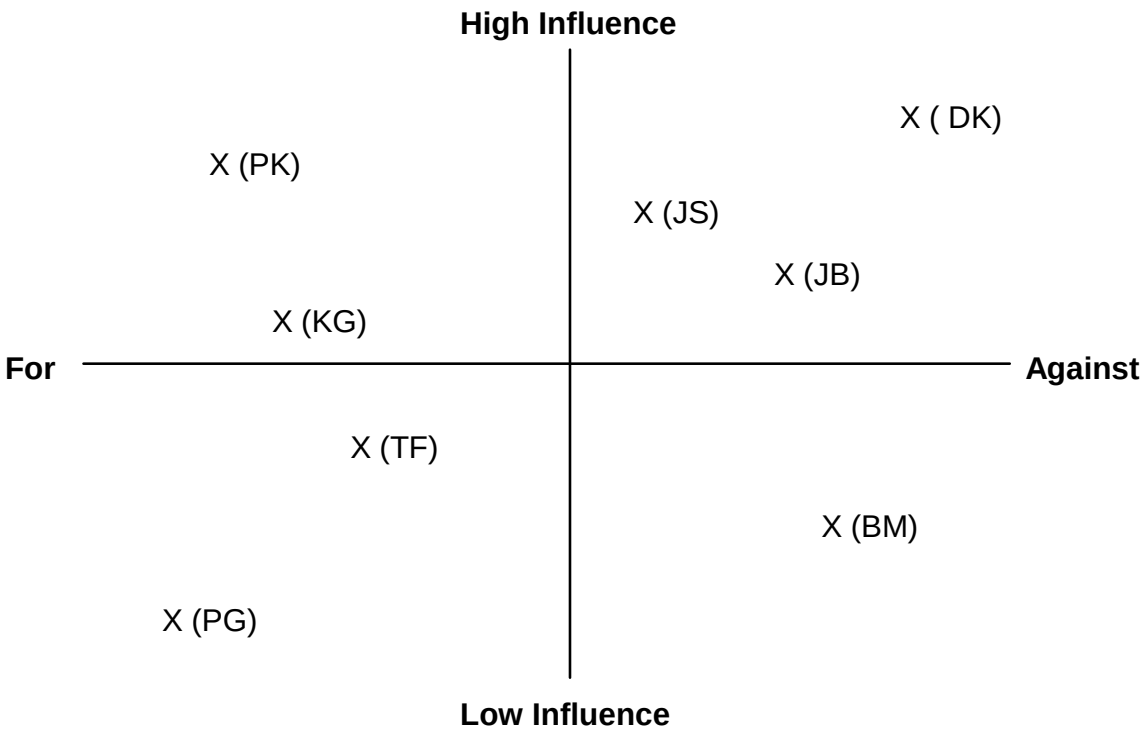
1. Stakeholder analysis

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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