Learning To Facilitate Community-Based Research: Guidelines From a Novice Researcher[1]

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Abstract

The diversity of South Africa's population calls for authentic and contextually relevant participation in research that is community based. For novice researchers and researchers transitioning to participative methods, it can be challenging to facilitate a community-based research (CBR) project if they lack the necessary facilitation skills or experience. These skills are crucial to enable collaborative and participative learning. In this paper, I explain how I learnt to facilitate a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) project through critical reflection on self and process. I generated data from my personal reflective journal entries and transcripts of our action learning group sessions, and I validated my claims to knowledge by recoding the data with two critical friends, my coauthors of this paper. The claims to knowledge I share in this paper are twofold. Firstly, I have come to know how to improve my facilitation skills and, secondly, I have learnt to use continuous critical self-reflection to guide my actions in conducting more ethical CBR, underpinned by the principles of PALAR. I believe that my account of learning may help other researchers improve their facilitation of community-based participatory research groups to become more confident, critically reflective, and ethical researchers.

Keywords: action research, living theory, critical reflection, facilitation, participatory action learning and action research (PALAR), self-reflection

Introduction

In South Africa, researchers in the social sciences and humanities are starting to use more participatory methods to conduct research in response to the country's diverse population and educational settings (Wood, 2020a). This is also the case globally. Community-based research (CBR) is based on the principle that "people are brought into the research as owners of their own knowledge and empowered to take action" (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995, p. 1760). This has required researchers to be participative and ethical facilitators of research groups, to conduct research *with* (community-based) rather than *on* community partners (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). However, traditionally trained researchers tend to lack facilitation skills to the degree needed to ensure that the research they conduct is authentically participative (Tandon et al., 2016; Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2020), especially if they follow a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) design where the core project group meets regularly to critically reflect on the process and the progress of the project.

As a novice researcher, I realised that I did not have the necessary skills to facilitate a CBR project because most of my previous research training had been rooted in positivist traditions. To be able to conduct CBR in an ethical way, I had to learn how to facilitate a diverse group of people towards reaching a common goal, which included learning to critically self-reflect on how I was influencing the research process. If my facilitation skills discouraged participation, critical reflection, and community-based knowledge generation, I would compromise the authenticity of the learning and knowledge generated by the core project group. Our action learning group (ALG) comprised six in-service teachers, including the school principal and a department official, four pre-service teachers, a fellow lecturer and me (first author). We were diverse in terms of race, age, gender, language, experience of teaching practice, and social background. This diversity, while welcomed in terms of the different paradigms, experiences, and knowledge it brought to the group, also created the possibility that misunderstandings and skewed power relations might threaten the democratic and inclusive process if it was not facilitated skilfully.

I explain the lessons learnt from my experience in setting up and maintaining an ALG, which led to the development of the guidelines for facilitation I present in this paper. My guiding research question was *"How can I, as a novice researcher, improve my facilitation of a community-based participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) project?"* Firstly, I discuss the theoretical positioning of PALAR for CBR, followed by a clarification of the facilitator's role in maintaining an ALG. I then motivate the practitioner self-study methodological processes followed for this paper. Next, I explain my concerns about facilitating an ALG and how I addressed these. I use the guiding principles of PALAR as standards of judgement against which to evaluate and improve my facilitation skills. The extrapolated guidelines that emerge as my living theory may prove useful to other researchers new to participatory forms of CBR to improve their facilitation of the collaborative work demanded by such designs.

Theoretical Positioning of PALAR for Community-Based Research

PALAR is a qualitative paradigm, methodology, and facilitation process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015) for research that contributes to transformational and emancipatory learning in various social contexts (Kearney, 2015). PALAR is a form of action research that foregrounds learning through cycles of action and reflection, grounded in overarching values of care, inclusion, and collaborative learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2019). Participants in the project become active producers of knowledge rather than informants and recipients (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Continual critical reflection and dialogue develop the agency of participants to become advocates and enablers of change.

PALAR aims to emancipate participants to think critically and for themselves so that they can make decisions about their own lives and work to create more socially just environments (Zuber-Skerritt, 2019). In community-based PALAR studies, the participants determine what they need to learn and why, and they work together in an ALG to regularly reflect on the progress and the process of the project (Zuber-Skerritt, 2019). Revans (2011, p. 74) stated that "there can be no learning without action and no (sober and deliberate) action without learning." Action and learning are thus equally important in a PALAR process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). The role of the facilitator, normally the university researcher, is to create a safe space, in the form of an ALG, for learning and development to unfold. Action researchers can draw from the key principles of PALAR (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013), namely the 7Cs and 3Rs, as standards of judgement to evaluate their competence to facilitate the core project group. These principles are communication, commitment, compromise, collaboration, competence, critical self-reflection, and coaching—operationalised by the concepts of relationship, reflection, and recognition (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Each of these principles, and the role it plays in the facilitation process of an ALG, is outlined in Table 1. I include examples of questions that I asked myself throughout the research process to help me continually evaluate and improve my facilitation of the ALG.

Table 1

The Principles of PALAR and Their Roles in the Facilitation Process of Action Learning Groups (adapted from Wood, 2020b; Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013)

Principle	Role in facilitation process	Am I being self-reflective? Questions to improve my practice
Communication	The facilitator guides the discussions so that participants can engage through inclusive, dialogical, and symmetrical communication.	How am I ensuring that our communication is symmetrical, dialogical, and inclusive?
Commitment	The facilitator creates opportunities to maximise commitment to the study and to take responsibility for the research activities.	How am I creating opportunities for the participants to take ownership of the project?
Compromise	The facilitator and the participants need to be willing to sacrifice some personal goals for the greater good of the project; the facilitator must monitor that the compromise does not outweigh the benefits of the study.	How am I guiding participants to work together for the greater good of the project?
Collaboration	Participants need to work together to attain a shared vision or goal. The facilitator needs	How am I encouraging participation by all members?

	to be aware of possible power relations, and how individual personalities and cultural roles might influence power.	How are power relations affecting collaboration and participation?
Competence	Throughout the study, the facilitator reflects on their own practices and makes changes to build competence. The facilitator should also create opportunities for participants to utilise and develop their skills. Experts should be brought in or consulted where needed.	How do I create opportunities for the participants to use and develop their strengths within the group?
Critical self-reflection	The facilitator should reflect on not only the new knowledge to answer the research questions, but also on the learning processes and how they influence the group process.	How are my actions, predispositions, and prior knowledge influencing the group? How well am I creating opportunities for the group members to self-reflect?
Coaching	The facilitator should learn how to facilitate effectively, through being mentored or by consulting with critical friends. There should also be supportive coaching for the group members.	How well am I consulting with more experienced researchers? How well am I coaching the participants?
Relationship	The facilitator should create opportunities for relationship building. The relationships between the group members should be strengthened and nurtured throughout the study, grounded in values of trust, honesty, democracy, and transparency.	How am I nurturing the relationships between the participants to maintain open and trusting communication?
Reflection	Sharing of ideas, knowledge, and experiences is essential for generation of new knowledge. The facilitator should ask questions that encourage discussion.	How well do I model and support critical reflection within the group?
Recognition	The facilitator and participants should affirm and celebrate each other's learning and participation in the group.	How do I acknowledge and raise awareness of personal and professional growth and contribution to knowledge?

The 7Cs and 3Rs of PALAR, as illustrated in Table 1, are interrelated and are contingent on each other, for example, without relationship building, it will not be possible to effectively collaborate as a group (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Facilitating an ALG requires a deepened understanding of PALAR concepts and reflection on the influence of the facilitator throughout the research process (Wood, 2020a).

The Importance of Skilful Facilitation of the Action Learning Group

The participants in PALAR studies form a group with a shared vision, referred to as an action learning group (Zuber-Skerritt, 2019). Action learning sessions are focused meetings where the members learn from and with each other through sharing their experiences, knowledge, and skills in relation to the topic being explored and the process and the progress of the project (Wood, 2020a). New ideas are evaluated and discussed critically to enable transformation in learning to meet the joint vision of the group.

The purpose and tasks of an ALG are divided into four main objectives, as listed below (Wood, 2020a):

- *Relationship building:* Learning to share, trust, and support each other to create the space where everyone can share their knowledge and experiences, even when participants hold opposing views.

- *Critical reflection on self:* Increasing self-knowledge to determine learning needs and improve personal and professional skills.

- *Critical reflection on process:* Continuous reflection on the research process during each ALG meeting, to ensure that the project is on track.

- *Developing a shared vision, and determining how to reach it:* Crafting a joint vision for the project and determining the questions, goals, and processes that will help reach these goals.

The facilitator's role in forming and maintaining an ALG is to create an environment conducive for open and transparent dialogue, to generate understandings of the social issue in question, and to implement action to address it (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Effective facilitation enables participants to actively contribute during ALG meetings, to address issues of power relations, and to ensure that all participants, regardless of their authority status, have the opportunity and the motivation to participate (Kearney, 2015). The facilitator must be sensitive to the social context of the ALG members, providing opportunities for skills development and/or building the confidence of participants (Wood, 2020a).

In contrast, if a facilitator does not maintain open and trusting communication or create a supportive environment, people will be less likely to participate, and PALAR then devolves into a traditional, researcher-driven study where participants miss out on the developmental and educational benefits inherent in the process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). Without refined facilitation skills, a researcher can easily reinforce unequal power relations, compromise the ethicality of the research, let their own biases control the discussions and results and, ultimately, damage partnerships between the university and the community (Giatti, 2019; Wood, 2020a). In summary, the role of the facilitator is to manage the group dynamics of the ALG empathically and democratically through open and transparent communication, enabling critical reflection free from bias or coercion (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018).

Methodology

For the purposes of this article, I followed a practitioner self-study approach (McNiff, 2013), a genre of action research where the researcher explains how they improved their practice, through conducting iterative cycles of action and learning. According to McNiff and Whitehead (2011), self-enquiries start with the researcher experiencing a sense of dissonance that they are not living out their professed values in their practice and, thus, are not being as effective as they could be. They then identify actions that they believe will improve their practice, they implement these improvements and reflect on their efficacy in terms of reaching their stated goals, and they then present this learning as a set of claims to knowledge, which constitutes their living educational theory (Whitehead, 2018). The theory is living because it is continually changing in response to the dynamic context in which the practitioner lives and works. Putting research into practice is a lifelong pursuit of professional development and is, therefore, not finite. This process of continual reflection and action is portrayed in Figure 1. The *reflection* component of a practitioner self-study encompasses critique of one's personal knowledge, behaviour, and perceptions (McNiff, 2013). The *action* component concerns the changes, informed by the reflection, that the researcher makes to their own practices (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

Figure 1

Generating a Living Theory Through Cycles of Action and Reflection (adapted from McNiff, 2013; Whitehead, 2018)
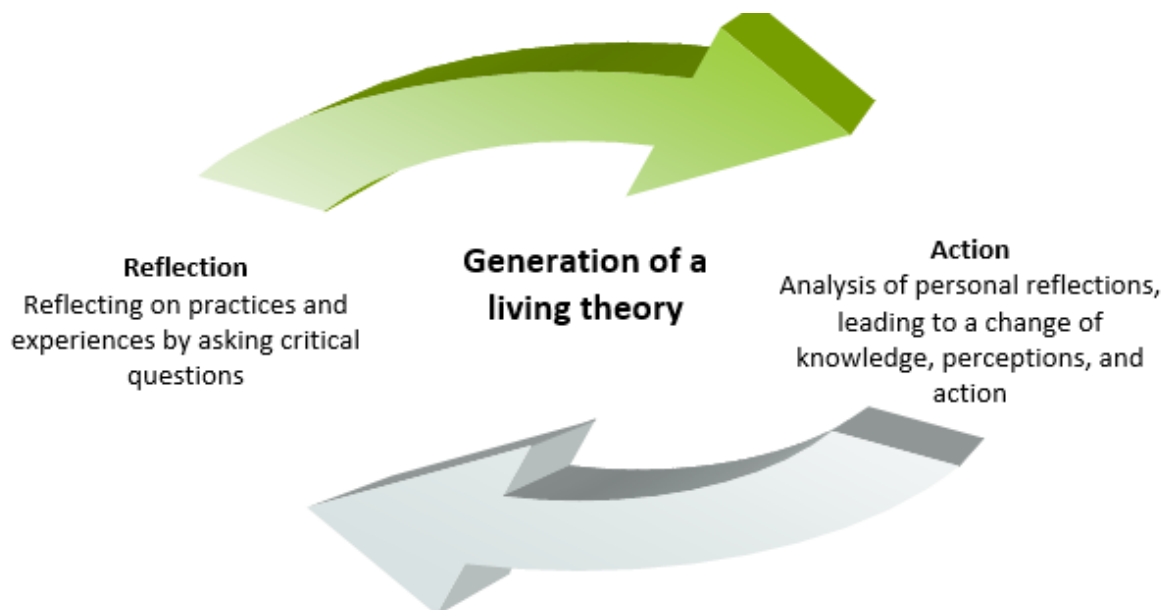
To generate evidence to support my claims to knowledge, I kept a personal reflective journal throughout the fieldwork (McNiff, 2013), and I supplemented this with evidence from transcripts from the ALG meetings. Before and after each session I reflected on the aims, the activities, and the process by asking myself questions such as those outlined in Table 1. These reflections helped me plan for future sessions and to become aware of potential barriers that could affect the group process towards reaching our goal of crafting guidelines for developing a critical service-learning programme for pre-service teachers. I evaluated my learning by analysing my journal entries and the transcripts of the sessions against the 7Cs and 3Rs of PALAR as guiding principles (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). To validate the data, my coauthors recoded the data individually. We then negotiated consensus of meaning, a process referred to as peer validation (McNiff, 2013). I also presented my learning to peers at a conference, where my claims to knowledge were critiqued by experts in the field. I draw from Habermas's (1978) four criteria to enhance social validity, namely, that my claims to knowledge are *comprehensible* to the reader, that the evidence provided suggests that my explanation is *truthful*, that my actions to attain the aim of improving my practice are *appropriate* given the key principles of PALAR, and that the conclusions are *sincere* and align with the norms and traditions of the context in question. I obtained ethical clearance from the university ethics committee for the larger project that this study formed part of (NWU-00783-18-A2).

Learning To Facilitate a Community-Based Research Project: Validating My Claims to Knowledge

When I first started the project, I was overwhelmed by the prospect of facilitating the ALG. Being a novice researcher, I was unsure of my ability to do this, and I did not want to jeopardise the potential beneficial outcomes of the process for the participants because of poor facilitation. As I wrote in my personal reflective journal (PRJ):

> *When I first started to plan this session, I felt so overwhelmed. I was negative, because I had difficulty finding participants, and it felt as if I was just going to make one big mess out of my study. (PRJ, 23 May 2019)*

My strong belief in the value of participatory research in generating knowledge for social justice praxis motivated me to face my fears. I strived to embody the values of honesty, transparency, and democratic participation, and to encourage the other participants to feel free to voice their opinions and share their knowledge. I was also aware of the potentially constraining effect of power relations in the group given that it included a diverse mix of people used to hierarchical systems of interaction in their respective institutions. Table 2 provides an overview of the biographical details of the ALG.

Table 2

Action Learning Group Biographical Details

Participant code	Age (Years)	Race	Gender	Home language	Professional status of participant
P1	53	White	Female	English	In-service teacher
P2	53	Black	Male	Setswana	School principal
P3	23	White	Female	English	Pre-service teacher
P4	27	Black	Female	Setswana	Academic
P5	28	Black	Female	Setswana	In-service teacher
P6	22	White	Female	English	Pre-service teacher
P7	22	White	Female	English	Pre-service teacher
P8 (first author)	29	White	Female	Afrikaans	Academic
P9	43	Black	Male	Sesotho	In-service teacher
P10	29	Black	Female	Sesotho	In-service teacher
P11	53	Black	Male	Setswana	Departmental official
P12	22	White	Female	English	Pre-service teacher

I thought I was equipped to facilitate such a diverse group but my lack of competence made me nervous in completing this task. I now explain how I learnt to overcome my fear and improve my facilitation skills, using the interrelated foundational principles of PALAR as living standards of judgement against which to validate my learning. I start with the first lesson because it was pivotal for the remainder of my learning.

Learning To Accept Critique: Enabling Critical Self-Reflection and Embracing the Knowledge of Others

Initially, I was not comfortable with accepting critique and I was thus not open to coaching or critical self-reflection, which, in turn, hampered my development of competence. I thought I was a good facilitator, even though I was anxious. As a lecturer, I had skills to engage with students but I did not

realise that facilitating a PALAR group would be so different from and more complicated than lecturing. I was disillusioned and demotivated when I received feedback from my critical friends after the first session. I was also hesitant to admit that I did not have sufficient knowledge or skills to facilitate a CBR group because I thought it would mean that I was undeserving of doing research at doctoral level. The following excerpt from my reflective journal reveals the revelation I came to about the need to change my practices:

> *I had time to reflect on this [negative feelings about doing research], and I think that I need to change my perception of learning while doing research. The skills to conduct research will develop as I become a more experienced researcher, but nothing will change if I refuse to let go of the fears I have . . . I have to be honest about my learning, and I need to embrace the growth. (PRJ, 29 November 2019)*

When I read my journal entries later, I realised that my attitude was the greatest obstacle to the progress of the project. If I remained unaware of the need to learn through reflection and being self-critical, I would remain an unskilled facilitator. In fact, I was negating the principles of coaching and critical reflection in my own practice while expecting the other members of the ALG to adhere to them. The gap between theory and practice is one of the tensions inherent in participatory research (Fals Borda, 2013). Initially, I was not aware of the theory–practice gap in my own interaction. I was too busy trying to get through the session so I did not fall behind with the academic schedule I had set myself. In effect, I was being hypocritical because I was not practising what I was preaching. Traditional ways of researching were ingrained in me, resulting in a lack of willingness to acknowledge my vulnerability. Argyris (2003) asserted that people in professional positions, such as academic researchers, tend to avoid critical self-reflective learning because they do not want to appear incompetent and vulnerable. However, Fals Borda (2013) claimed that researchers build competence for participatory research when they are honest about their vulnerability and embrace critique of their actions. Transformative learning follows when we reflect on *why* we behave, feel, and think the way we do, and not merely on *what* we are doing (Mezirow, 1990). Argyris (2003) called this double-loop learning, which leads us to question our assumptions, rather than focusing on what happened, and which enables us to separate ourselves from the actual event. To remedy this, I had to embrace learning on two levels, namely, learning about being a facilitator and learning about why I had certain fears that hindered a positive and open attitude towards learning.

I changed the way I viewed feedback from my promoters as critical friends. Their feedback was not intended as personal criticism but as guidance based on their experience. I realised the crucial role a detailed planning of a session[2] plays, in that it helps the facilitator to reflect on the process and their assumptions about both the process and the participants. My critical friends helped me choose activities that would better reflect the participatory principles for knowledge created required in a CBR project.

Before engaging in a session, the facilitator needs to have clear in their mind a guiding research question for the aim of that stage of the process. Every session needs to start with a relationship-building activity, followed by a check-in to enable group reflection. The facilitator benefits from guiding questions to enable participants to share openly, and they should ideally model this first. I learnt that the session planning is not merely an administrative task; it was a learning tool where critical friends were able to coach me to improve my ability to engage in double-loop learning (Argyris, 2003).

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[2] Link to a detailed planning of a session:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/17BxPCkGV_lg6GmwkgPnFmnVD9d0pTMgg/view?usp=sharing

Although at first it was challenging to learn to accept and welcome this critique, I had to open myself to this learning because it helped me become comfortable in accepting my own learning needs.

I learnt to engage with feedback on a more reflexive level and to learn from the expertise of others. Critical reflection on our own practices leads to transformational learning (Mezirow, 1990), while keeping hidden our fears, uncertainties, and anxieties prevents deep learning (Brookfield, 2017). One of my later reflections validated this learning:

> *When I did my first session in May I did not understand why I had to submit such detailed planning of the sessions to my promoters prior to the session. I thought an outline planning is enough. I am now starting to realise that the session planning is my learning tool. It is how my promoters teach me how to be a facilitator. . . . The life-enhancing values of PALAR are starting to become part of me—care, compassion and lifelong learning. I found it difficult to be open about my shortcomings at first, but I am starting to see that I cannot move forward as a researcher if I do not acknowledge how much I still need to learn. (PRJ, 17 August 2019)*

McNiff (2013) emphasised that our worldview underpins what learning and development we foreground. Thus, to really grow as a facilitator, I had to acknowledge my shortcomings and reap the benefits of *failing forward*, as Maxwell (2000) reminds us. I learnt to accept that I was not a failure as a researcher just because I failed to recognise my own weaknesses from the start. Having understood my own shortcomings and need for learning, I was in a better position to facilitate the same in the group.

Starting Where the Group Is, and Responding to Their Needs

I was initially concerned that participants might not see the value of the project for in-service and pre-service teacher education but, rather, consider it merely a means for me to gain a qualification. Traditionally, teachers have been used as sources of knowledge by researchers, rather than being invited to coproduce knowledge with them. It was therefore not surprising that participants were unsure of their role in the project and were hesitant to participate in critical discussion. I realised I would have to find a way to shift this understanding of research as being not merely for a doctoral qualification to benefit me but as a means of improving teaching and learning in socially disadvantaged contexts that would benefit all participants and ultimately their learners.

Comments such as the following validated my concern and helped me in my quest to encourage participants to see themselves as knowledge producers:

> *In the beginning, I didn't see us being able to contribute anything besides what was already there. But as soon as we started engaging and communicating and talking, even just one word, you know, or just a short sentence, then it started, more ideas started erupting. And maybe I can also say the reason why I felt in the beginning that I personally didn't have anything to add on to the framework [project] was because it was already there. But like I said in the discussions that we had further on, is that you always allow that space for inclusion. (P2, Check-out session, 16 November 2019)*

The framework referred to was the theoretical framework that I had designed for my doctoral study. I had combined aspects of several existing theories of service learning, but it was an emerging framework, and the aim was that our project group should develop it to formulate guidelines for service learning. However, I realised that by sharing the visual of the framework in the first session, I had intimidated the members of the group rather than encouraging them to participate. On reflection,

I used this framework because I wanted to show the group that I was knowledgeable - stemming from my anxiety about working with such a diverse group. As a young white female academic, I was not sure how the black male school principal would regard me, and I was keen to show that I was knowledgeable about the topic under discussion. By presenting a "finished" work, I prevented the participants from drawing on their own considerable experience and local knowledge of the challenges they face in teaching, and ideas of how they could begin to address some of these challenges through engaging with pre-service students doing service learning. From this experience, I learnt to not foreground my own knowledge and ideas but, rather, to let them emerge as part of the group discussion along with ideas from every other participant. As a participant in the project, I was fully entitled to share these ideas with others but, by presenting them from the outset as the theoretical framework, I inhibited interaction rather than facilitate it.

The choice of venue and time was also not ideal for encouraging full participation. We had agreed to meet at the school after teaching ended so that the teachers would not have to travel. However, staying at their place of work hampered their ability to disengage from the stresses of the day. It also put me under pressure because I had to rush to the sessions after my lecturing duties. On sharing this concern with my critical friends, they advised me to ask the group if they would prefer a whole-day breakaway at a neutral venue—so the participants could have more time to engage, with limited distractions, and to enable them to relax and give their full attention to our discussions.

I chose a scenic riverside venue for the full-day session. The neutral location and relaxing environment away from the school and our normal day-to-day tasks brought a new dimension to the discussions, as is evident from the comments shared after the first session:

> *P2: I think we had quite a very relaxed day. No one is tired, even though we came up early in the morning. So, if we have any opportunity of any Saturday, I think that is best.*
>
> *P8: So, I will ask everyone to indicate on the WhatsApp group which Saturday they are available. [Silence for 6 seconds]. Do you want to come to an environment like this again?*
>
> *P2: Yeah! [followed by excited laughter from the group].*
>
> *P3: I like this. It's different. And what we are doing is different.*
>
> *P6: This is calm. (Check-out session, 17 August 2019)*

I also included an affirmation exercise (see Wood, 2020a, p. 73, for example) to acknowledge the knowledge, skills, and values participants contributed to the project. This was done to help the participants see themselves as coconstructors of knowledge, and to recognise the value each brought to the project irrespective of their position outside the group. Tandon et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of recognition of the participants' knowledge in CBR to encourage democratic engagement. Martin (1981) stressed that researchers should be heedful of the power they deliberately exercise. Thus, I had to be mindful of how my facilitation affected the dialogue in our sessions, and how I was affirming the contributions of the group members. I believe I was successful in helping participants feel they were making an important contribution, based on the following excerpt:

> *It made me feel worthy to feel that I can actually accomplish something, or that I am in the process of helping a system to become better. (P4, Reflection, 16 November 2019)*

During our final reflection session, I asked participants how they had experienced our way of learning and collaborating, and P2 shared the following:

> *It has made me realise that even a little I can contribute—it's valuable. So, sometimes one is seated there, pregnant of ideas, but not being able to deliver. So this has made me realise that I can deliver. . . . So one has a lot of ideas, but one does not know how to disseminate or cascade this or share this, but by engaging in the group it has put me at another level in terms of sharing ideas. (P2, Check-out session, 16 November 2019)*

I noticed that the group started to participate more critically when they eventually realised that it was their contributions on how we could create a socially just education system that would become the guidelines for teacher education. This, in turn, enhanced commitment. Burns and Worsley (2015) explained that increased participation occurs when participants become aware that their involvement in the project becomes the product of the research. During our last session, we reflected on how we felt about our newly cogenerated knowledge, and P2 shared the following:

> *As a school principal, I'll be proud if students come to my school and practise what I was a designer of. It will be so amazing, because I will even be able to guide them. You know, not everybody will have this opportunity. (P2, Group reflection, 16 November 2019)*

This reflection indicates a deeper awareness that participants' contributions would enable them to feel more confident and knowledgeable in their future practice when students come to do service learning. They now realised they could design programmes rather than just be recipients of the university "service." Commitment to, and ownership of, the project was thus enhanced once I provided the opportunity for them to identify and implement the knowledge, values, and skills they had contributed to the group.

Learning To Equalise Power Relations To Enhance Participation

At the start of the project, I was not mindful of the way my approach (namely, sharing my theoretical framework) could be experienced by some participants as exclusive, and that it might have been experienced as reflective of a position of authority, or even superiority, on my part. All participants should be able to communicate with each other as equals (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018), and I had to learn how to facilitate this and be mindful of power relations that might jeopardise symmetrical and inclusive communication.

During the first two sessions, the discussions were dominated by the principal and me. I only realised this when reading the transcript later. The privilege and power incurred by our positions as leaders unintentionally influenced the group dynamic, even though my planning was aimed at preventing this. I learnt that planning must be accompanied by critical self-reflection on how I might influence the group through my decisions as to how I introduce a topic, the instructions I give for engaging, and so forth. I wrote the following in my journal:

> *The principal invited another principal (and departmental official) to the session, and I was a little concerned, because a lot of the discussion came from these two participants and myself, although the other participants later started sharing more as well. . . . I should draw the participants in by asking questions that will enable everyone to join in the discussion, not only the natural leaders, though I was guilty of this myself. (PRJ, 29 May 2019)*

Burns and Worsley (2015) cautioned that we should not identify research as participative simply because a few people are actively sharing; they maintained that truly participative research should meaningfully engage all the participants. I admitted to myself that I had been blaming the group members for their lack of participation, attributing it to "shyness" or "lack of knowledge," rather than

accepting my responsibility to create a safe and welcoming communicative space. Communicative spaces are "social contexts [that] may be thought of as spaces where people communicate and via the communication develop certain perspectives upon the world" (Roxå, 2002, p. 575). Teachers are used to transmitting knowledge, expecting learners to listen and agree with everything they say. It is thus not surprising that they transferred this perspective to our situation where they saw themselves as the learners, and the principal, the departmental official, and me as the experts. Although asymmetrical communication is not uncommon in traditional approaches to research (Bergmark, 2020), it is, of course, the antithesis of what PALAR and other forms of CBR espouse.

To counter the lack of engagement, I asked each participant to take the lead in an aspect of the reflection. At the start of one session, I recapped what we had discussed in the previous session and asked the participants to respond to and lead the discussion on that particular aspect. This enabled individuals to add to and elaborate on, for example, the fears we shared about teaching in a system fraught with injustices. The following excerpt from my journal explains this strategy to improve the level of participant engagement:

> *Instead of just reading the summary of the session aloud, I asked all the participants to take charge of a section. . . . The participants shared their views on what they read, like a group reflection activity. (PRJ, 17 August 2019)*

Recognising how the group's participation increased through this sort of activity, I was encouraged to introduce more activities. I made use of arts-based research activities such as photovoice, making collages, and constructing a group poem,[3] to share their knowledge and experience of how they envisaged social justice praxis for teacher education, and how we could create a critical service-learning programme for teacher education programmes. I adopted this strategy because arts-based research activities increase critical thinking and capture the narrative of participants more accurately; the creative demand enables participants who might have felt too intimidated to reflect verbally to express themselves better (Leavy, 2020). Arts-based methods are not only used to generate data but also as artefacts to generate discussion leading to collaborative knowledge production (Mitchell et al., 2017). Through our collaborative engagements in our ALG, we could draw on each other's expertise and create a space where we could cascade our ideas:

> *Your approach and the manner in which you engaged with the team was very inclusive. There was no point where I felt a bit excluded or I feel like this is A's study and she's taking control of everything that has been generated. The fact that I was part of generating the guidelines, which was a very big part of the goal of the study, is also a very, you know . . . it's something to be proud of. (P4, Check-out session, 16 November 2019)*

Another strategy I thought would be suitable to mitigate possible power relations was to encourage the group to address each other by their first names. I asked the participants how they would like to address each other, which immediately caused discomfort as the following dialogue from our ethical agreement discussion illustrates:

> *P8: What about titles, or how we address one another? Are we on a first-name basis?*
>
> *[Uncomfortable laugh from pre-service teachers]*

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[3] Link to arts-based data:
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Y5Ae84VnxY9H2ROGPjkNt7tJJ80LZQCe/view?usp=sharing

P2: [Clears throat] Come again?

P8: Is it OK if we call one another by our first name? I know that the students might be uncomfortable with that, as they know me by my surname . . .

P2: You know, for some of them [teacher participants] it will be wrong in their culture to call me by my name. They call me Sir. (Negotiating ethical agreement, 29 May 2019)

The apparent uneasiness indicated that participative and democratic forms of research were new to the group, especially departure from accustomed hierarchical social structures. I realised that I should not cause more discomfort, or impinge on the cultural beliefs of the participants, and so we agreed to address each other in whatever way we felt most comfortable. I again learnt the importance of checking in with the group before making changes, given that the diverse perspectives of the participants should inform how project groups are maintained (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Facilitating a group is a difficult process and it was made even more so by the multiple roles I had to juggle.

Wearing Multiple Hats: Communicating as Facilitator, Researcher and Participant

To grow as a facilitator of PALAR meant that I had to be aware of how my biases, privileges, and personal goals for the project were influencing the participants (Coghlan, 2013). I was concerned that I might unduly influence the group if I provided a one-sided account of what my intentions for the project were. This fear caused me to withhold crucial information during the initial start-up session in which I introduced the project. I planned activities such as relationship building and setting up an ethical agreement, but I neglected to engage the group in setting a clear vision and purpose from the outset. I did not brief group members on a very important step in the PALAR process, namely, crafting a collaborative vision from which the group could extrapolate their goals, rather than assuming that the research questions I had for my doctorate would guide the project. Thus, I lost a good opportunity to build ownership and commitment among the group members. During one of our final reflection sessions, I asked the group how they thought we could have engaged differently from the start of our project. One participant shared the following:

So, if it can be explained before and then maybe generate that enthusiasm, sometimes people . . . we get scared by just a topic there. And we started to say that "Now what about that? What is it I'm going to do? I know nothing about it." But if we have a little bit background of your intentions, then maybe people will be more willing to participate. (P2, Group reflection, 16 November 2019)

I learnt that I needed to ask more critical questions and allow time for thinking, reflection, and discussion before moving to the next research activity. I was expecting the participants to critically reflect on our project without me being critically reflective myself (Brookfield, 2017), or facilitating a critical discussion. After the second session, I wrote this in my journal:

I learnt that I should draw the participants in by asking questions that will enable everyone to join in the discussion, and guiding the conversation so that everyone gets a fair chance to contribute. (PRJ, 29 May 2019)

Researchers in CBR projects need to become skilful facilitators (Tandon et al., 2016), and they need to continue to develop their skills. Through reflection after action, I did learn to be a more active listener and to pose critical questions to deepen thinking. I also learnt to know when to act as facilitator and when to participate more and let others lead—this only came with time, practice, reflection, and hindsight. What I realise now is that during fieldwork, the academic project should be put aside—otherwise the researcher's needs tend to dominate rather than the project being guided by the

participants at their pace. However, painful as it is to admit my many mistakes to the wider academic community in this article, the lessons I learnt in this section helped me to develop guidelines for novice facilitators, which I discuss in the following section.

Guidelines for Novice Facilitators: Presenting My Claims to Knowledge

As a novice facilitator in a CBR project, I realised that my lack of competence in facilitating participatory research was actually an ethical issue (Wood, 2017). Before ethical clearance is granted, researchers must prove their competence by undergoing ethical training. However, such training does not equip them to facilitate participatory research where they cannot make ethical decisions without the input of the participants. And the participants will not feel free to make such input unless the facilitator takes the time to build a safe communicative space, which requires a certain degree of skill. However, I did learn from experience, and I share that experiential knowledge in this section. The lessons I learnt, supported by evidence from the data I presented, are listed below in the form of guidelines to enhance the capacity of novice facilitators of community-based research groups, which they may adapt to suit their own context:

- Good facilitation requires a commitment to critical self-reflection after each session on how you are influencing the working of the ALG. Immediately after each session, write or make a voice recording of your observations and actions during the session, and analyse your reflection against the foundational principles of CBR.

- Be honest about your experiences, even if you are learning things that are painful to admit. Growth only happens when you move beyond your comfort zone and become aware of your own biases and learning needs. Share your reflections with critical friends, and be open to their feedback. See it as an opportunity to learn from fellow academics in your field.

- Use detailed planning for each session informed by the transcripts, videos, and reflections from the previous session. Focus especially on the connections between group members, and how you can deepen these relationships. Critical self-reflection on your planning before and after sessions can help you anticipate potential barriers and plan to prevent them.

- Work at the pace of the group and focus on the joint vision. If you focus on the academic product (your qualification), you will panic and push the group too quickly, and all will lose out on the benefits of action learning. This can also jeopardise the ethicality of your project.

- Recognise your power and the privilege it brings. For many participants, this might be the first time they have been expected to participate in research with academics rather than being researched by them. How skilfully you facilitate will influence how they respond in terms of commitment and participation. Create opportunities for participants to take leadership so that you can gradually reduce your role as facilitator—to enhance sustainability of the project once you withdraw.

Inexperienced facilitators can use, adapt, and add to these guidelines as they continue to build competence to conduct ethical CBR. I offer them in the knowledge that, through sharing my experiences, I can help novice researchers to more ethically facilitate CBR projects.

Conclusion

In this paper, I shared lessons learnt from facilitating a CBR project. This practitioner self-inquiry helped me to create a "living theory" (Whitehead, 1989, p. 41) informed by reflection and action (McNiff, 2013). Critical reflection on the learning processes and experiences of this study enabled me to learn how to improve as a facilitator of CBR, and thus become a more ethical researcher, by ensuring that I live out, as well as enable, the foundational principles of participatory research. Robles Lomedi and Rappaport (2018, p. 606) warned that "if grassroots and external intellectuals do not understand the dynamics of this collaborative exercise, the transfer of authority that these methodologies advocate cannot take place." And these dynamics depend on skilful facilitation of the group process. I believe these guidelines can help other researchers who do CBR to contribute to a more socially just society by enabling authentic participation by those most affected by the pressing educational and social issues that we seek to address.

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