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Shifting Gears: Lessons Learnt From Critical, Collaborative, Self-Reflection on Community-Based Research¹

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Abstract

This article reflects the learning of five researchers in higher education in South Africa who took part in a participatory action research project to educate teachers how to integrate climate change issues into their teaching and learning. It was the first time any of the researchers had used participatory action research. We are all from natural science backgrounds and now involved in education for sustainable development. We had been trained in more traditional, objective, and researcher-driven methodologies grounded in a positivist paradigm. The purpose of this article is to share our learning about the changes we had to make in our thinking and practices to align with a participatory paradigm. We used reflective diaries to record our journey through the action research cycles. A thematic analysis

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of our diaries was supplemented by recorded discussions between the researchers. The analysis revealed that, while it was challenging to begin thinking in a different paradigm, we came to appreciate the value of the action research process that enabled teachers to integrate climate change issues into their teaching in a participatory way. We also concluded that we require more development to be able to conduct participatory research in a manner true to its values and principles. The conclusions we came to through our collaborative reflections may be of value to other researchers from similar scientific backgrounds who wish to learn what shifts in paradigm, methods, and processes are needed to be able to conduct community-based research in a participatory way.

Keywords: action research approach, climate change, community engagement, higher education, research challenges

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Introduction

This article shares the learning experiences and challenges of five researchers in higher education in South Africa. The research team took part in a participatory action research (PAR) project to educate teachers how to integrate climate change issues into their teaching and learning for Grade 7 learners. It was the first time that any of us had conducted participatory research. We are all from a natural sciences background and are now involved in education for sustainable development (ESD). We had made a slight shift from a purely positivist paradigm towards objective qualitative methodologies but had not progressed to feeling comfortable with anything less than a mixed-methods design. We were used to researching *on* teachers, where we decided on the research focus and questions and analysed the data without any input from them. We were unaware that we could work *with* teachers and community members not only to attain theoretical insights, but also to bring about real change in their practices or circumstances. When we were invited to work on an international action research project, we soon realised that a paradigm shift was needed.

The shift from a researcher-dominant mode of enquiry to PAR is not easy. We were used to laying down our scholastic proposition, reporting prerequisites, and determining the time permitted for the completion of the study. A participatory paradigm requires a movement away from this rigidity towards a more collaborative and relational process (Kearney et al., 2013). Participatory researchers are required to critically reflect on the process as it unfolds to ensure that collaboration between community members and researchers is in line with the foundational principles of community-based research (CBR) (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Community members often expect academic researchers to lead the research process because of their perceptions of personal incompetence and lack of knowledge. Changing these perceptions is an important part of the research given that CBR has educational and emancipatory outcomes (Wood, 2020). The CBR process entails the participation of both researchers and participants to determine the objectives, questions, and methodology (Campos et al., 2016). This is not something we had been used to when operating from positivist or interpretive paradigms where objectivity is key (Eyisi, 2016).

Having been trained in more traditional, objective, and researcher-driven methodologies, we felt out of our depth. As researchers, we felt that we could compare ourselves to a taxi driver on a journey. Our journey was always to a destination (project aim) that we predetermined. As the taxi driver (researcher), we focused on the numbers of passengers (research subjects) in our vehicle. Now, we began to focus on who was in the taxi (qualitative)—a young teacher or community member. We began to learn the names of our passengers. We realised that we could listen to their life stories and learn from their experiences on our journey. We could welcome all our passengers on board and we could ensure that the taxi ran smoothly (develop a relationship). We could ensure that we travelled safely by keeping to the speed limit (act ethically) so we could all arrive at a negotiated destination together. The paradigmatic changes we had to make were significant. All the research team members had to learn to shift gears to cope with the turns and twists of the road—as needed in an emergent design. We could no longer just put the taxi into “drive” and cruise along a pre-mapped path. We had to learn to appreciate the knowledge brought by the participants in a social context and establish trusting relationships with them (Eyisi, 2016). Because PAR has a social justice intent (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015a), we found ourselves having to learn about social and environmental rights and injustices in a specific context and draw on local knowledge to address them, rather than just theoretically integrating environmental education for sustainable development (ESD) into various subjects.

We began to read up on participatory action learning and research in ESD. The engagement of universities worldwide in sustainability has increased (Aleixo et al., 2016) and ESD emerged from the need for education to address growing sustainability challenges (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). This responsibility was initiated in 2014 by the Nagoya Declaration (UNESCO, 2014). Momentum grew when the UN Decade on ESD (2005–2014) and the Global Action Programme on ESD (2015–2019) were implemented. The newest framework, ESD for 2030, aimed to reorient and strengthen education and learning to contribute to all activities that promote sustainable development (UNESCO, 2020). ESD for 2030 placed a stronger focus on education’s central contribution to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). ESD for 2030 directly contributes to SDG 4 on quality and inclusive education, and it makes use of “action-oriented, innovative pedagogy to enable learners to develop knowledge and awareness and take action to transform society into a more sustainable one” (UNESCO, 2020, p. III). We agree that participatory research can help develop holistic understandings of sustainable practices as well as provide possibilities of empowerment, policy mobilisation, ways for cooperation, and partnerships (Giatti, 2019) that can assist to transform a community through action.

Universities as research institutions were called to play a key role in thematic research related to ESD and the SDGs (UNESCO, 2020). The “climate change in communities” research topic was important to us and we read how the participatory research approach represents an avenue to deal with contemporary and urgent demands for a fairer and more sustainable relationship between science and society (Giatti, 2019). Universities are the key to healthier, greener, and fairer societies. The role of universities in climate change and sustainable development cannot be achieved without universities’ contribution to, and integration between, research, teaching, public awareness, and community engagement (Henderson et al., 2017; Liu & Kitamura, 2019) including the 17 SDGs (Association of Commonwealth Universities [ACU], 2021). As a research team, we decided to undertake climate change research within a community because climate change is widely regarded as being one of the biggest challenges of our time. Universities across the commonwealth have prioritised action on climate change and enhancing universities’ contribution to the resilience of communities for sustainability (ACU, 2021).

To help us make the paradigm shift towards a more participatory philosophy, we decided to reflect on the following question: “What are the challenges facing us as academic researchers who are taking

part in a participatory action research project for the first time?” The article focuses on our reflections on learning to work in a participatory paradigm. We aim to create knowledge based on a critical reflection on our experiences (Kolb, 1984). And we hope this knowledge will be useful to other researchers struggling to make the paradigm shift towards the participatory philosophical assumptions necessary to conduct authentic CBR.

Next, we present a short overview of the climate change project followed by the theoretical underpinnings, methodology, and a discussion of the four themes that emerged from our reflective learning. We end with a discussion of the implications of our learning for future practice.

Background to the Participatory Climate Change Project

In this section, we briefly describe the PAR project we were involved in and the principles of PAR we had to learn to embody in our interaction with participants—in order to explain how we had to change our thinking about research. In the past, we would have gone to a community and gathered data from teachers to make claims about the challenges they faced, and recommendations on how to overcome them. However, this project was grounded in a PAR approach and so we had to change our tactics to be able to work with teachers to improve their teaching of ESD, and with community members to help them realise their potential as climate activists in their own community. The project involved Grade 7 teachers and community members working together to identify and understand a local community-based problematic situation related to climate change. In this project, the focus was on facilitating teachers to mobilise learners as citizen scientists to investigate the effects of climate change on the community with the help of community members. Together, through curriculum integration of ESD, teachers and community members involved learners in taking action to address the identified issues. The project took place at three different research sites some distance apart.

PAR strives to frame an approach of knowledge generation that is both collaborative and focused on achieving positive social change (Brydon-Miller et al., 2020). The approach is based on reflection, data gathering, and analysis—and action that aims to change communities and reduce community problems through involving the people in the community who are affected by the problem (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015b). This meant working with the teachers and community members to determine the research objectives, questions, and methodology (Campos et al., 2016). The participatory methodology was aimed at promoting a democratic approach to creating knowledge to address the climate change problems of that specific community. The teachers and community members had to develop an awareness of their situation before they could take ownership and appropriate action to continue on their own. Our role was to encourage and support these participants in professional learning communities. Support and engagement from researchers can enhance participant well-being by building professional identity, leadership, and agency (Rubagiza et al., 2016). Participants’ knowledge is valued, and their self-confidence is enhanced through the new knowledge they gain, opening their minds to new possibilities (Tandon et al., 2016). A drawing exercise was used to enable the teachers and community members to generate ideas about an environmental problem in the community, organise their ideas, opinions, and issues into meaningful themes, and communicate these in a simple and powerful representation. The drawing exercise and presentation led to very interesting discussions regarding the real climate issues facing the school and the community. A variety of environmental issues such as litter, water insecurity, live electric wires put up by squatters, sewage pipes blocked with paper, hunger, and crime were mentioned. It was also mentioned that a frustrated community group had burnt down a local clinic because it was not providing quality service. Collaborative knowledge production with others through the PAR process produces critical interpretations that are accessible and understandable to all those involved (Chatterton et al., 2007). This approach to research was not one we had used before and we realised the need to critically reflect on our own thinking, feelings, and behaviour in this project so that we could improve our practice.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory guided our thinking about PAR. Our experience has afforded us a space to create knowledge through reflection (Wood, 2020). Reflective practice is a specialised cyclical form of thinking that forms part of action research (Finlay, 2008). This article leans on Kolb's experiential learning theory as the cornerstone of participatory forms of research given that it encompasses interactive cycles of reflection and action (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015b). The theory proceeds from the epistemological assumption that knowledge can be created through reflecting on the experience. The experience can be tested, creating a new experience, followed by a cycle of experiential learning and knowledge creation (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's experiential learning theory is a well-known education theory and, as he explained, "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (1984, p. 38). The theory suggests that learning is cyclical, involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's four-stage model takes us through the learning cycle and shows how experience is shared through reflection to create learning that can then be tested in real-life situations. Kolb emphasised reflection in experience-based learning. By reflecting on our experiences as researchers, we can learn and, through sharing this learning, alert others not to make same mistakes. In our reflections, we did not ignore our deficiencies but focused on our strengths to overcome them. By sharing our experiences and challenges in doing PAR, we contribute to the theory of engaged scholarship (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015b). Our existing strengths as researchers included, for example, our analytical minds, academic discourse skills, and ability to conduct research. Now we had to use these strengths in a new paradigm where our knowledge was no longer the only valid knowledge. We had to learn to combine our research knowledge with the knowledge of the participants—in this case, teachers and community members. We had to sharpen our strengths to become careful listeners free from prejudice. We had to think about and explain our thoughts and feelings in our reflections on a regular basis (Wood, 2020). We now discuss the methodology we used to make sense of our reflections.

Methodology

We adopted a critical, collaborative self-study methodology (O'Dwyer et al., 2019) to reflect on our experiences. Our collaboration aimed to understand the present through our past experiences, a research method that evolves from personal experiences (Tidwell et al., 2009). The roadmap for our journey can be described as a practice of focused and systematic recording and reflection, guided by our research question.

Two female and three male researchers from the same institution of higher education were involved in this research. We generated the data for this article through reflecting on our experiences immediately after each session during the road trip back to campus. We also later recorded our own experiences in a reflective diary. Keeping a reflection diary in such a systematic manner offers the advantage of learning from experience (Kolb, 1984). The reflective diaries were analysed using coding-to-theory as described by Saldana (2016). Coding identified short phrases from the data to create categories that we then grouped into themes to obtain a better understanding of the data. The codes and analysis of the data in this study were verified by an independent researcher to ensure trustworthiness and content validity. Ethics clearance for this research study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the respective university, attesting that it met their stringent ethical requirements (NWU-00483-17-A2).

Discussion of Themes

Four themes were derived from the data: (1) Need for capacity building in participatory designs, (2) The importance of building supportive relationships, (3) The importance of collaboration to bring about change through education, (4) Disrupting our assumptions of PAR. We will discuss some of our experiences and challenges below, using the code of Rn to designate the different researchers.

Theme 1: Need for Capacity Building in Participatory Designs

As novice researchers in PAR, we felt insecure. We thought we needed more information regarding action research and PAR. We wanted some form of training about action research and PAR so that we could “develop the skill to involve all the participants” (R3).

I really feel incompetent and need to find out more of what action research entails. In order to conduct the research correctly, I need to read more about action research and participatory action research. (R4)

I feel that I need to read more about action research and participatory action research to fully understand how to conduct the research correctly. (R2)

Owing to the rigid positivist paradigm we had worked in previously, we needed to have control to “document the steps of the research [process] correctly” (R3). We learnt we had to change our ideas about what is correct, and stop thinking in a linear way. We are now more open to change and have also realised that change takes time. At first, we did not record our reflections in enough depth but now we record our reflections immediately after sessions to capture the deeper nuances and reflections on what we have learnt.

On our way back from the workshops, we reflected about the discussions and talked with each other about our experiences. I wish we could have recorded those discussions— many of the things we said on those trips, I sadly forgot. But I still remember that we had different viewpoints. (R4)

We realised the importance of participant involvement, but we still felt unsure of “how to involve participants,” “how to document information,” and how “to communicate with participants” (R1). In some instances, we knew that participants saw us as experts, but we felt insecure and vulnerable due to our lack of experience in working in a participatory way. This made us realise that participants also might feel vulnerable, which helped us to empathise with their possible insecurity in the research partnership. We understand our reflective practice to be the kind of knowing that Schön referred to when he said, “The inquirer does not stand outside the situation like a spectator; he is in it and in transaction with it” (1992, p. 122).

Taking the above reflections into account, we realised that, as researchers, we needed to change our way of thinking and our practices to align them with a participatory paradigm; the PAR approach had opened our minds to new possibilities. We learnt to spend more time with teachers and community members and to first build a relationship before starting the actual research. In this way we can deal with our mutual insecurities and learning needs, and negotiate an understanding of how we wish to progress and what we each want to achieve from the partnership. Participatory research strives to understand and improve the world through collective action. Central to participatory research is collective, self-reflective inquiry that academic researchers and community members undertake so they can understand and improve on the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves. Reflective processes are directly linked to action and embedded in social

relationships (Baum et al., 2006). Our experience was that the engagement with the participants and the relationships formed in this research paradigm helped us to learn how to “shift gears” from a researcher-driven approach to engagement towards a more participatory partnership. However, this change also brought “bumps in the road” that we had to learn to navigate.

Theme 2: The Importance of Building Supportive Relationships

As researchers, we experienced numerous challenges. Our relationship with the teachers and community members suffered because we did not meet often enough. In terms of travelling time, the three research sites were situated over 100 km away from our campus.

To really become involved, we have to see each other more often. Then we can become really engaged with each other and assist where necessary. (R4)

For the project to be effective there must be more opportunities for the participants to meet and exchange ideas on a regular basis and to identify the major issues and solutions. This did not happen, and I therefore see it as a major challenge. (R3)

We realised that we did not schedule enough sessions with teachers and community members for feedback and reflection. We only met them formally on two occasions and then communicated via WhatsApp. In hindsight, we realise we cannot plan for limited contact and expect maximum feedback. In the participatory paradigm, relationship is important (Wood, 2020). There was not enough time in our initial project planning to build up the relationships central to CBR. We realise now that we needed to have monthly sessions at least. Given that participants develop and learn in relationship (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003), the two sessions were not enough to build relationships; and our busy schedules, and lack of planning to meet regularly with the teachers and community members resulted in “*not enough communication between the participants*” (R3) and the researchers. Communication is viewed as a building block for shaping trusting relationships that are crucial for participatory processes (Kearney et al., 2013; Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).

Teacher availability, or lack of it, was a major challenge in our efforts to communicate with participants.

To contact them [teachers] via WhatsApp and they do not respond is also very frustrating. (R4)

Our initial understanding of working within a participatory paradigm was that of accommodation, rather than authentic participation. We made sure that we expressed eagerness to assist teachers by providing them with resources and climate data that they might need for lessons. The teachers had informed us that they did not want to take on extra work. From the start, we made it clear that we were there to help with ideas and information on how to integrate ESD into the curriculum—rather than negotiating our role in the process as we should have done. It was surprising for us to experience a greater commitment from the community members regarding the environmental issue identified. We have learnt that if we had engaged more with the teachers around their concerns of work pressure, and how they saw their role in the project, and what outcomes they wanted to reach, we could have had established a more positive rapport and developed shared goals.

The fact that the teachers did not contact us for assistance was frustrating. I feel that we made ourselves available for assistance and offered help, but the only ones who were interested were the community members. They had good ideas, but they could not materialise without the initiative of the teachers. (R2)

For good communication it is also necessary that there must be a champion at the school that can drive the project. With personnel changes and shifting of responsibilities at the schools this presented a challenge. (R3)

What we learnt is that teachers continue to feel stressed by the challenges inherent in teaching (Wood, 2015). We agree that it is understandable that teachers are reluctant to take part in research that they perceive as more work and added stress. We have realised that we were thinking outside of the participatory paradigm by still assuming the role of expert who expected participants to fit into our schedules, and call us—rather than taking the initiative ourselves to find out how they were progressing. What we learnt is that we need to spend more time on relationship building and collaborative project planning to enhance positive participant commitment (Wood, 2015). Our job is to create a platform for the teachers and community members to learn how to address their own problems through cycles of action and reflection. To this end, we need to organise regular and structured meetings where we model iterative cycles of reflection and action and facilitate learning about how to bring about change. It makes sense to work with schools closer to our campus so that we can realistically develop the kind of relationship that celebrates and embraces the knowledge, language, and culture of participants (Brydon-Miller et al., 2020) and guides them slowly to learn how to take social action.

Theme 3: The Importance of Collaboration To Bring About Change Through Education

The participatory and empowering nature of PAR provided an ideal vehicle for us to address the real local environmental issues that are relevant to the community in this project. It increased the relevance and appropriateness of the project design and contributed to a better quality of data. The PAR approach is consistent with the holistic, ecological worldview of ESD that looks more to process than the product, recognises the systemic view of change, and therefore allows for the more sustainable transformational process (Kioupi & Voulvoulis, 2019) that is the aim of ESD.

We realised that undertaking a community-based project brings collegiality into play. It also means that we should start to work with a community in a way in which we minimise power relations and strive to equally share ideas, learn from one another, and share responsibility for social change in the community. We university researchers also started to work together as a research team in a community of practice, learning to dialogue about our learning; this was something we had never done before in our traditional objective forms of enquiry.

I realised [that] to make a real difference in a community it is necessary to draw upon their experience and expertise. (R3)

Yes, I definitely believe so. To work together, as researchers, can help communities to make a difference and bring about change. It helps communities to stand up and make a difference themselves. Researchers are only the agents to help teachers to see what they can do themselves. (R4)

A team of local community members will always outperform an individual or a team from the university. I therefore do feel that a community engagement research activity is viable. (R3)

It shows that one cannot work in isolation, but that we need to realise that we have a role to play and we can use each other's strengths to make a difference and bring about change. (R2)

Taking part in a PAR project taught us that building trust in a relationship with the teachers and community members is central for its success. Participation in PAR establishes a positive learning environment and enables authentic learning through which connections can be made among concepts and across disciplinary lines. Even in the far-from-ideal relationship in this project, we learned to appreciate the diversity of value systems present in the discussions, and the research project benefitted from the wider participation of the teachers and community members. PAR is a cyclical and interactive reflective practice form of thinking (Finlay, 2008) that aims to build partnerships and maintain community trust (Christopher et al., 2008). It requires circular, rather than linear, thinking and presents a framework from which phenomena can be investigated from a broader perspective. This premise is the antitheses of the prevalent reductionist thinking (Toews et al., 2008) that had previously been our method of thinking. We realised that taking part in PAR was a rich and meaningful experience for us too. The participatory worldview of PAR is grounded in a collaborative partnership that uses cycles to develop and maintain partnerships and requires long-term commitment from all involved (Holkup et al., 2004) as we join in a collaborative form of inquiry. PAR is based in community participation—working with the community rather than on them (Ibhakewanlan & McGrath, 2015). Our newly found skill of reflection enriched our experience as researchers and made us realise that our journey of learning is not finite but unending. We no longer regard ourselves as experts with nothing to learn about research—collaborative reflection has taught us that we can always improve our practice.

We assumed that most of the teachers were involved in the community and community issues like climate change and environmental education as part of their community role. However, the teachers were not doing this. There may be many reasons for this but, due to high workloads experienced by teachers, we have learnt that we need to take the initiative to communicate with them about their support needs. In the past, we would just have explained theoretically how to integrate ESD into the curriculum. However, in the participatory paradigm the focus is not on the curriculum, it is on working as a team for social change towards a sustainable environmental future.

I believe the teachers are all aware of the seriousness of climate change and the effect thereof. We still need to encourage teachers and keep them motivated to make a difference in their classroom. Perhaps they are so overloaded with the syllabus content that they do not have capacity to add our activity as well. (R4)

We encouraged teachers to take action, but we should have done more to support them in this. PAR is grounded in the principles of collaboration, support, and empathy (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015b). This is something we have to work on in this project going forward. Another consideration is that, rather than approaching a school with a request for teachers to collaborate with us, we should take time to get to know the school community and let the research focus emerge from our discussions—let the community take the driver’s seat, rather than us deciding on destination and route.

Theme 4: Disrupting Our Assumptions of Participatory Action Research

For us as researchers new to PAR, this first experience was a huge learning curve. The first session was facilitated by a colleague versed in PAR and watching her in action left us feeling as if we had just crashed the taxi! She modelled how to give participants a voice and valued their contributions—something we had never thought of doing before in our research. This evoked various emotions.

I am used to quick interventions and immediate output. My experience of action research was “why is this moving so slowly.” After the first workshop, I realised that this type of research is not rushed. It was an eye opener to realise that we are dealing here with a new way of doing research. Actually, it felt like research was humanised because we are dealing

with engagement and a deep understanding of people, their situations, actions, circumstances and challenges. It was humbling to realise that participants have a story, a voice and I can learn so much from them. It made me realise that there is so much to understand about other communities and other people's situations that changed my outlook on how I think and react towards other situations. (R2)

Owing to our positivist past, we even called our first meeting with our teachers and community members a workshop. Workshop is a term the teachers were also accustomed to, but it does hold certain connotations that are not in line with PAR, such as one person being in control and teaching the others. We have now decided to refer to sessions, or seminars, which indicates a more dialogical space. We learnt that in CBR, the humanising pedagogy of Freire is a more appropriate approach to take. Freire (as explained by Lyons et al., 2013) taught us that the basis for all educational action should be real love and concern for the dignity of others. Freire's critical pedagogy taught us to be more conscious of the experiences of others, to believe that a better future can be achieved, and that education plays a critical role in the pursuit of social justice so that social change can be achieved (Ross, 2019).

We realised that our future interactions had to change in pace and focus, and that all members of the PAR project had to be given a voice, rather than us dominating the discussions.

At first, action research was a new way or type of research for me. But as time passed, I realised that we (researchers and all participants) must be in a relaxed mood. A positive aspect regarding this action research project was that participants came to their own conclusions over many encounters and hopefully take responsibility for their actions. What I learnt was that I, as researcher, must also become engaged and share my views. In the past, it was normally a one-way of data generation. Action research for me means that the community identify their own problems and seek for solutions. My role is to encourage them to share their feelings and also motivate them to elaborate on their own circumstances/situations. This is the best way to change community's attitudes and to realise they have the answers within themselves, or then with the help of stakeholders (community leaders, principal etc.) they can come to a solution. (R4)

We learnt more about our responsibility in the research and the need to engage authentically with participants during discussions. We learnt to sit with a group and become part of the group discussion. In this way, we can build a close relationship with the teachers and community members by sharing our own experiences. We also learnt to make place for reflection on both research process and goals before and after each session (Zuber-Skerritt et al., 2015a).

The Implications of Our Learning for Future Practice

As researchers, we embarked on a journey towards a more participatory paradigm. Critical reflection will now be at the core of our practice and we will do this immediately after each session. We started from the premise that, as participatory researchers, our role was only to present information, offer assistance, and encourage teachers and community members to take action. However, we now realise that we are integral to the process and that our relationship with our coresearchers is central for the attainment of sustainable change. Although we have expertise in the subject matter and research, we also need to learn how to share this without dominating the interaction. To do this, we need to enable the participants to recognise the value of their own contributions to the process. Thus, going forward, we will ensure that we first engage with prospective participants to build trust and enhance their feelings of competence and self-confidence before embarking on actual research. By organising more

sessions and providing more support in between, we can enhance participatory and democratic processes.

We have realised that members of lay communities are not familiar with the academic language used by researchers and we have to make an effort to avoid such “academic speak.” Added to the mix is that we are Afrikaans native speakers, while the participants had Setswana as a first language. The fact that none of us was speaking our mother tongue (English was the common language) made it more difficult to express ourselves. Language can be a stumbling block to communication vital for shaping trusting relationships in PAR (Wood & McAteer, 2017), and we will have to learn how to minimise this in future to create what Brydon-Miller et al. (2020) called a free space designed to reflect and celebrate the language and culture of the participants to honour indigenous forms of knowledge, and to acknowledge the deep connections between language and different ways of knowing.

Conclusion

This article aimed to share the reflective learning of five researchers in higher education on their facilitation of a PAR project. Our collaborative reflections alerted us to the challenges and resultant changes we must make in our thinking and practices to align with a participatory paradigm. Our learning journey is ongoing as we unlearn old practices and dismantle previous assumptions about research—almost like learning to drive a car with gears rather than cruising in automatic mode! The conclusions we came to through our collaborative reflections and shared learning may be useful to other researchers from similar scientific backgrounds who want to shift gear as we did.

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