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Lessons Learnt From Facilitating Action Learning With Youth Facing Multiple Adversities¹

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Abstract

Action learning has proven to be an effective change process in the field of organisational development, where it originated. However, can it work equally well with young people who face intersectional adversities that negatively affect their holistic well-being, sense of purpose, and self-worth? This paper presents the case of a participatory action learning and action research project that we considered a failure because, after eight months of working with eight youth rendered vulnerable by sociostructural oppression, group cohesion and collaboration towards a common purpose did not materialise. Our analysis of three focus groups conducted with the youth after the engagement, various electronic communications with and between them, and our own reflections as facilitators, taught us some harsh lessons about the complexities of working with such vulnerable populations. Through critical reflection on the lessons learnt, we aim to “fail forward” in true action learning style. Therefore, we offer our learning to assist others working with similar groups to avoid the mistakes we made.

Keywords: unemployment, praxeology, participatory action learning and action research, reflective learning, youth development

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Introduction

As South African researchers working in a transformative and participatory paradigm (Wood, 2020), we adopt participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as our preferred research design. We do this because, without foregrounding action learning as an integral component of participatory action research, we have found that community participation in, and ownership of, the research is less likely to happen (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2022). Working in action learning groups enables participants to learn how to reframe their experiences, solve their own problems, and ultimately, how to take action to improve their situation (Hurst & Marquardt, 2019). Furthermore, by participating in the action learning, the university researchers are less likely to “take over” and default to a directive role (Wood, 2020). To define action learning within the PALAR process, we refer to Teare, as cited in Zuber-Skerritt (2011, p. 181): “Action learning occurs when people learn from each other, create their own resources, identify their own problems and form their own solutions.” Years of working with poverty-stricken communities all over the world led Teare to conclude that facilitating people to become action learners leads to personal and community transformation as participants become more self-confident and enthusiastic about learning and mobilising to change their lives. Although we are aware that definitions of action learning are many, contextual, and evolving (Pedler et al., 2005), that definition is most suited to our community-based approach in PALAR.

The first author has worked as a community-based researcher for years, and is often approached by community members. In 2021, she was approached by a director of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) whose mandate was youth development. He asked her to engage with a group of unemployed youth who had attended a computer course at the NGO, and to train them in research so they could work as volunteers at his centre. To support the NGO, the first author brought together fellow community-based researchers (the co-authors) to form a team to engage the youth in action learning. The idea was that the youth would identify the needs of youth in the community in order to develop, implement, and evaluate programmes to meet these needs. Action learning as a process has delivered good results in other research projects the first author has conducted with vulnerable populations (see, e.g. Wood, 2021). But, although it is common for one or more members to drop out of projects, as per their ethical right, we had never experienced a whole group disintegrating before the participatory research could start, as happened in this case. After eight months of bi-monthly (twice a month, every two weeks) visits with the NGO and the youth, focused on engaging them in action learning, the youth group disengaged and stopped coming to our collaborative sessions. This disengagement deeply affected us as community-based researchers because we value the growth and success of the participants we collaborate with. We subsequently wanted to understand what we could do differently to address what we assumed, at first, was a lack of commitment on the part of the youth. The young people learning how to collaborate in an action learning group would have had lasting benefits in terms of their self-confidence and personal and technical skills enhancement (Vince, 2008). The purpose of this paper is therefore to present our reflection on this particular case in order to derive implications for facilitating action learning and action research with youth facing multiple adversities. We first elucidate vulnerability as a concept in terms of unemployed youth, then move on to explaining the research methods, before presenting the findings and conclusions. The main question guiding our

reflective inquiry was: “How can we best facilitate action learning to encourage full participation in the research process of youth who are rendered vulnerable on multiple levels?”

The Vulnerability of Unemployed Youth in Challenging Socioeconomic Contexts

In South Africa, the age range for youth is 15–35 (Republic of South Africa, 2020), possibly to cater for the generations that lost education during the freedom struggle. Youth unemployment in South Africa is among the highest in the world (Maskaeva & Msafiri, 2021). In 2022, unemployment in the 15–24 age group was 46.1% for the second quarter, as revealed by the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (Statistics South Africa [SSA], 2022). The country had more than 10 million youth in that age group, with only 2,5 million of them either employed or seeking a job (SSA, 2022). The rest were inactive either due to discouragement emanating from not finding a job in their locality or not finding one that matched their skills (SSA, 2022). The term used to describe these youth is “not in employment, education or training” (NEET), and the rate of NEET is growing (SSA, 2022). Black and female youth are the worst affected (SSA, 2022) due to the intersectional nature of the oppressions they face such as poverty, language barriers, lack of experience, lack of social capital, and inferior education. Youth unemployment persists despite the national budget, which allocated R5.2 billion to cover youth employment incentives and economic recovery support for the year 2022 (SSA, 2022). Their NEET condition results in negative social, economic, and health consequences that render these young people vulnerable. The longer youth are unemployed, the more likely they are to develop mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Mokona et al., 2020), drug and alcohol abuse, gangsterism and violence, and risky sexual behaviour (Kheswa, 2017). Youth unemployment in South Africa is compounded by various factors (Yu, 2013) including low quality education and less job opportunities in impoverished communities (Van Aardt, 2012), having to take on parental duties due to guardian death or neglect, or early pregnancies (Meyer, 2017), and the general trauma that comes from living in penurious and violent contexts (Jooste & Maritz, 2015). These extenuating circumstances increase risk for negative life outcomes (Arora et al., 2015). Based on our previous experience with PALAR, we assumed that learning how to integrate action learning into their lives, and using action research to address the complex problems facing them, would enable the youth to improve their lives. However, we also assumed that, before we began the participatory project, the participants would need extensive personal development. We now explain our reasoning behind that decision.

Linking Self-Leadership Theory and PALAR

Our standpoint, as community-based researchers, is that with support, young people can develop resilience to deal with adversity. Therefore, we believed that starting with self-leadership would support the youth’s transition to become community leaders capable of influencing other youth towards positive change. Self-leadership development would also help the youth become co-researchers in a participatory research project focused on their community’s needs, as per the NGO’s request. As Hougaard and Carter (2018) stated, to lead others, we need to be able to lead ourselves first. The theory of self-leadership appealed to us as a positive and strength-based approach to youth development (Van Woerkom et al., 2019). Self-leadership also increases the ability of youth to deal with trauma (Jooste & Maritz, 2015), and promotes entrepreneurial mindsets (Krieger, 2018). Self-leadership is the notion that each person has the potential and ability to lead themselves through managing their internal motivations towards action—regardless of the external forces they may be facing (Shek et al., 2015). Self-leadership theory provides pathways to develop proactive behaviour (e.g. goal setting), constructive thought patterns/cognition strategies (e.g. constructive self-feedback, positive visualisations, reducing negative emotions), physical vitality (improving fitness and energy), and task motivating strategies (changing negative perceptions about specific necessary but unattractive tasks; Manz, 2015).

The youth we collaborated with started with action learning, with the goal of transitioning towards PALAR, as developed for community engagement by Wood (2020, 2022) building on Zuber-Skerritt's (2011) seminal work. PALAR starts by forming an action learning group to engage in the addressing of complex problems that directly affect the members. Therefore, PALAR is a form of transformative community education (Wood, 2022) that enhances people's capabilities through the development of lifelong learning. Figure 1 presents an overview of the process, which comprises two components: relationship (negotiating purpose, processes, and building personal and interpersonal capacities, understanding the context, negotiating joint goals, and ethics) and research (designing and implementing the collaborative research).

The figure 8 binds these two components into one continuous, integrated cycle where participants continually reflect on both their own and group development, as well as on the research process. In effect, the PALAR process does develop self-leadership but, in this case, and whilst working with youth, we deviated from it by separating theory from action. Our reasons for doing this and the consequences thereof are clarified in the findings section.

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how we could improve our own practice to encourage participation in future groups. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We thematically analysed the data (Clarke et al., 2019). Our analysis of the first focus group session informed the guiding question to ask in the second session and, in the third session, the focus was similarly determined by what we learnt from our analysis of the previous one. We thereby adhered to the principles of iterative reflection and action underpinning an action learning and action research design (Wood, 2020). All sessions were held in settings designed to put the participants at ease and to give them a break from their normal environments, such as a coffee shop and a nature reserve. The data set was augmented by our reflective field notes and WhatsApp messages that the youth exchanged during the period of the project with the second author. The validity was increased by each author conducting an independent analysis before coming together to arrive at consensus on the themes discussed in the following section. The protocol was approved by the relevant university ethics committee, attesting to its adherence to the strict ethical principles governing research with vulnerable groups.

Findings

We identified three themes that helped us answer the research question and discuss them with reference to the relevant literature. The participant quotes are identified by the code P#. It was evident that the “failure” of the project was based primarily on our own faulty assumptions.

Faulty Assumption 1: Youth Would Be Willing and Able to Communicate Openly and Honestly

Effective learning in an action learning group relies on open, honest, and clear communication (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) given that participants learn from and with each other through sharing their feelings, opinions, and ideas. We were aware of the difficulty of diminishing power relations between ourselves and the youth given our differences in terms of age, race, language, educational background, and economic status, and we worked hard at creating a fun, relaxed atmosphere through our various group activities. All of us participated in the activities, not just the youth. We assumed that they would communicate freely among themselves outside the group, but this was not the case.

The first issue was that they did not communicate between the face-to-face meetings with us. We had set up a WhatsApp group where everyone could post motivational messages and pose questions. This medium was chosen by the group because they all had phones and it was light on data. However, several of them were often unable to buy even the small amount of data needed and so were excluded from the WhatsApp conversation, which affected group cohesion and meant they missed out on information and ideas that may have been useful to them.

The lack of finance of the participants also led to them not attending the group without communicating this to anyone in advance. The group had decided that they would meet each week to work on exercises to improve their self-leadership and build relationships because we only met with them bi-monthly. They blamed non-attendance on the fact that they had to travel up to 10 kilometres to the agency site and could not afford the taxi fare.

The main challenge was the transport, I think. Because some live far from the community centres so that day that we had to come, the transport was really a problem then. (P2)

As a result, they did not meet frequently enough to personally communicate with each other and build the relationships needed for successful action learning leading to action research (Méndez et al., 2017). They were also confused from the start about the aim of the project, but

We didn't ask, we decided to keep it to ourself. (P2)

When asked why they did not ask clarifying questions, they could not give a clear answer:

I don't know . . . (P2)

Our failure as facilitators was to assume that the director of the agency had explained the purpose of the project to them and that they had understood him. We took it for granted that everyone was on the same page from the start of the project. We later found out that he had only explained the participatory action research project as training to equip them to be volunteers but had not clarified that this required them to be trained in participatory research. When the participants stayed away from the group, we assumed they were losing interest because they took a decision (which was, in fact, a form of agency) to not share the real reasons for their absence at the time. As facilitators, we should have taken the “time to fully engage, listen for understanding and not move forward until participants . . . are ready” (Mulvale et al., 2019, p. 295). When we reflected on why we had not, we realised that the 50-kilometre drive to and from the site, and the struggle to synchronise the visits with our respective crowded diaries, was stressful for us as well. Lack of time, distance, and costs are well documented as reasons why community engagement projects often do not reach their desired outcomes (Kue et al., 2015) and are distorted to become more researcher driven (Masalam et al., 2016, p. 343). We had become hypocritical, espousing the theory about PALAR, but not embodying it fully in practice. Therefore, it was not surprising that this lack of effective communication contributed to the development of mistrust.

Faulty Assumption 2: Sufficient Trust for Authentic Participation Would Be Built up After a Few Sessions

Trust is having faith that others are reliable and have your best interest at heart, allowing you to engage in self-disclosure (Armstrong et al., 2022). Trust is, of course, central to action learning. Participants needed to trust in us (as facilitators), in each other (as group members), and in their communities (as future community-based research participants), for authentic research relationships (Wood, 2022). To do this, we chose activities that would reduce power relations and build trust. Participants appreciated the interest in their lives because this encouraged them to begin to think more critically about their goals.

So, once you start questioning someone about what he/she wants to achieve in life, him or her would start thinking: She [facilitator] asked me what do I really want to do in life? So, it starts there. So, if no one is asking you, and you are just waking up, eat and sleep, then that's it . . . you get frustrated and depression. (P3)

In any action learning group, it is vital to take the time to understand members' goals and needs and explore the political, economic, social, health, and other factors that may impact them, as clearly indicated in the PALAR process (see Figure 1). According to Dobrova (2017), trust is built through dialogue and interactions that assist members to learn to consider and respect different points of view, especially when it is the first time someone who is normally silent (or has been silenced) has the courage to share. It seems that we were somewhat successful in building their trust.

You [the facilitators] were open . . . the facial expressions . . . we could see that you are happy to be with us . . . okay, this person cares. She's here, she's talking to us. Okay, so we're going to listen to her. (P2)

Trust building must come across as authentic, otherwise self-disclosure and participation will not take place (Griffith & Larson, 2015). However, participants remained fearful to share their dreams with their fellow group members. Participant 2 explained that they were afraid to share their ambitions because they might not achieve them, and then the group would be disappointed in them:

They are scared because we have to discuss emotions. . . . Maybe they are scared because we have to share our dreams and they feel they are slow, and this one is faster, and I am doing right now. And then they feel like they are disappointing, or something like that. (P2)

Participant 4 explained that young people living in their context had lost hope in their ability to create a better life, finding escape in negative coping mechanisms.

Youth are not being open about what they are going through, what's going on in their lives. . . . They rather deal with it on their own. Sadly, some of them, when you ask if they okay or not, they would just try to convince you they fine. Sometimes you might feel like dying cause you're stuck and you don't know what to do anymore or where to go. . . . In the community, most of the youth gave up to drugs, alcohol, and parties. They only live for the moment. Even when they find something to do to change their situation, eventually they tend to throw in the towel and quit, because they are tired. Most of us can't maintain something that requires effort . . . most of us, they just don't care. (P4)

Reading this excerpt was a wake-up call for us. We had not realised how severely the youth had been affected by living in stressful environments. We knew in theory, having read the literature and from our years of interaction with communities in similar situations, but we did not realise the deep damage caused by living in oppressed circumstances. Their ability to focus, and their holistic wellbeing, had been eroded by years of constant adversity and a daily struggle to survive (Hari, 2022). Only then, did we begin to understand why group members might stay away or drop out if they were asked to do something that they felt they could not do. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that a participant who was the most vocal and enthusiastic in the group, and seemed to be the one with the most self-confidence, suddenly dropped out when asked to do a presentation at the next session. Their fear of sharing and being judged by their peers was explained by the NGO director.

If you have a group of 10 people and two can share, but eight cannot share . . . there is a problem. Because now if I share, I am sharing from the heart, and you are listening to what I am going through. But if . . . you are saying you are not comfortable in sharing, next time I won't share. So, it means there's that thing of: I don't want someone to hear my progress, I don't want this person to hear, I am not comfortable. . . . And the group does not want to help each other.

For trust to build, there must be mutual respect and open sharing of feelings, ideas, and opinions (Griffith & Larson, 2015). Without trust, positive risk taking, confidence in experimentation, and taking responsibility for one's actions, effective action learning cannot occur (Dobrova, 2017). We had not taken enough time to really listen to their needs, nor could the youth fully open up and share their needs with us. Our mistake was deciding beforehand that self-leadership would be beneficial for them instead of exploring the complexity of their situation. This was based on our next faulty assumption.

Faulty Assumption 3: Because We Live and Work in South Africa, We Understand the Problems Youth Face

Misunderstanding occurs at both an explicit (words and language used to convey concepts, thoughts, ideas, and feelings) and an implicit level (assumptions, propositions, or interpretations of verbal and

non-verbal communication; Abramson & Moran, 2017). In this instance, misunderstandings stemmed from our faulty assumptions that because we were experienced researchers who had worked in similar contexts for years, we understood the adversity facing the youth. We found that, in the best case, we only had a superficial understanding of what their lives were like.

We were university educated, White, middle-class, and English-speaking professionals. The youth were NEET, living in an impoverished context, Black, and Setswana speaking, although they did their schooling in English. Differences in language, life experiences, race and class, upbringing, cultural and religious beliefs contribute to misunderstandings, which in turn, can promote mistrust and miscommunication (Hinner, 2017). We use cultural bias in this context to mean that, as facilitators, we are influenced by Eurocentric education, culture, economy, norms, values, and assumptions that have been embedded through our schooling, social location, culture, and visual media (Heleta, 2016). Although we tried to see the world through the lens of youth, this was not easy. Township life in South Africa remained a foreign experience to us, irrespective of our ontological values of participation, caring, equity, and diversity. For example, our assumption was that ubuntu is a common weltanschauung accepted by all African people, irrespective of age or gender. Ubuntu can be understood as a value system or normative philosophy that rejects individualism in favour of the values of collectivism, human dignity, care, respect, belonging, participation, collaboration, and solidarity (Bolden, 2014). The idea of ubuntu is often summarised by the phrase “I am because you are.” Yet, these experiences indicated that the values of ubuntu were not prevalent and, rather, that the young people facing adversity had withdrawn into themselves, mistrusting others and their communities rather than seeking or offering support. Basic psychology teaches us that needs are hierarchical in nature (Maslow, 1943) so how could we expect the members of the group to be committed to the self-transcendence associated with community-based research (Schwartz, 2012) when their lower-level needs were not fulfilled sufficiently? For example, they lived in contexts where there was no or intermittent electricity, water, and sewerage services, inadequate and crowded housing, and an unstable supply of nutritious food—so their basic physiological needs were often not met. The gangs and other violence prevalent in townships, and their status as NEET, meant that their safety and security needs were threatened. Their need for love and belonging was challenged by family problems and the tendency to withdraw into their own self rather than seek the support and friendship of others. Their esteem needs were not met because they did not have the dignity of being able to provide for themselves and their families.

We had started with self-leadership, similar to self-actualisation, without taking into consideration the trauma that being NEET entails. We had a theoretical understanding of the adversities that young people face in their circumstances, but did not fully appreciate the effect of such long-term stress on their holistic wellbeing and their ability to trust and give of themselves for the benefit of others. They were reluctant to assume a leadership role because their peers would “think you are better [than us], because you are the boss” (P7).

Youth leadership can develop into negative leadership if they fear being bullied or controlled in some way, or embarrassed. Reflecting on this, we conclude that we erred in separating self-development from the research process. Moll et al. (2020, p. 2) explained the stages of collaborative research design as follows.

It should begin with critical and embodied reflexivity that attends to (1) ourselves—the subjective self or “I”; (2) our relationship with others—the intersubjective “we”; and (3) the systems in which we and others are embedded—the objective “it.”

These stages should happen simultaneously within the action learning group at the beginning of a PALAR project, not in a linear fashion—as we knew and had practised many times before. However, because we assumed that the youth participants lacked self-confidence, self-knowledge, and the intra- and interpersonal skills to participate in action learning, we had reverted to “intervention” mode—let’s first “fix” them before starting the PALAR process. This was an uncomfortable realisation because we had all written on the theory of community-based research. But here we were reverting to the type of engagement we had so vehemently opposed in our scholarship. Yet, only on later reflection did this become obvious to us. We now discuss the implications of these disturbing realisations for implementing action learning with vulnerable youth.

Implications for Practice

As painful as these lessons were, we believe that it was a valuable learning experience to be rescued from our complacency. Years of conducting and publishing PALAR and other forms of action research had led us to believe that we were experienced facilitators, capable of working with any group of people. However, this particular group brought us back to the basics of action learning and action research: start where people are at, focus on their issues, and move at their pace. We went in with an end goal in sight—based on the request of the NGO director—rather than following the tried and trusted process of PALAR. We had decided beforehand that self-leadership development was needed when, in fact, the group was not sure why they were there or what was expected of them. When we spoke of self-leadership in the first meeting, the skewed power relations prevented them from questioning what the purpose of the group was. Although they had enjoyed the exercises we did together, and benefitted individually from the interaction, it did not lead them to collaborative action. For example, in the focus groups they shared how they had “learned about [seeing] different perspectives” (P1) to “[focus] on the best side of my life . . . to take my life seriously” (P5) and to persist in tasks, rather than give up at the first obstacle. Several of them made applications to training courses or approached people they thought could help them with their goals. Some youth became more focused, sharing that “there was something [before] that was turning me back. I learned I had to focus to the right path” (P4). They learnt how to control their thinking and not let “imagination run their lives” (P1).

However, moving to a group project to research and develop programmes to present to other youth was not something they wanted or felt capable of doing. This is not surprising, given that they faced so much adversity in their daily lives and their main aim was to improve their own circumstances. So, what are the implications of this case for conducting action learning with youth rendered vulnerable by socioeconomic adversity? We offer some suggestions based on our learning from this case.

1. Do not assume that everyone is on the same page as far as the purpose and goals of the group are concerned. We fell into the trap of responding to a third-party request that predetermined the purpose and allowed the NGO director to recruit participants he chose to be volunteers at the NGO. We negated the power relations that existed between him and the participants that might have made them agree to the group just because they felt they had to. It is important to engage several times with participants just to listen to their stories and get to know them and their interests before requiring them to commit to a project.
2. Adequate provision of resources is important. It may not be a problem to travel 10 kilometres when there is adequate, reliable, and affordable public transport but it is a very stressful situation for unemployed youth living in township contexts. Data provision is vital for ongoing communication. To avoid this, we conclude that creating a third space for youth to engage for several days, both within the group room and “after hours,” would help build trust and group cohesion. In that way, they can build relationships without the facilitators being present all the

time. Taking them to a comfortable place where they can sleep and eat without any stress or worries frees them to focus on what they are experiencing and learning in the group. Prolonged contact over four or five days helps them to form friendships, and being in a safe and well-resourced environment makes them feel valued as part of the group. In this way, the lower-level needs as identified by Maslow (1943) can be met to an extent, so that they can focus on learning and participating in the group. A retreat also removes stress on the side of academic researchers because they can block out a week and do not have to travel long distances for each session. This may be more costly, but can be built into research funding given that the return on investment in terms of research outcomes far outweighs the cost. Doing this would help to build a strong foundation for later interaction.

3. According to the PALAR process, and many other forms of collaborative research, it is vital to start an exploration of needs, hopes, and dreams before deciding how to progress. We assumed that by first developing self-leadership, it would facilitate their participation in the research process. But we learnt again that we have to trust the process and the participants, or the engagement will end up being researcher-driven and participants will eventually lose interest. Participants did benefit from action learning on an individual basis as they learnt to set goals, find ways to reach them, revise their actions, and rethink and persist if the first attempt was not successful. However, they chose not to work as a group because their main concern was being able to deal with their own problems.
4. Constant reflection among facilitators is essential to ensure that the principles and values of participatory research are being respected. It is too easy to take shortcuts due to work pressure or other reasons when the group is not moving as fast as you think they should, or in the direction that you think they should be going. Facilitators need to keep each other accountable and hold their own action learning group on a regular basis—we did reflect on sessions in the car during the drive to and from the venue, but we really did not give them our full attention. The more time and work pressure we experienced, the more we separated practice and theory.

Conclusion

We decided to write this paper so that we could better understand how to facilitate action learning with youth who are rendered vulnerable on multiple levels in order to enable them to fully participate in and benefit from a PALAR project. The aim was for them to research, design, and implement programmes for the benefit of other youth who attended a youth development NGO. We learnt several lessons both about the youth and about our own practice. The depth of prolonged adversity these youth had experienced had exhausted them, making it difficult for them to sustain efforts that could improve their lives. They feared being judged by others and tended to withdraw into themselves rather than seek help. They did benefit from the “interventions” we did with them and the support we offered, but more individually rather than learning with and from each other. Regarding our own learning, we made several faulty assumptions that resulted in us becoming directive towards our own agenda, rather than facilitative of theirs. We present our (painful) learning here so that others may avoid making the same errors.

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