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## **Contextualising PALAR to be Suitable for Use in Community– University Engagement in the African Context: The African Calabash Framework<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Institutions of higher learning were always seen as being isolated from their community and operating as ivory towers. This view is rapidly changing due to growth in community–university engagements. And, to strengthen these collaborations between the university and the community we should use methods of engagement that are context relevant. The Nelson Mandela University through its Centre for the Community School has been making use of Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) as a method of engagement when collaborating with community members. Given its Western origin, using this methodology as is, without contextualising it, could present challenges because the social and economic dynamics differ. Through the lessons we learned from conducting a study, which sought to understand how an Action Learning Set experienced the use of PALAR, we contextualised PALAR for it to be suitable for the African context. We developed the African Calabash Framework, which offers methodological and philosophical guidance on how PALAR can be used for community–university engagements in the African context.

**Keywords:** African Calabash Framework, PALAR, community–university engagement, community-based research, participatory visual methods

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## Introduction

In Africa, we cannot continue conforming to Western ways of doing things. Methodologies that originate from the Westernised context were designed with that context in mind. And, in order to use them, we should decolonise and contextualise them for use in our African context. An example of such a methodology is Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR). The use of PALAR in various community-based research (CBR) projects as a method of engagement in the African context has increased. Its grounding principles and philosophical focus make this methodology ideal for CBR projects. Adapting and contextualising the PALAR approach to the African context will make it more effective and accommodative to our contextual realities, amplifying its effectiveness and suitability for use in CBR conducted in the African context. In this paper through the lived experiences of an Action Learning Set, we explore the use of PALAR in CBR, its contextual relevance, and contextual factors that must be considered when PALAR is used in the African context. In order to achieve this, we sought to answer the following research question: “How can PALAR be contextualised to be suitable for use in CBR projects conducted in the African context?”

To answer this question, we looked at a community of practice that used PALAR as a method of engagement in a CBR project where multiple engagements between the Nelson Mandela University’s CCS and the school community took place. The CCS at Nelson Mandela University is part of the Faculty of Education. Its primary mission is to ensure the university contributes to the social well-being of all citizens, advocates for social change, and actively engages in development programmes that promote university–community collaboration and advancement. The CCS has held multiple engagements with various school stakeholders to co-construct school improvement plans that were context relevant and, in which PALAR was used as a method of engagement. The aim of this study was to contextualise PALAR to be suitable for use in CBR projects conducted in the African context.

## Literature

### Community–University Engagements

In April 2018, Professor Sibongile Muthwa (2018, p. 4), Vice Chancellor of Nelson Mandela University, South Africa posed the question: “What are universities for?” Although this question has been a concern in higher education for centuries, she argued that it has re-emerged as a fundamental concern due to the severe realities of our current socio-economic, political, cultural, and environmental conditions. Professor Muthwa embraced Premesh Lalu’s (2015) perspective that this question can be engaged critically through two approaches: “What is the university for?” and “What does the university stand for?” She further argued that these questions speak to a sector, a nation, and a world that is constantly changing, and that answering them requires critical community–university engagement.

What is critical community–university engagement? According to Furco (2010, p. 380), community–university engagement is “based on the belief that engagement with the community, a practice that had long been viewed as a core pillar to the academy’s work, flourishes and succeeds when it is integrated into the academic fabric of the institution.” This type of community–university engagement may take the form of, for example, community-based learning through academic service learning, and community-based or participatory action research (Furco, 2010). This definition of community–university engagements resonate with the traditionalist approach to how Nelson Mandela University looks at engagement. We see it as a precious pot of collectors’ items that we as an institute of higher learning can tap into and use to our own benefit (Sathorar & Geduld, 2021). But what about the communities we engage with as higher education?

Cunningham and Smith (2020), citing Boyer (1996) and the Kellogg Commission (1999), outlined how US higher education came to recognise the value of community engagement and the necessity of addressing it with academic rigor:

Higher education was challenged to address communities’ most pressing needs in what Boyer (1996) referred to as a reaffirmation of its “historic commitment” (p. 11). He made a call for engagement, urging higher education institutions to partner with their communities in search of solutions to our most pressing community issues. This challenge was further emphasized when the Kellogg Commission (1999) issued a report calling on higher education to do more and go beyond outreach and service in what the commission referred to as “engagement.” The commission urged that teaching, research, and service be redesigned to better address social concerns. Institutions that rose to this challenge and committed to mutually beneficial partnerships with their communities are known as “engaged institutions” (Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 1). (Cunningham & Smith, 2020, p. 53)

Community engagement is not just an approach to scholarship but, for many scholars, it represents a form of understanding (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011) that prompts epistemological questions such as: “What is knowledge? How is knowledge assessed? What defines valid knowledge? How do we come to know what we know?” (Rendón, 2009, pp. 66–67).

We align our definition of community–university engagement with that of Gibbons et al. (1994), who postulated that it is an asset-based approach; it recognises and values the knowledge contributions of community members beyond the higher education institution. From a transdisciplinary perspective, knowledge assets extend beyond traditional disciplines and academic institutions, merging academic and community-based knowledge to create new insights. We go further by adding that we define community–university engagement by its goal: to change the world. It is not about sustaining the status quo in

community political and economic structures; a radical agenda is committed to get to the root of power inequality and oppression through critical engagement (Janke et al., 2023). It is about changing the structures that are creating the inequality. The engagement must include community and be committed, therefore, to a participatory process that empowers all the people who are involved.

The choice of method used in community–university engagement is crucial because it must foster a democratic and inclusive environment where every voice is valued equally. PALAR provides this approach by creating communicative spaces that encourage participation, and allow participants to identify, address, and resolve complex challenges for the particular group or community (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2014; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015).

### **The Use of PALAR in CBR**

For community members who have had limited or no exposure to higher education and research, incorporating learning into the PALAR project could make it more relatable and accessible, reducing intimidation, and enhancing its practicality. Wood & Zuber-Skerritt (2013) asserted that the action learning component is essential for everyone involved in the project. More importantly, they emphasised that community members might choose to focus less on the writing up of the research and sharing their learning, and that they might prefer alternative methods of dissemination.

Bhagwan (2017) noted that the university can contribute to the community and also, learn from the communities around it. PALAR challenges the traditional notion of the researcher as sole bearer of knowledge and instead, recognises all participants as valuable sources of insight. In PALAR, participants are recognised as co-researchers who collaborate to address and challenge complex contextual issues (Mthiyane et al., 2023). A distinctive aspect of PALAR is its dedication to democratising knowledge production among researchers and participants alike. Additionally, PALAR facilitates communicative spaces that encourage active engagement, allowing individuals to collectively identify, address, and resolve intricate challenges within specific groups or communities (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2014; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). This collaborative approach is why the CCS adopts the PALAR methodology to develop relevant school improvement plans with input from a diverse range of stakeholders within the local school community.

PALAR researchers are cognisant of the subjective perspectives of both their research collaborators and themselves. This awareness prevents them from remaining detached and assuming their own objectivity while making judgments about right/wrong, should/shouldn't, or must/must not, as if there were a universal value system (Zuber-Skerritt, 2018). Researchers who believe in their own objectivity and adhere to binary right/wrong thinking need to understand subjectivity more thoroughly—both their own and that of their research collaborators (rather than referring to them as “subjects”).

PALAR in CBR involves continual critical reflection: learning from experience (action) by understanding the change process (research). This means critically evaluating and conceptualising what succeeded, what failed, how or how not, why or why not, and using this insight to identify communal improvements. Both PALAR and CBR necessitate building relationships and teamwork to ensure effective collaboration and sustainability (Mahadew, 2023). Through iterative cycles of dialogue and mutual collaboration, participants are given the opportunity to reflect on their existing perspectives, which influence their personal and professional practices. Consequently, these principles of conscientisation play a role in shaping the social transformation agenda of PALAR as used in CBR.

PALAR does not come without its challenges. On the contrary, it is a messy approach that is complex and not structured. Furthermore, elements of power differentials still exist between the researcher and the participants as noted by a participant in this research project: “Even though the engagements were always respectful and democratic, it was difficult to avoid the fact that she was always a leader amongst us”—referring to the researcher. Power dynamics operate throughout the process of PALAR, which is why the approach insists on constant critical reflection. In truth, the initial stages of applying PALAR and the negotiations that take place are influenced by the worldviews of the researcher and how the researcher interprets the world.

Therefore, it is very important for researchers who want to use the PALAR approach to be honest with themselves and be willing to learn and unlearn constantly. Negotiations can be very complex and complicated, and it is for this reason that researchers must learn to set aside their feelings and be flexible. This is very painful to do and quite challenging given that the researcher cannot enforce their worldviews on the participants. For example, in this research project, we originally planned to make use of drawings and cellfilms only. Through negotiations, the participants vigorously interrogated these data generation tools and were of the view that they would prefer to make use of collages rather than drawings. Having justified why we saw the need to use drawings in the research project, and the value of using drawings, we negotiated and reached the conclusion that we should use cellfilms and both collages and drawings as data generation tools.

Another challenging aspect about PALAR is that it is time-consuming. The first cycle of Setlhare et al.'s (2016) PALAR project to establish how the process could help teachers come to a collaborative understanding of the psychosocial challenges their learners faced took eight months to complete. The time-consuming aspect of PALAR was also evident in the findings of our research project with participants citing this as having a negative impact on their workloads because they had to be present for the workshops and as well as for their respective jobs; commitment ends up being compromised. Another major challenge with using PALAR is that it is financially straining. Some participants found that their

finances affected their participation in the research project because they could not afford to be present in all the scheduled sessions.

### **Using Participatory Visual Methods as Data Generation Tools**

To generate data, we used collages and drawings. We had originally planned to only use drawings but the participants of the study suggested that we add collages as a data generation tool. Drawings as a data generation method are easier to administer and are cost effective. In addition, the use of drawings in a research project is not meant to represent how artistic a participant is but rather, to relay the message they want to pass. As mentioned before, we also used collages to generate data. The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) described a collage as a piece of art that is made by sticking various materials such as photographs onto a piece of paper. A collage consists of cutting and pasting pictures that already exist. A collage does not require a person to have prior technical skills thus participants can express themselves in a creative manner while using their creativity in a meaningful way.

The use of collages as a data generation tool is not new in the education context. Mahadew (2021) made use of collages in her doctoral study, which sought to empower the critical voices of early childhood care educators and two trainers in their exploration of inclusive learning environments. Sonti (2022) recently made use of collages in her master's research study, which explored the perceptions of education stakeholders on the concept of community schools as beacons of hope for school improvement in the Nelson Mandela Bay area. The use of collage adds value to postgraduate research because it provides an opportunity for the use of expressive language (Russo-Zimmet, 2016) to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' worldviews. Our participants felt that they would be able to express themselves more clearly through making collages. Staying true to the methodology of the research project, we negotiated and agreed to add this as a generation method so that participants had the freedom to use both drawing and collage or one of the methods.

Using participatory visual methodologies does not come without its own challenges, and matters of ethics are some of those challenges. As noted by Khanlou and Peter (2005), research using a participatory action research framework can result in intricate ethical challenges. These challenges are still present in today's process to obtain ethical clearance, and they include power struggles especially because the roles of researcher and participants tend to be blurred. For example, in the forms we had to submit to the ethics board we stated that identities of participants would be protected and that pseudonyms would be used. However, the participants wanted their identities to be revealed and, given that the PALAR methodology warrants that participants are celebrated by being recognised, we could not betray the methodology. Recognising the challenges researchers face when trying to obtain ethical clearance, Wood (2017) made a call to change the criteria against which strict ethical standards are evaluated so that complex, dynamic,

research projects such as those with community members can be accommodated. In this research project, we ensured that power was shared amongst the participants and facilitation duties were not only mine (first author's) but were also shared. We also ensured that we abided by the principles of action research—providing an environment where there was mutual respect, democratic participation, equality, and inclusion. This research project did not diminish self-respect or cause experiences of shame, embarrassment, or regret for the participants.

In terms of validity, we used democratic participatory validity, which, according to Samuel (2019) looks at the extent to which the researcher involves the participants in the research project, the relationship between the researcher and the participants, and the extent to which the participants participated.

### **Theoretical Framework**

We used cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to frame the study. Literature suggests that the foundations of the CHAT are in the work of the Soviet Russian psychologists Lev Vygotsky, Alexander Luria, and Aleksei Leontèv (Sannino & Engeström, 2018). Notably, CHAT has been developed into three generations. For the purpose of our study, we made use of the second generation. The second generation of CHAT culture and history are also crucial factors when trying to understand and sustain development and learning (Postholm, 2015). Given that CHAT is based on the principle of human interaction (Andriani et al., 2022), it was a suitable theory to frame our study because it incorporated the participants' culture and history as crucial aspects of their human interactions. Further, CHAT fosters a deep analysis of activity systems, promoting change and development (Engeström, 2001; Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006), which aligned with the research project's objectives. Its suitability as a theoretical framework for this study lies in its perspective on transformation as a zone of proximal development—a space of possibilities between the present and future where activities drive solutions (Engeström & Pyörälä, 2021). In this context, the desired solution was the contextualisation of PALAR to better suit the African setting.

### **Method**

We purposefully sampled nine participants for the study. We chose purposeful sampling because the criticality of the study relied on who the participants were and their unique realities. Moreover, the study looked at how participants experienced PALAR, so it was imperative that we purposefully sample them. The participants were three community members, three school principals, one teacher, and two CCS staff members. Together, they formed an Action Learning Set. An Action Learning Set, first introduced by Reg Revans, is a group of individuals who collaborate to address challenges. They draw upon their personal experiences and share their skills to promote deeper learning and problem solving (Morrison, 2017). We used PALAR as a methodology because we recognised its power in establishing the value of PALAR as an

engagement method. This approach aligns well with the paradigmatic perspective that emphasises recognising power imbalances empowering participants to contribute meaningfully. True to the foundational principles of PALAR, democracy was upheld in determining the methods used to generate data.

The Action Learning Set used participatory visual methods to generate data. Participants used drawings, collages, or a combination of drawing and collages to generate data (see Images 1 and 2). Purposeful observations were also used in the study by the Action Learning Set.

### **Image 1 and Image 2**

#### *Members of the Action Learning Set Generating Data*



Although the participants could choose from the above methods of data generation, they were given two prompt questions which sought to establish how they experienced the use of PALAR as a method of engagement. The first prompt question was “What made you feel positive about the approach used to develop school improvement plans in the Centre for the Community School?” This prompt sought to guide the participants in their thinking by outlining aspects of the PALAR method that they found to be positive.

The next prompt question was “What made you feel less positive about the approach used to develop school improvement plans in the Centre for the Community School?” Through this question, we wanted to understand aspects of the methodology that the participants viewed as less positive about the PALAR method. We intentionally used “less positive” instead of “negative” because the objective was not to align negativity with the method but rather, a critical stance given that our aim was to draw lessons from their experience in order to make the method more adaptable to our context.

Thus, our aim was to improve the method, based on the lessons we learnt from the positive and less positive experiences. We used thematic analysis to analyse our data and below, is a presentation of the data generated in the themes discovered.

### **Data Presentation**

According to the data, the Action Learning Set indicated that they found the approach used by the CCS empowering.

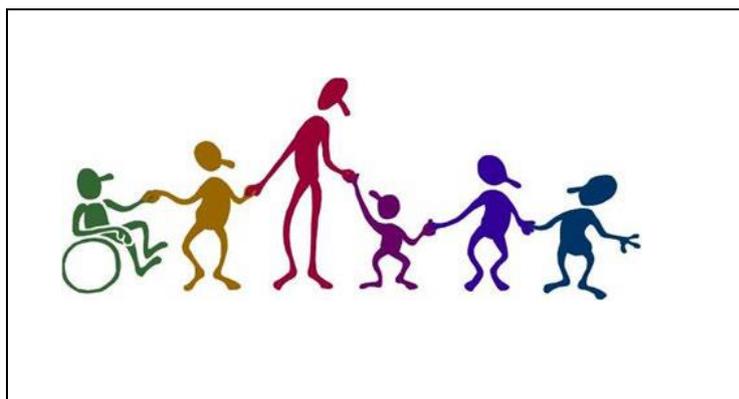
#### **Theme 1: Acknowledging Indigenous Ways of Knowing**

Our data revealed that the PALAR approach created an enabling space for all voices to be heard.

Consultation at an equal level, where every voice counts, irrespective of educational background, leads to a good working relationship . . . This picture [Image 3] signifies that despite their differences, they are able to hold each other's hands and acknowledge each other; a practice that leads to good working relations. (Jabu)

#### **Image 3**

*Portraying Diverse Backgrounds*



Tracey further observed that the PALAR approach empowered the people within the community to work towards finding solutions for their challenges:

It's about people within the community, fixing the community schools themselves.

Historicity is one of the guiding principles of CHAT (Engeström, 2001). And, the PALAR approach acknowledges all voices as equal and recognises the value community members bring with them into the space, regardless of educational background. Contextualising PALAR to be suitable for use in the African context means positioning the participant as a reservoir of knowledge, recognising their indigenous ways of knowing, and their valuable contributions that are influenced by their lived experiences.

## Theme 2: Resources

The cyclical nature of PALAR (Neethling, 2015) means that there is no end point; the process requires multiple meetings and constant reflection. Our data confirmed that the approach is time-consuming. Jabu used a tortoise (Image 4) to show how time-consuming PALAR is. A tortoise is known for its slow pace when walking but, interestingly, the tortoise in Jabu's picture has a luscious green patch of grass surrounding a tree. When we probed further into the significance of this, Jabu said:

As much as the tortoise is slow, it eventually gets to where it's going, and the green in the picture signifies the good results that are produced by this approach, we get there, eventually.

### Image 4

#### *A Symbolic Representation of the Time-Consuming Nature of PALAR*



Other members also expressed their concern about the time aspect of PALAR. Tracey stated

Being a part of the CoP [community of practice] is very time-consuming. As someone that is intrigued by the way the CoP takes initiative to bring about change, I always want to participate, but then on the other hand I feel as if I'm neglecting my other commitments as a teacher.

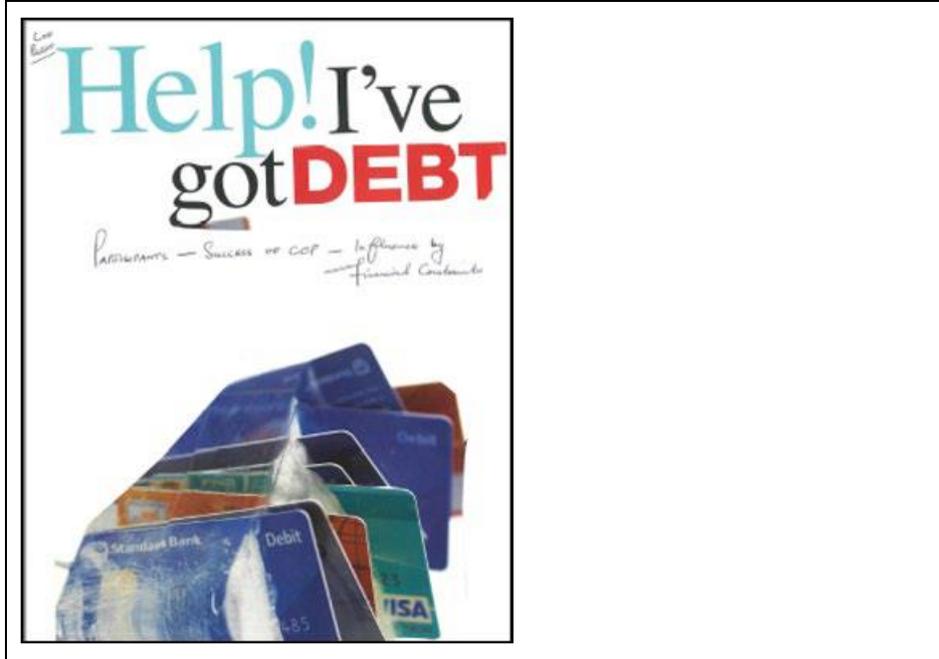
Setlhare et al. (2016) reinforced what Tracey described when by noting that the first cycle of their PALAR project took eight months to complete. The cyclical nature of PALAR sometimes makes it difficult for projects to be concluded timeously.

In addition to PALAR being time-consuming, some members of the Action Learning Set highlighted that finances was another factor that influenced their experience of the PALAR approach and their participation in the community of practice. PALAR is cyclical, meaning that there are numerous activities that take place when using this approach and these involve planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Due to this cyclical nature of the approach, there had to be numerous gatherings for which bus fare and petrol money were

sometimes a challenge. The lack of the monetary resource negatively affected the participation of members who otherwise would have loved to participate (see Image 5).

### Image 5

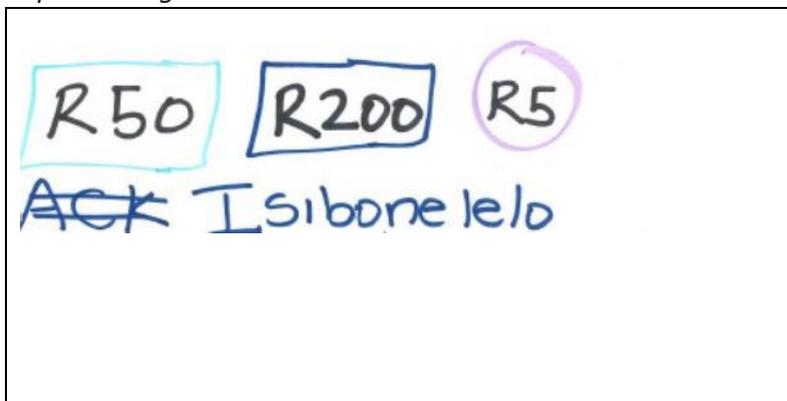
#### *Representing Financial Constraints*



This was noted to be a challenging aspect by some of the members of the Action Learning Set. In South Africa, the level of unemployment is high and as a result, getting to meetings is a challenge especially if the meetings are far from where the participants reside. Consequently, some participants requested monetary donations to enable them to get to the meeting venues, as shown by Neziswa's drawing (Image 6). *Isibonelelo* is a term that refers to subsidy or donation.

### Image 6

#### *Representing Financial Constraints*



Nomthandazo, a community member, agreed with Neziswa and stated:

Most of the community partners are unemployed, and taking part in the projects is time-consuming.

Tafadzwa, also a community member added:

The time we spent participating in these engagement we could have been out generating an income as we are unemployed.

The above shows that even though the community members love to serve their communities, the harsh realities of unemployment have a significant impact on how they experience the PALAR approach. In Africa, we do not have the resources that are available in the West where this methodology is mostly used. The community members stated that they did not always have bus fare to go to the gatherings. They were faced with choosing between buying bread for themselves and their families or using that money to travel to a meeting. The element of situatedness becomes important here. The mind is ontologically and functionally intertwined within environmental, social factors (Costello, 2014) and as seen in the responses from the community members, their circumstances influenced their participation or lack thereof in some instances.

PALAR is a Westernised concept developed by someone from Australia, a country that has more resources compared to our African context. The application of PALAR in the Global South, specifically in Africa, warrants a drastic adaptation so that the approach can be effective in our contextual realities.

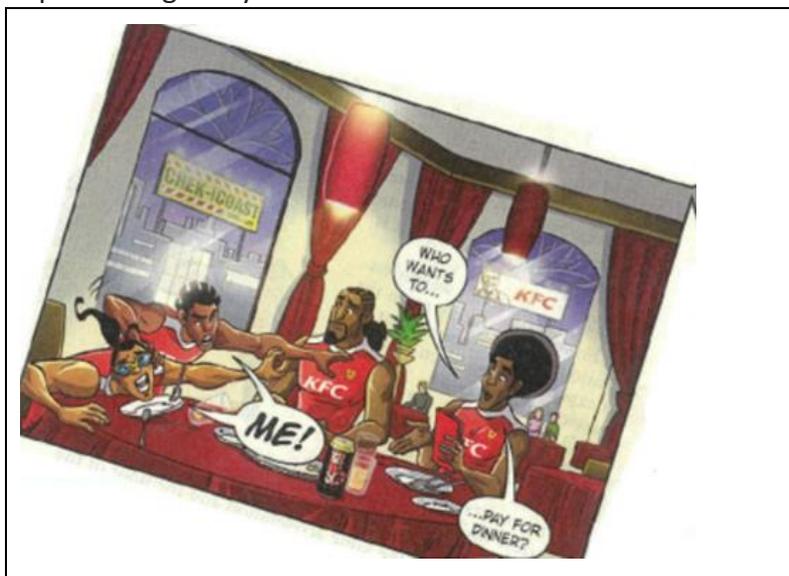
### Theme 3: Cultural Intelligence and Language Diversity

Jerome, Neziswa, and Nomthandazo used food to highlight the relationships formed through using PALAR. According to them, food was an element that brought the group closer to each other. Jerome stated:

Breaking bread together was another aspect I appreciated about the PALAR approach, we were able to eat together during break times and because we already established meaningful relationships, it felt as though I was eating with my family.

#### Image 7

Representing Unity

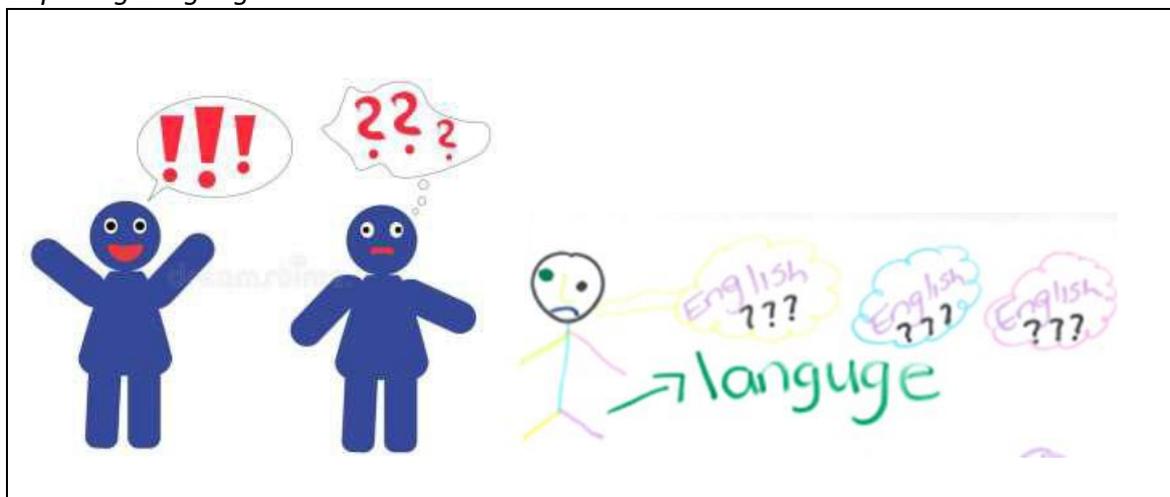


In some cultures, food can easily be seen as just a means to nourish the body and fulfil Maslow's hierarchy of needs. However, in the African culture, food carries great significance. In the African community, eating together signifies a sense of family and belonging, and food is used to express love and oneness. In African culture, we have our own set of values, practices, culture, and beliefs that are unique to us as Africans, and they are the cornerstones of who we are and how we relate to each other. Love is a concept that Freire (1970) spoke openly about in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He stated that love is an act of courage, not of fear; love is a commitment to others. Damons and Cherrington (2020) also highlighted the importance of love when making use of the PALAR approach.

Our data revealed language as an aspect that must be considered when using the PALAR approach. English was not easily understood by people who were not accustomed to the language. Nomthandazo highlighted how she experienced the use of language in the gatherings by stating that she found herself left out sometimes through being confused because she did not understand some of the words used in the workshops. She expressed this through her collage (Image 8), while Neziswa shared the same sentiments in her drawing (Image 9).

### Image 8 and Image 9

#### *Depicting Language*



### **Contextualising PALAR for Usage in the African Context: The African Calabash Framework**

Our data revealed that context is crucial when using PALAR in the African context. Considering resources such as time and finances is an essential aspect in ensuring successful implementation of the PALAR approach. This highlights the importance of being mindful of the situatedness of the participants when using PALAR in the African context. Further, appreciating and recognising all voices is a vital aspect to be

considered when using PALAR. This highlights the importance of appreciating the wisdom of all participants, positioning them as reservoirs of knowledge in the process of conducting CBR. Also, revealed in the data is the importance of collaboration and appreciating diversity. The African context is diverse with many different cultures. It is important to appreciate this and be culturally intelligent when using PALAR in CBR. Appreciating diversity also means taking into consideration the language that is used in the space. As Freire (1970) stated, language is never neutral and so language carries the potential of silencing many voices. This could have devastating effects in CBR given that the depth of the research relies on the participants' voices. These lessons enabled us to develop the African Calabash Framework as a guide for CBR in the African context.

### **The Calabash Structure and Its Relevance to CBR in the African Context**

The calabash is a fruit that grows on both trees and plant vines (Abubakar, 2018). This fruit is found in various shapes and is known as the symbol of rural African life (Oladumiye, 2018). According to Tekel et al. (2016, p. 530), the design of the calabash has a special meaning: "It symbolizes people coming together, a melting pot of cultures, sharing and passing around the calabash." The calabash in this framework represents Africa and the diverse African cultures that exist. The fragility of the calabash signifies the idea of acknowledging vulnerability as an important epistemic process in the engagement process of CBR. The calabash is used to preserve milk. In most African countries, milk signifies nurturing. The shape of the African Calabash Framework is intentionally round (see Image 10) to represent the cyclical nature of PALAR. Lastly, the calabash is a vessel that is passed around as people gather to drink from it. This is indicative of the concept of shared learning. In addition, the act of sharing signifies the concepts of *harambee* (a Kenyan philosophy that embodies the spirit of shared responsibility, reinforcing the importance of collaboration in fostering sustainable progress) and *ubuntu* (an African philosophy that highlights the essence of humanity, underscoring the deep African belief that to be truly human is to recognise and affirm the humanity of others). Furthermore, the act of gathering around to drink from the same calabash is representative of the African identity and culture, symbolising the coming together of people to share knowledge. The African Calabash Framework has five sections, and each section has an epistemological focus.

### **The Sections of the African Calabash Framework**

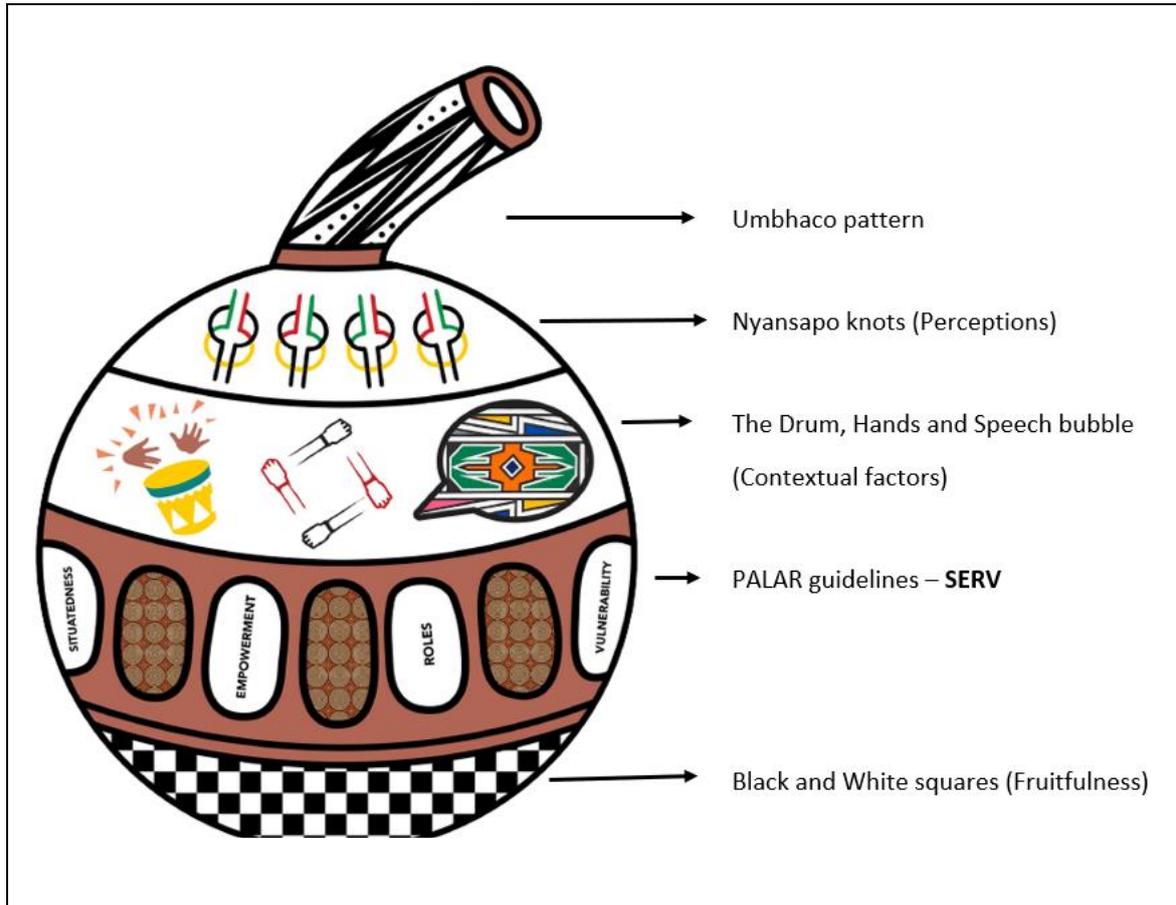
The first section of the calabash (Image 10) is a black and white pattern that reflects *umbhaco*, traditional attire that is usually worn by the AmaXhosa tribe in traditional celebratory gatherings. The AmaXhosa tribe is a South African tribe of proud people whose cultural heritage is close to their hearts (Vukuzenzele, 2008). The use of this pattern echoes the pride that African people feel towards their culture.

Aragbuwa and Omotunde (2022) described proverbs as richly characterised, brief oral expressions that symbolise the essence of most African cultures. The second section of the calabash uses *nyansapo* knots to represent the participants' voices. African people use proverbs, idioms, and metaphors to express themselves. The Akan tribe in Ghana uses the *nyansapo* knot as a symbol of wisdom that suggests: "When the wise ties a knot it takes an intelligent mind to unite it" (Okrah, 2003, p. 6). In this framework, the wisdom knot acknowledges the participants' wisdom by positioning each participant as *isisele senyathi* [a reservoir of knowledge].

The third section of the calabash depicts an African drum, hands holding each other in a diamond shape, and a speech bubble made of the Ndebele print. This section displays the contextual factors that must be considered when using the PALAR approach in the African context. The African drum represents culture. The African drum is Western Africa's most common cultural symbol (Oladumiye, 2018) and is a meaningful instrument of communication in traditional African society (Ushe, 2012). The hands beating the drum signify oneness; the sound made by the drum is only as good as the person beating the drum, meaning that when conducting CBR, everyone must work as a team, moving with the same rhythm of solidarity. The hands represent cohesion. PALAR is cyclical and in, CBR there can be multiple tasks that must be completed simultaneously. Cohesion becomes crucial in this instance. A lack of cohesion results in chaos. Cohesion will enhance the success of these programmes and enable successful completion of various tasks. The diamond shape signifies the richness that results from working together. The wealth of knowledge will benefit stakeholders involved. The colours of the hands carry meaning as well. To be able to conduct CBR, you need to have love for people. This love is indicated in the calabash by the colour red. The colour black is the absorption of all colours (Cherry, 2022) and in this calabash, black represents strength—we are stronger together. The speech bubble represents language. Africa has many different languages, and this variety is represented by the Ndebele print in the speech bubble. The Ndebele tribe is a Southern African tribe known for their beautiful colourful traditional designs. The vibrant Ndebele colours symbolise the diverse Indigenous languages of the African people.

## Image 10

*The African Calabash Framework (Rangana, 2023)*



The fourth section of the calabash represents the SERV (situatedness, empowerment, roles, and vulnerability) guidelines on how PALAR can be used in the African context as an engagement method (Rangana et al., 2023). There are seven circles in this section to represent the values of PALAR known as the 7Cs. Of the seven circles, four circles display the SERV guidelines, and three circles are covered in an African print called *isishweshwe*, which is a printed cotton fabric commonly used for traditional Southern African clothing. Those three circles represent the PALAR process, also known as the 3Rs. The circular shapes represent the cyclical nature of PALAR, and the covering of three circles with *isishweshwe* represents the adaptation of the PALAR processes to the African context.

The fifth section of the calabash is made up of small black and white squares. This pattern is taken from AmaZulu weaving. The AmaZulu are also a South African tribe, and the small squares symbolise fruitfulness. In the AmaZulu culture, basket weaving is one of the crafts that epitomise the African identity (Nettleton, 2010).

The epistemological focus of Sections 1, 2, 3, and 5 are the philosophical underpinnings, while Section 4 is the methodological approach to CBR.

### **The Implications of the African Calabash Framework for Policies on Community Engagement in Diverse Communities**

The African Calabash Framework holds significant implications for shaping community engagement policies in diverse African contexts. According to the African Union (2022), effective engagement policies must honour local traditions while incorporating innovative practices to build trust, enhance collaboration, and drive sustainable development. Although various policies address community engagement across the continent, a significant gap remains in policies specifically focused on community–university engagement. Successful engagement policies prioritise grassroots participation, ensuring that local voices contribute to decision-making (Juta, 2023). However, challenges such as language barriers, power imbalances, and a lack of cultural sensitivity (Enaifoghe & Adetiba, 2019) have highlighted the need for adaptive frameworks that promote equity and representation. The African Calabash Framework embodies these principles by emphasising inclusivity, respect for cultural norms, empowerment, and transparency. Furthermore, it positions all stakeholders, including community members, as reservoirs of knowledge—reinforcing the importance of recognising Indigenous knowledge systems in community–university engagement. Research by Masoga et al. (2021) advocated for methodologies aligned with African worldviews, stressing the integration of Indigenous perspectives in engagement practices. Similarly, Bank et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of African universities adopting context-specific engagement strategies rather than relying on Western-centric models in order to ensure more effective and sustainable outcomes. The African Calabash Framework responds to this call by contextualising PALAR—a traditionally Westernised methodology—making it more applicable to African contexts.

Grounded in the PALAR methodology, the African Calabash Framework offers a contextually relevant blueprint for community engagement. It not only acknowledges the need to include local voices in decision-making but also provides practical strategies for achieving this by integrating cultural intelligence, language, and identity as core elements. Nevertheless, implementing the African Calabash Framework in diverse communities presents certain challenges. Although it addresses some of PALAR's limitations, it still retains others. For instance, although the framework emphasises situatedness, recognising the uniqueness of each community's context, it does not eliminate PALAR's cyclical nature, which can make the process time-consuming. Additionally, its broad representation of the "African context" may be perceived as overly generic. For example, the Khoisan people, who identify as the First Indigenous People, continue to advocate for recognition as Africans because they are not officially acknowledged as such. This highlights socio-political complexities that may arise in diverse communities. However, the African Calabash Framework remains applicable given that its underlying theories transcend socio-political tensions, emphasising identity as a crucial factor in community engagement through PALAR.

Ultimately, the African Calabash Framework offers culturally responsive and inclusive practices that strengthen community–university partnerships. While it may require refinement to address certain challenges, its emphasis on identity, equity, and participatory processes makes it a valuable tool for fostering meaningful engagement in diverse African contexts.

## Conclusion

Although PALAR’s principles are in alignment with some African values such as *ubuntu*, given its Westernised context, it was not entirely suitable for use in the African context; it had to be adapted and contextualised for the African context. Through this study, we generated data that sought to understand how an Action Learning Set experienced the use of PALAR during their engagement sessions. From the lessons we learnt from the findings, we were able to design a framework that adapts and contextualises the usage of PALAR in the African context—the African Calabash Framework. The African Calabash Framework does not only represent a contextually relevant artefact, but it is a representation of the philosophical underpinnings that ground and guide engagement in the African context.

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