

PALAR as a methodology for community engagement by faculties of education

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Community engagement (CE) is a core function of the university in South Africa. In the field of education, the imperative to pursue and promote CE provides an exciting opportunity for researchers to work with school communities to address the many challenges that threaten the quality of teaching and learning. Yet, relatively few researchers in education faculties have expertise in this emerging area of scholarship. There is therefore a need to develop among academics a capacity for community-based research and deep knowledge of how to approach it effectively. This conceptual article positions participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as a creative, innovative, collaborative and self-developed way to achieve this purpose. Findings from various PALAR projects, in which the authors have participated, provide evidence of PALAR's utility for disrupting traditional notions of partnership, power relations and knowledge creation. However, they also highlight the challenges this form of enquiry poses within academic environments geared for research that follows a more pre-determined, researcher-controlled trajectory. These findings are helpful for stimulating thinking about how such challenges can be addressed to ensure that the research, action, and knowledge we create through this process actually translate into practical community improvement.

Keywords: action learning; action research; community engagement; higher education; participatory research; school communities

Introduction

The traditional view of university researchers working alone in their 'ivory tower' may be changing. But the majority of tertiary researchers still have scant experience in engaging in educational research with communities for social and educational improvement, seeing it as radical (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2010) and, we would suspect, risky. The traditional administrative and academic requirements of higher education institutions generally are not geared for a collaborative and emergent form of research that recognizes the participant as a co-researcher and co-creator of knowledge.

This gives rise to two primary needs, both vital to developing a vibrant research culture within and beyond the university. One is to develop among academics capacity for community engagement that can draw constructively from and can feed back into local knowledge to identify and meet community needs. The other is to concomitantly

change the way administrators, academics and community members think about research and their respective involvement in the processes so that necessary structural adaptations can be institutionalized within the higher education system.

We have been instrumental in developing a genre of action research that we call PALAR. Drawing from our experience in various PALAR projects, we suggest that adopting and adapting this participatory methodology to develop researchers' capacity to carry out community engagement effectively will help to address both of these issues. Importantly at this early stage of PALAR's development, we have uncovered many challenges – systemic and in practice – as we implement a collaborative methodology within institutional and community contexts where the idea of active participation and equal partnerships in community-based research is still relatively novel.

We believe that the questions and concerns we are grappling with will help to stimulate debate and discussion around these issues and further improve PALAR as a beneficial approach to our need to engage effectively with communities for their own sustainable development, in South Africa and beyond. Our long-term research aim is to begin to develop grounded theory around how university researchers, specifically those working in education contexts, can conduct educational research that more fully serves the learning and development needs of both community and academy.

Community-university research partnerships in the South African context

Most of the literature on university/community partnerships in research stems from studies conducted in westernized contexts (e.g. Cruz & Giles, 2000; Minkler, 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003) and most of these studies have been in disciplines such as the health and medical sciences. Service learning appears to have dominated as the main conceptualization of community engagement in higher education in South Africa (Lazarus, Erasmus, Hendricks, Nduna & Slamati, 2008), especially in faculties of education. We appreciate that there can be more than one effective approach to community engagement, and that service learning does make a valuable contribution to student learning and development. However we recognize a serious need to develop the capacity of tertiary researchers to conduct meaningful, participatory research that promotes sustainable social change in education communities. Community engagement from this perspective should expand “the role of higher education from a passive producer of knowledge to an active participant in collaborative discoveries” (AUECA, 2008:2).

We endorse the concept of *community engagement for social change*, a notion in which *engagement* requires academics to conduct research *with*, rather than *on* people, and to perceive them as participants, rather than mere informants, subjects and/or recipients of knowledge. Beneficial change emanates from a process of social transformation (Gauthamadas, 2005), which has to be driven by the involvement of the community concerned. Since the process is people-centred it is non-linear, emergent and unpredictable. However, the people-centred nature of this approach also makes beneficial change more likely to be sustained, since participants come to see themselves as active agents in improving their own and their community's quality of life

and thus have a more firmly vested interest in sustaining the results of their efforts. While there is an emerging body of knowledge that advances this paradigm (e.g. De Lange, Mnisi, Mitchell & Park, 2010; Ferreira, Ebersöhn & Mbongwe, 2013; Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013), relatively few education researchers in South Africa currently have the capacity to engage in meaningful community-based research to produce both practical and knowledge outcomes (Slamat, 2010). As Minkler (2005:4) pointed out, there is a difference between research that is “community placed” and that which is “community based”, the latter requiring authentic collaboration rather than token involvement which is usually accepted as adequate in the first. A truly participatory approach, as we propose in this article, will help to promote sustainable change in school communities. We are not suggesting that PALAR is the only or necessarily the best research methodology to attain this end. But by disseminating our learning, we hope to raise awareness of the need to build theory and practice around research methodologies for community engagement that are suitable for African contexts, applying an inclusive, egalitarian, purposive and participative mindset to the research task. Our work focuses on the field of education research, but the epistemological and methodological assumptions and processes of PALAR could be applied in any field in higher education.

Participatory action learning and action research

So what is PALAR (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) and why have we chosen to highlight this genre to guide community engagement? In this section we discuss some features of PALAR that distinguish it from other genres of action research and that we argue make it more suitable for developing democratic, mutually rewarding partnerships between members of the academy and external education communities, the latter defined as any group of stakeholders in education who wish to engage in action to attain specific goals to improve their educational circumstances. We substantiate our argument with *verbatim* quotations and examples from our various PALAR projects. Since we are working in education, the postgraduate students are often also community members. However, for the purposes of this article, we refer to them as postgraduate students. Teachers and learners are the main community members in these projects.

PALAR emphasizes both learning and research

Action research has two aims, according to Dick (2004), first, to take planned action to improve situations, and second, to simultaneously research the change process to deepen understanding and thus develop theories to explain the change that takes place. Based on our experience of participatory research, we believe that the community participants are usually more interested in the first aim, focusing on improving their quality of life, with the academic researchers prioritizing the second. This is not to suggest that academic researchers are not interested in improving the life circumstances of the community, but, because they are held accountable for producing research outputs emanating from their engagement, writing up and disseminating the learning are a key task.

Table 1 Overview of research projects referred to in article

Project Name	Funder	Main research aim	Action learning set participants	Methodology
Action Research for School Leaders (2010-2011)	DG Murray trust	To equip school leaders to facilitate the process of action research for school improvement	Masters student; supervisor; 24 school leaders from disadvantaged communities in 3 primary and 4 high schools	P A L A R
Masilingane Phase 1 (2009)	MacAIDS	To enable teachers to create a school environment where gender equality is practised openly and consistently, thereby helping to change gender norms	University researcher, 8 teachers from 6 schools in disadvantaged communities (who then led projects in their schools with learners/teachers)	R
Masilingane Phase 2 (2011)	HIVOS	To enable teachers and learners to act as agents of change to raise awareness around gender inequalities and influence the adoption of more equitable gender norms	4 university researchers, 8 teachers/learners from same schools as Phase 1. At each of the schools the AL set consisted of university researcher (s), teacher (s) and learners (ranging from 12 to 32 learners)	
PALAR for community engagement (2012)	AusAID	To develop capacity among tertiary researchers for community-based, participatory research	4 teams, each conducting community-based research, each team consisting of a supervisor, PG student and community member	
Participatory Action Research for Community Engagement by Tertiary Institutions (2013-2015)	NRF	To develop capacity among tertiary researchers for community-based, participatory research; to develop grounded theory about the process of PALAR as a means of community engagement by faculties of education	3 supervisors; 1 post doc; 6 doctoral students; 2 masters students. Each PG student has an action learning set in the community in their respective projects	

PALAR follows a cycle similar to any other participatory action research – collaborative identification of needs, deciding on the best course of action, implementing the action, evaluating it and then deciding what further action to take, based on participants’ critical reflection upon the process (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; McIntyre, 2008; Piggot-Irvine, 2012). Participatory action research (PAR) is based on a critical, emancipatory paradigm (Jordan, 2008) as is PALAR, but the latter emphasizes the action learning aspect as well as the research aspect. This explicit recognition of the two different, though complementary, interests opens negotiation between university and community participant-researchers as to what aspect they wish to take the lead in at the different stages of the action research process.

For some community members with limited or no exposure to higher education and ‘research’ (and perhaps for some postgraduates or new academics), the inclusion of ‘learning’ is also likely to make the PALAR project something with which they can identify – less intimidating and more practicable. Of course, the action learning component is vital for all parties to the project, but community members may choose to focus less on actually writing up and disseminating their learning or may choose different ways to disseminate. For example, in a PALAR project, school leaders in the Eastern Cape (see Table 1), chose to write accounts of their projects as straightforward, clearly written narratives of what they did to improve the situation. Publishing their stories in this format on the web enabled them to share their experiences with other school leaders, departmental officials and other readers far beyond (to read these accounts see <http://aru.nmmu.ac.za/Projects/Action-Research-for-School-Leaders>), providing them with a chance to influence practice and policy and to reach an audience a journal article would not have reached. We, the academic researchers in this community engagement project, published our research in journals that met the requirements for research output and to feed the knowledge we had created into academic discourse (Wood & Govender, 2013). Thus, the learning and research of both university and community researchers was disseminated, but to different target groups. We have found that unless we emphasize the learning aspect of the process, and explicitly recognize the community participants as co-researchers, valuable local and contextualized knowledge is often lost to the wider community and policymakers.

In the case of faculties of education, where postgraduate students are mostly teachers and therefore members of a school community, they often wear the hats of both academic and community researcher. An example hereof is Blackberry (2013) who found the learning/research distinction extremely helpful as she battled to separate her role as facilitator of teacher professional development in e-learning from her doctoral student role. The action learning process enabled her to collaborate with her colleagues and reflect on their mutual learning, while the research component provided a framework for the generation, analysis and interpretation of data at each stage.

The 3Rs of PALAR: relationship, reflection and recognition

Kearney et al. (2013) have identified three components of PALAR that guide the

process and can be used as a form of validation. These three components are: the development of democratic, authentic, trusting and supportive *relationships*; the process of continual critical *reflection* in a collaborative learning context; and *recognition* of the achievements of all participants. An understanding behind PALAR's approach to learning and research is that prospective participants often begin with imaginings of traditional academic research and consequently with resistance, seeing no real benefit in it for them (Watson, 2001). PALAR encourages participants' commitment through three key features – the start-up workshop, the creation of action learning sets, and celebration of achievements and milestones – all of which foster relationship, reflection and recognition, and ultimately participant learning and sustainable successful outcomes (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011).

The *start-up workshop* provides a space for all participants to come together to begin to negotiate how and why they will work together and to forge collaborative partnerships. This workshop ideally takes place over a few days, at a venue away from institutional or community settings, to allow participants to give their undivided attention to building relations and planning strategy. Relationship deepening exercises help participants to get to know each other, to trust each other, and to recognize the common bonds that unite them. Concerns and expectations around power relations are discussed openly and the PALAR process is deliberated in relation to the project that the group is embarking on. Comments from participants are typically similar to the ones below, taken from the reflections of participants on our National Research Foundation (NRF) funded project (2013) on community engagement:

I had expected that we would be sitting and listening to theoretical explanations and instructions...it was refreshing that we interacted within smaller groups as well as the larger group, getting a better understanding of each other and what is expected of us, with no power plays between supervisor and supervisees. It set the example of practice for us when we interact with community participants in our own research. The smaller group interaction highlighted for me the value and potential that each person possesses which often goes undetected. The style of the whole process encouraged sharing of concerns and fears quite easily and I feel that the group will work well together even when there are differing ideas/opinions (Masters student).

...the facilitator had very good skills for bringing all on board as an inclusive exercise. The open exercise on "Turning Points" deepened the relationships within the group as sharing went deeper than just cognitive ability, but touched on the feelings, drivers and motivation for all of us being there (Doctoral candidate).

These reflections suggest that from the outset, the start-up workshop creates opportunity for all participants to begin to challenge their existing notions about what constitutes research, who creates legitimate knowledge, and who is in control of the process. At this workshop, participants discuss their level of participation at each stage

of the project. Although much action research literature stresses the need for equal participation of both academic and community researchers, we have found in practice it is often more useful for participants to negotiate responsibilities and power relations at each stage of the process. Rather than equal participation, our shared understanding recognizes the equality of those involved as participants and the need to nurture their different abilities to contribute to the project in different ways at different times. Frequently community participants are happy to allow the university researchers to take the lead in organizing logistical matters, such as travel, venues and catering, or in data analysis, as long as the community participants have the opportunity to confirm the research findings. Given that many community members work in time-scarce and resource-scarce contexts, they are relieved to be able to take a back seat and allow others who have more resources and experience with tasks like these to take responsibility at specific stages. They do enjoy being actively involved in data generation and in dissemination of the findings, particularly through participatory methods. We believe that this does not endanger the emancipatory intent or the egalitarian ethos of action research because the transparent negotiations ensure that the interests of all participants are made explicit from the outset, engendering trust and feelings of informed, authentic, rather than forced, participation and power sharing.

The action research project has left behind a climate where people work together and share a lot and such climate is conducive for both personal and professional growth. And all these create a climate that is relaxed and easy to work in (School leader, DGM project).

The relationships initiated at the start-up workshop are deepened and developed through regular meetings of all participants, as they come together as an *action learning set* to critically *reflect* on progress with their project/s. PALAR focuses not only on improving situations, but also on the learning that emanates from participants' critical and collaborative reflection on the personal and communal experiences of the change process (Wood, Morar & Mostert, 2007) during the action learning set meetings. This learning process is important as it renders the positive outcomes of PALAR more sustainable; the epistemological and ontological insight promoted by dialectic reflection has far-reaching and long-lasting effects on people's thinking and actions (Polanyi, 1958) and on their ability and will to sustain project outcomes. As Pegg, Reading and Williams (2007) explain, sharing and reflection in the action learning set meetings encourage deep learning. Somekh (2008:5) believes this approach to collaborative learning enables participants to create knowledge about "the interrelationship between human behaviour and sociocultural situations" in specific contexts, rather than simply producing theory detached from its context:

One can make positive changes at the school that not only better the school but also help to form a better relationship with staff and parents and develop a mutual understanding of the difficulties they have in bringing up their children (Teacher, DGM project).

Critical, collaborative reflection involves challenging existing assumptions and looking for different ways of seeing things (Fletcher, 2005). It recognizes that experience in itself is neither productive nor unproductive, and it is how we reflect on experience that gives it significance and heightens our self-awareness. It asks questions that are insightfully self-conscious, including about the influence of the participants themselves upon the knowledge they create. It encourages the dissenting voice that can lead to the formation of a new consensus of which all project participants take ownership. The action learning set enables the participants to form a close group sharing a common purpose to investigate and decide on matters that are a real-life concern. This process is itself a transformative learning experience through which participants build confidence, self-esteem and sense of purpose (Smith, Willms & Johnson, 1997). The opportunity for participants to interact with each other in a safe environment gives them a voice and enables them to create insider knowledge needed for a comprehensive understanding of change and development in their own community (Brydon-Millar, Greenwood & Maguire, 2003). As one action learning set participant put it:

At first I was very worried about the action learning set meetings because I didn't know what to expect and thought that everybody would already know everything and I am a total novice in PALAR. The sessions exceeded all my expectations and I was like a sponge absorbing as much as possible. It was astounding to me that everybody was treated the same way and everybody wanted to learn from each other and work as a group towards a common goal. I met a lot of different people bringing rich diversity to the table – x university's people surprised me, what a wonderful experience (Masters student and teacher, NRF project)

The third component that distinguishes PALAR is its *recognition* of participant and project achievements. Too often, university researchers work with community members and leave the research site without publicly acknowledging the valid contributions to knowledge and practice by these community members. This leaves the community members feeling unrecognized and unvalued (Watson, 2001) and detracts from their experience of the partnership. Rather than using the opportunity to publicly reaffirm the all-round value of university/community engagement, it increases the perceived divide between the needs of the academy and of the community, which can *negatively influence* the formation of future research relationships. Giving participants an opportunity to identify and possibly pass on their learning publicly and to celebrate each other's contributions to the project's success also provides a place to discuss further needs that arise from the project findings and paves the way for continued collaboration (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011), as action research projects never really come to a definite end.

The action research process is spiral in nature and the need for community development is ongoing. But at the end of each phase there is space – and, we suggest, need – for participants to present their work to a wider audience through public semi-

nars, community meetings or performances. Academics normally present their work at conferences and publish in journals, but it is important to create equal opportunity for the community members to showcase their knowledge and practical contributions. Such events also serve as an awareness-raising intervention at community level, with the potential to influence others towards positive change. In one of our projects, working with youths and teachers from impoverished communities around gender issues, we arranged for the youths to present two workshops at an international academic conference, which they evaluated as an experience that really helped them to rethink their ideas of themselves as empowered young community members, not simply children with no real say in their community's development, formalized policy or other "adult" matters (Wood, 2012:362).

Earlier in the same project, the participating teachers hosted a seminar for their fellow teachers, department officials and academics at the university (Wood, 2009). They published their accounts of the gender projects they had led at their schools in a book distributed to all who attended the seminar. They also presented their work at the seminar through presentations via Powerpoints, posters and drama/poetry involving their learners (see <http://aru.nmmu.ac.za/Writings>). This made the teacher participants feel that they had something valuable to say:

It was such a great feeling to be listened to by so many people, and I never thought we could produce a real book – this makes me proud to be a teacher, the first I have felt this in a long time. I am motivated to keep on working to improve gender respect in my school, I know we can make a difference if we all work together using PALAR (participating teacher, Masilingane project).

Teachers from this project were also invited to form a panel at a national Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) community of practice meeting to discuss their experiences with an audience of academics representing all the higher education institutions in South Africa (HIV & AIDS Education Community of Practice, 2011). The youth they teach have continued to present dramas and poetry at community functions and to display the visual artifacts (photographs, drawings) they made during the project, thus continuing to act as agents of positive change around gender issues in their community (see Wood, 2012). The PALAR approach provides opportunities for experiences and outcomes like this within each project, deepening the enthusiasm, commitment and motivation of both university and community partners to continue their research relationship. The opportunity to showcase their project achievements helps also to raise awareness around the need to develop leadership for sustainable change, as voiced by one community participant:

I want to create a situation where even if leave my school the projects I have initiated will continue because they have a solid groundation [sic] which is PALAR. I do not want to feel like I cannot go elsewhere because I am scared the projects I was taking part in would collapse (Community participant, AusAID project).

However, PALAR also brings challenges. The guiding principles of PALAR, which provide useful criteria against which to evaluate participant actions and interactions throughout the research project, can present ‘testing moments’, which through reflection become learning opportunities, within contexts geared towards less collaborative forms of enquiry.

Challenges of implementing PALAR as a form of community engagement

Zuber-Skerritt (2012) refers to the democratic, participatory and emancipatory values and behaviours that comprise the paradigm of PALAR as the 7Cs: communication, collaboration, commitment, coaching, critical reflection, competence and character building. But, as Koutselini (2008) points out, action research is not an easy process. We have found inherent tensions between the needs of the academy and of the community, which often lead to difficulties in establishing authentic participation of community and building up trusting relationships for sustainable community engagement. Deeply entrenched ideas about research and researchers and power relations between community participants and academics also take time to dislodge. The following discussion outlines some of the main challenges we have encountered as we attempt to implement the PALAR methodology, using the 7Cs to assess the interaction with community members.

Communication is an important aspect of PALAR that plays a significant role in forming trusting relationships. However, achieving clear communication is not always easy, as one doctoral student in our current NRF project reflected on her first attempt to meet with her action learning set in the community:

I learnt that involving people step by step in everything you are doing with them counts a lot and this is something that you as a researcher can easily miss. For instance, before conducting research, I ... had to clarify timeframes and that is where I blundered without noticing. In my first meeting with the participants, I explained everything that is expected of them before they could sign the consent letters. I remember one asking if they could be given time before signing but I politely requested them to sign that time because the forms were due for submission. ... they signed and we set a date for the next meeting that did not succeed. I discovered that they had a problem of meeting every week. I therefore had to agree with them to meet once in two weeks as they suggested. This taught me that it is easy to be deceived. I thought that participants were happy and ready to start working whilst they were not. I did not respect their views by not allowing them more time before signing, which means I did not listen to them, I did not fully involve them in deciding on meetings. I have done it my own way because I wanted to submit my ethics forms. I learnt that there are no small matters, everything matters, small matters can easily turn big and block cooperation from participants. My other lesson is that, when working with people, you must be prepared to compromise a lot.

It is evident that the pressure felt by the student to submit ethics forms and to start the research process blinded her to the feelings of the participants. This resulted in her losing potential participants before the project had even started. Fortunately, the **critical reflection** induced her change in thinking so that she could appreciate her mistake and change her subsequent approach. **Commitment** from community participants is not easy to achieve – they have to be convinced that their input will make a difference and that they and their community will benefit from the research at least as much as the academic researchers will. Unless time is taken to discuss **collaboration**, and what this really involves in roles, expectations and responsibilities, the relationship will not be conducive for co-generating knowledge through authentic cooperation in the research process. As the doctoral student's reflection above shows, **compromise** is another C critical to ensure the success of the collaborative relationship. We have therefore rethought the original 7Cs and have replaced 'character building' with 'compromise', recognizing that all of these 7Cs of PALAR contribute to character building.

The academic requirement for the postgraduate student to submit a detailed proposal and obtain ethics clearance before entering into relationship with the community encourages, if not compels, the student to define the problem and the research design in isolation from the community participants. This is not in line with a truly participatory design, where the research focus stems from the expressed needs of the community (Piggot-Irvine, 2012). For this reason, it is important to make sure that problem and research design are discussed and negotiated in collaboration with community members at the start-up workshop, with opportunity for community members to appreciate how they can become involved in data generation, analysis and dissemination. However, this raises another problem that we have encountered in our PALAR work: community members often perceive themselves as not **competent** in matters concerning research and look to the academic researcher to take the lead. Changing this perception takes time, so opportunity should be created within the action learning sets for community participants to voice their opinions and have their input validated.

We have found that if this is done consistently, in an atmosphere of trust, honesty, respect for diversity and openness to new ideas, community-member participants begin to recognize their own potential and their value as co-researchers.

We've learnt that sometimes we are faced with challenges that we can solve, given that we actually identify them ... we devise strategies to help deal with them, so the project has been very helpful in making me see that all the problems within the school environment can be solved if we work together as a team ... because sometimes the teachers do have good strategies ... so when you ask for input or how they would go about solving certain problems, it makes them feel appreciated and also like part of the process (School leader, DG Murray Foundation project).

Through **coaching** and learning from one another throughout the research process,

traditional ways of thinking about research can be shifted; the academics begin to value community knowledge and skills, and the community participants begin to understand that they are also capable and competent researchers, as two typical reflections from our AusAID project participants show:

PALAR offers the ideal means for achieving this goal, as it positions academics as fellow participants, and not as 'knowers' who need to 'train' the 'unknowing' in-service teachers. This approach thus has the ability to dismantle hierarchies, restore historical power relations and enhance sincere collaboration between all parties (supervisor).

I think PALAR is a great concept that can help me greatly to progress further in my work. Currently at school, our Community Development Committee is made up of a group of teachers and has no parent or community representation. I now know that it is vital for members of our community to be involved in their community's development. This workshop has taught me to be careful not to create or perpetuate the divide between them (community) and us (teachers). This development project must be owned by all of us who are involved in it (community member, AusAID project).

However, living out these characteristics within the research process takes time, patience and thoughtful effort. In contrast to traditional research approaches, where the empirical data collection may take only a couple of weeks, PALAR requires longer involvement in a specific community. This creates a problem for the university researchers, particularly when postgraduate students are involved, since timeframes for degree completion are short and non-negotiable. Reminding ourselves of the intrinsic importance of PALAR's 3Rs – relationships, reflection, and recognition – is helpful for sustaining the project itself while under way, as well as for sustaining the project's outcomes for ongoing community development. As one teacher on the Masilingane project commented: *PALAR provides us with the tool to take this issue further – it opens up the real reasons for problems so that workable solutions can be found.*

Conclusion

By sharing our experiences of using PALAR in a South African education context, we have argued that PALAR is potentially a useful methodology for engaging in educational research with communities for social and educational improvement. However, it also poses challenges within the administrative environment of the higher education system that was created to serve an interventionist, rather than a collaborative, approach to community research. Similarly, the entrenched ideas that both the community and academic researchers hold about research, its usefulness to the community, and the value of community participants as knowledge creators, also present barriers to authentic participation and collaboration.

The methodology of PALAR has been researched and developed in a primarily Australian context, mostly within the framework of higher education and organiza-

tional development. The knowledge we have shared in this publication from reflecting upon our own experiences of PALAR in South Africa has potential to help develop an approach to university/community engagement relevant within socially and economically challenged environments.

We aim to promote further discussion and research into feasible ways to conduct university/community engagement to continue generating positive and sustainable social change. That is why we propose that there is a need to investigate ways to improve research methodology, including its consistency between concepts/values and application/practice on the one hand, and with the higher education system on the other. Useful questions include:

- How can we adapt the current academic requirements for registering a degree to make them more accepting of the emergent and uncertain nature of PALAR?
- How can we ensure that the research questions developed for proposal purposes are something that the community is interested to participate in?
- How can we enhance the development of a trusting relationship with community members within a relatively short period of time?
- How can we adapt ethical considerations to ensure that community conceptualizations of what is ethical are addressed?
- How can we use the idea of the 7Cs and 3Rs of PALAR as a means to monitor and evaluate participation and power relations within the research process?

Many more questions also need to be answered and will continue to emerge as PALAR is applied as a useful methodology for universities to engage with communities – to conduct research, create conceptual and practical knowledge, and promote continuous learning through these processes. All stages of PALAR are for the mutual benefit of those involved. We trust that in this spirit our paper will contribute to the emerging body of knowledge about community engagement that involves university and community members in finding ways to improve the quality of life for themselves and their communities in a sustainable way. We believe that our approach, in and through this article, of itself demonstrates the active, participatory, inclusive, self-critical and trusting approach of PALAR towards creating knowledge for effective community and university development.

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