

# Community development in higher education: how do academics ensure their community-based research makes a difference?

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**Abstract** Community engagement is positioned as a core strategic aim in higher education internationally, yet one could question how ‘engaged’ such endeavours are. Community-based research is supposed to promote the co-creation of contextually relevant knowledge to assist communities to improve their capacity for addressing issues they deem important for learning and development. However, it remains a challenge to conduct authentic participatory and democratic research within the restricted time frames and rigid ethical requirements of academia, traditionally geared towards a more researcher-driven form of enquiry. The adversities experienced by participants living in contexts of poverty tend to immobilize rather than encourage individual and collective agency. It is thus difficult to expose underlying structural barriers to development, unless academic researchers adopt epistemological and methodological paradigms that require meta-reflection on the process and foreground community definitions of what change is valuable. Drawing on my reflections of collaborating with an HIV and AIDS agency in a socio-economically challenged community, I discuss the underlying and inherent socio-structural inequalities that influenced participation, power relations and communication and threatened the emancipatory outcomes of the participatory action research (PAR) process. I explain how using a capability lens to guide a PAR process enabled me to assist participants

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to choose an alternative pathway to learning and development. Based on my learning, I offer some suggestions that other academics might find useful to help them promote the epistemological, practical and emancipatory outcomes fundamental to PAR designs if they are to contribute to lasting community development.

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## Introduction

Since we live in a country (and world) where poverty, disease and other social ills continue to be a part of daily life for the majority of people (Wood, 2014), I feel morally obliged to engage in research that helps to address such injustices and contributes to sustainable community development. A driving aim for Higher Education in South Africa is 'to redress past inequalities and to transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs, and to respond to new realities and opportunities' (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2013, p. 1). Yet, in general, the knowledge produced by the academy has had little positive impact on the quality of life of those we research (Nhomo, 2012). Our recommendations on how social problems can be ameliorated are often proffered as one-sided knowledge outputs without actively engaging with the communities in question (Erasmus, 2005). However, there are increasing calls for higher education to shift its thinking about community engagement, to conceptualize it as a means of exchanging knowledge and resources to attain mutually beneficial outcomes for all involved (Bingle and Hatcher, 2002; Odora Hoppers and Richards, 2011). There is growing recognition that unless we do so, it will be difficult to generate knowledge that can be translated into relevant, sustainable community change and development (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012).

I view community engagement as a key focus of my educational research, driven by a desire to collaborate with people to learn how to create a better life. However, too often, community engagement projects are conducted within a short time frame, with academics withdrawing as soon as they have enough data to satisfy their research requirements (Bender, 2008). I argue that this is unethical, since sustainable development is hardly feasible without the prolonged engagement needed to first raise awareness of the potential and possibility for change among participants whose lives are characterized by multiple adversities. How do we engage with communities who might not want our 'help', either because they are so deeply immersed in the situation that they cannot imagine a different reality or because they are protective of customs that offer them some form of stability, control or comfort in an otherwise harsh life? How do we create space for people to set and attain

personal and professional goals that are meaningful to them? These are some of the questions that I am grappling with as I attempt to undertake community-based research (CBR) in a Faculty of Education. This is also an international problem, as universities the world over battle to engage with communities impacted by historically and structurally embedded problems (Morrell, Sorensen and Howarth, 2015). In such contexts, deep-seated social and cultural issues shape the thinking, attitudes and responses of community participants within the project, yet often they go undetected by the academic researcher focused only on the stated outcomes of the project.

One way of beginning to form working relationships with prospective community participants is to engage with the so-called 'third sector' (Erasmus and Albertyn, 2014), or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Not only does this help university researchers (outsiders) gain entry into the community, but it also promotes sustainable change, since the organization remains in the community once the academic researchers withdraw. Since the organization is embedded in the community, it will possess a better understanding of the socio-cultural factors that influence community interaction and thinking. This all sounds good in theory, but working with NGOs at grassroots level is far from simple.

In many cases, grassroots NGOs are staffed by community members, rather than professionally trained community developers. This has both advantages and disadvantages. The immediate advantage is that the NGO members usually have deep insight into the community psyche and *modus operandi*, thus they are able to tailor their programmes in a contextually relevant way and in a language accessible to all. They live in the community and are thus in tune with the real issues that impact on daily lives of people – their empathy and insight position them as valuable sources of local knowledge. However, precisely because they are integral members of the community, they have been exposed to the same social and cultural *memes*, which often means that they are constrained by the very patterns of thinking, being and doing that they are attempting to change (Mansuri and Rao, 2004).

So, what implications does this have for open communication, democratic engagement, sustainable learning and development and the attainment of mutually beneficial outcomes? These are all basic tenets of the participatory research methodologies that are being hailed as exemplary for effective community engagement by higher education (Lazarus *et al.*, 2008; Hall, 2010). Yet, the operationalization of such values and principles is not easy when academics are constrained by bureaucracy, academic calendars and traditional notions of knowledge and power (Kearney, Wood and Zuber-Skerritt 2013; Wood and Zuber-Skerritt 2013). It is often much easier for the academic researcher to adopt a directive stance – after all, he/she must make sure they get the data needed to meet the research outputs for which they are held

accountable. It is relatively easy to write articles in language that pays homage to democratic community involvement, when, in reality, most of the project decisions were made by the academic researchers, including the actual focus of the study. So how do we, as academic researchers, ensure that the project is community-based, rather than just community-placed (Bailey, Koney and Furco, 2009)?

I attempt to answer such questions by drawing from a case study of my own experience of collaborating with community educators working for a grassroots NGO in a severely under-resourced urban area in South Africa. After sketching the background to the project, I present the theoretical and methodological paradigms which guided my collaboration with the community participants, before using these lenses to critically reflect on how issues endemic to the community participants' lives impacted on the trajectory of the project. I contend that for authentic, collaborative engagement that leads to lasting development and learning for all, academic researchers need to constantly critically reflect on the research relationships to ensure that they are adhering to the participatory principles that enable sustainable learning and development of both academic and community participants. Drawing on examples from this particular case, I put forward an argument for using a capabilities approach (Sen, 1999, 2010) within a PAR design to attain this end. I then conclude with some key messages that may help guide other researchers who want to ensure that they are contributing to sustainable community learning and development.

## Project background

In a country where 12.2 percent of the total population are estimated to be HIV positive, with the prevalence much higher in sub-economic and rural areas, there is an urgent need for HIV prevention education. Approximately 6.2 million black South Africans are living with HIV, with the female population significantly more affected than the male (Shisana *et al.*, 2014). I was approached by an international development agency that had funded an earlier HIV prevention project of mine to continue this work. They stipulated that the project had to address the link between gender inequalities and HIV vulnerability and that I should complete it within six months. Hence, from the start, I entered the field with a specific focus and time frame – a common practice in community-based higher education research, even if it is not ideal to determine the focus before interacting with the community partners. I thus purposefully selected a particular organization to meet my needs. The NGO is run and staffed by unemployed youth who act as HIV/AIDS and TB educators in schools and other community venues. They are certified by, and receive a small stipend from, the Department of Social Development.

They received minimal initial training from the Department (two to three days) on the bio-medical facts of HIV/AIDS and TB, with some input on stigma reduction. They had various reasons for becoming involved in this NGO which reflect both altruistic and personal learning goals:

To gain more knowledge and skills, self-confidence and development; to learn how to control my emotions; to learn how to work as a team; learn to accommodate others; help community to overcome HIV; to help people to gain knowledge to improve their lives.

(excerpts from participant reflections, start-up workshop, 28/6/2014)

I followed the usual ethical and administrative processes required by the university, which meant that I had to complete a research proposal before I could enter into any agreement with the community members. Thus, again, I was still dictating the shots, although the community members were not aware of this 'preparatory' work. However, I attempted to involve the community participants fully from that point on, to determine their vision for the project. Their main aim was to improve their skills as community educators and together we agreed on specific objectives to attain this:

- By December 2014 we want to develop two new strategies to address HIV and gender-related issues to improve our community education skills.
- To organize an event where we can showcase and share with the community what we have learnt (December 2014) (workshop notes, 28/06/2014).

Although I had had to draw up a budget in my initial proposal to the funders, I shared this with them and tried to impress on them the need for them to take responsibility for the outcome of the project. They attended training to learn participatory pedagogical tools such as photo voice (Wang, 1999) and drawings with narratives (Mitchell *et al.*, 2011) and then used them to gather data from their community participants about the gender inequalities in their community. Together, we analysed these data and I organized a two-day workshop where they learnt to make short digital stories about the main themes that emerged (*changing ideas about women's education and work being less important than men's; highlighting the danger of multiple concurrent partnerships for HIV infection and family life*) that they used as educational tools and could share through android mobile devices. They also presented a community education event to celebrate World AIDS day. This 'activity' met their objectives, met the funder's requirements and provided me with enough data to produce a research output. And so, I could have withdrawn at this stage (the six months were up) to write an impressive report for the funders, and an article or two based on the data. However, I was

very troubled by certain aspects of the research relationship, both between myself and the participants and internally in the organization. I thus embarked on a qualitative analysis (Creswell, 2005) of the data generated through participant reflections, transcripts of our recorded meetings and sessions and my own written reflections as participant observer throughout the process (Richards, 2014). The questions that guided my analysis were

- What are the respective perceptions of community/university partners about the research process and outcomes in terms of its gains and/or negative consequences?
- What factors hinder/promote learning in the collaborative research partnership between university researchers and community volunteers?
- How can the learning gained on this project be used to improve future action research partnerships?

In attempting to answer these questions, my analysis was guided by my epistemological and methodological paradigm, which is participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Wood and Zuber-Skerritt, 2013) and by the capability approach (Sen, 1999, 2010).

## Theoretical framework

PALAR follows an emerging process where research takes shape gradually rather than being pre-designed, and aims at collaborative transformation of participants (including academic researchers) through its emphasis on action learning (AL). PALAR is not only a methodological approach; it is also a philosophy underpinned by critical, emancipatory and person-centred theories. PALAR combines community development, leadership development and the development of lifelong learning as a positive and essential approach to community engagement (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). This paradigm is eminently suited to the need for universities to promote 'the mobilisation of human talent and potential through lifelong learning to contribute to the social, economic, cultural and intellectual life of a rapidly changing society' (DHET, 2011, p. 3), since the AL process develops capacity for lifelong learning and action leadership.

A PALAR paradigm aligns with the basic tenets of the capability approach to development as espoused by Sen (1999). In simple terms, Sen argued that development can only occur when people are in a position to make choices that enable action to improve their lives. In other words, the mere provision of resources is not enough without developing capacity to access and use them. The uniform provision of resources may, in fact, widen the gap between those who can access and use them and those who cannot, due to

cultural, structural or individual reasons. A PALAR process can help to expand the capability of people, as they learn how to determine what they need to improve their circumstances, and set individual learning goals to attain the personal and professional skills necessary to address any structural barriers that limit their freedom of choice. Sen's theory links human development, quality of life and freedom (Walker, 2005), and so aligns perfectly with the principles of PALAR that posit people should be free to make choices they believe will improve their quality of life. Freedom is a fundamental concept in the capability approach (Orton, 2011), but can only occur when people can make choices that remove social and structural barriers to goal attainment (Burchardt, 2004). For example, gender inequalities are a main driver of HIV infection (Dowsett, 2003) in spite of the fact that gender equality is enshrined in South African policy at all levels. Social and cultural norms preclude many women from being treated as equal and limit their ability to make choices to improve their own lives. The PALAR process creates a critical space where participants are encouraged to challenge socially accepted norms and find ways to change their lives for the better. Development is then not just dependent on a rights-based discourse (legal imperative), but on the moral issue of how women are able to live out these rights in everyday life (Robeyns, 2006). The outcomes of PALAR are then in line with the substantive freedoms (Sen, 1999) that are attained when people are free to live their life according to their values, thereby enhancing their subjective well-being. Although the capability approach has been critiqued as being too individualistic (Ibrahim, 2006), it does foreground the socio-historical barriers to human development (Burchardt, 2004), emphasizing the need to disrupt accepted practices and mentalities – an important aim of any PALAR process.

## Methodology

PALAR as a research methodology holistically integrates AL and participatory action research (PAR) so that people with similar interests and concerns participate (P) and work together on complex issues affecting their lives (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). PALAR encourages democratic, mutually rewarding partnerships between members of the academy and external education communities. In this particular PALAR process, the participants (NGO volunteers and academics) formed an AL set, a group that could be equated to Wenger's (2001) notion of a community of practice, which met regularly to critically reflect on the systematic and empirically sound inquiry into how to address HIV prevention education through a gender lens. This iterative and trial-and-error process encouraged the AL set to learn from their experience and from one

another as they collaborated to improve community-based HIV and AIDS prevention.

Twelve members of the NGO between the ages of eighteen to thirty-five initially volunteered to be part of the project, along with two university researchers. Data were generated from written reflections of all participants; transcribed project meetings; participant drawings and narratives and focus group interviews with participants, conducted by an independent researcher. A collaborative approach to data analysis involved all participants in thematic analysis of the data sets. As findings emerged, they were validated through applying the criteria of catalytic, democratic, process and dialectic validity (Herr and Anderson, 2005). The base primary criterion for quality and reliability in PALAR is authenticity (Zuber-Skerritt, 2015), meaning that research results are valid if they are authentic, i.e. recognizable and confirmed by the participants in the research. For this article, I drew mainly on my own reflections of the interaction between myself and the participants, as well as their reflections on the process and what they learnt from it.

## Discussion of findings

My critical reflection on the process revealed tensions between the needs and lived realities of the participants, and my own research-driven needs. It also became apparent that the gendered social and structural conditions that the project aimed at changing were in fact hindering the learning of the community participants and threatening project progress. Below, I highlight some of the emerging themes that speak to my research questions about the perceptions of the process and what factors hindered or promoted learning.

### *The socio-economic circumstances of the participants played a central role in project (non) participation*

Collaboration, commitment and open communication are the basic principles of the PALAR process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011), but it was evident that the community partners did not necessarily embody these principles in the way that I interpreted them. I had spent considerable time involving the participants in setting project goals, but made the mistake of assuming that because they wanted to be in the project, it would be simple for them to attend every meeting and make full use of the opportunity to learn. Their articulation of their expectations was in line with what I imagined they would be

I feel very happy to be part of this project because I am learning many things that I did not know before, and it gives me strength to like my job and to be proud of it. (P3, 28/6/14)

I expect the project will make me learn more so that I can reach more people and teach them about HIV and AIDS. (P5, 28/6/14)

They all articulated similar feelings and expectations, showing special interest in learning how to use visual methods to teach about HIV and AIDS in their interactions with the community. Over time, however, the initial group of twelve dwindled, with no more than five or six at each twice monthly meeting, and different people most times, apart from one or two consistent members. What I perceived as a lack of commitment on their part, initially led me to feel frustrated. I had to critically reflect on my own reaction to re-frame the situation. We had differing needs, due to our different life situations. How could I expect them to prioritize the needs of the project (and my need to make it successful), when each day was a struggle for them to make ends meet? I had to accept that they were free to drop out of the project, or to come and go as they wished. Some of them managed to find casual work from time to time; others were often ill; family commitments and funerals had to take precedence to project meetings – I had to learn to be patient, understanding and flexible as the project morphed in ways that I did not expect. For me, collaboration meant attending all meetings, yet as unemployed youth facing multiple adversities, their uppermost need was for casual work or to deal with pressing family issues. From a capability perspective (Sen, 1999), participation in the project was only useful to them if it helped to improve their lives and many of them, understandably, could not see past their immediate need for financial resources.

This re-framing helped me to deepen my resolve not to 'give up'. Instead, I helped them to compile personal learning statements (see <http://www.gullonline.org/affiliate/getting-started/index.html>), which focused on their longer-term goals outside of this immediate project. Thus, I learnt about their dreams of starting a construction business, obtaining a qualification in child care, learning how to counsel people or enrolling for a teaching qualification. I was able to talk to each one and help them develop some strategies to work towards these goals, which were complementary to helping them improve as community educators. This aligns with the capability approach that aims to extend people's ability to expand their options to be and do what they value (Sen, 1999). In other words, this lens helped me to realize that, if I claimed to support sustainable development, I could not just stick to the narrow aims of the project, but had to care about the life of the participants beyond the development of technical skills. As Walker (2005) suggests, we need to help youth to expand their opportunities to make meaningful life decisions.

It also became apparent that some of the participants viewed the project as an opportunity to make some money. An example: I wanted the community

to benefit as much as possible from the project, therefore I asked the participants to organize transport to the workshop using a community service provider. They happily agreed to this, but when they arrived at the venue, the NGO leader handed me an invoice for an exorbitant amount. It was hinted by other participants that he (and some others) had come to an arrangement with the driver to get a 'kickback' for themselves. I reminded them that if they used all the money for the project on transport, there would not be enough to fund other activities. Several of them decided to negotiate again with the driver who then presented us with a much more reasonable invoice. This experience taught me that it would take time to shift the participants from a scarcity mentality towards collaborative use of resources (Hall, 2001). At the next meeting, I went over the budget again and we discussed how each budget item was allocated. The next time the group organized a community event, the same thing happened in terms of the provision of a sound system, but this time several of the NGO members questioned the budget and spoke out against it. Although the NGO leaders did not listen on this occasion, it was a catalyst for several of the female participants to voice their unhappiness with the way the project was being managed. The project was aimed at developing the community participants as gender educators in their community, but it was obvious that deep-rooted gender inequalities were at play in the project itself.

#### *Gendered power relations within the project group*

Although there were only three male participants who regularly attended the project meetings, one of them being the manager, it was clear that there were power issues between them and the female members. Even if only one male was present, he dominated the discussions, leaving no space for the women to speak. If and when the females did contribute, they were often ignored or ridiculed. The female participants did not respect the male leader and told me so, but also did not have the courage to confront him. I found myself caught in a situation where they confided in me, but would not be open and honest with each other. After six months on the project, in which time we had reached the initial goals set by the participants, I was considering how to finalize the relationship. However, at the meeting to discuss this, only two female participants attended. They told me that the other girls did not want to come because they felt they were not allowed to do or say what they wanted; they were angry that the men did not attend project meetings, but took over whenever there was a community event to organize, and dictated how the project money should be spent. They asked me if they could carry on this project as a 'girls only' project. This put me in a difficult position, given that my ethical clearance had been granted on condition that the leader of the NGO approved the project. Yet, I was also happy to see

that engagement on this project and learning about gender inequalities had helped the female participants to find the courage to voice their real feelings. Participation on the project had not only improved their functioning (what they could do and be) but also taught them how to expand their freedom to make choices to enhance their quality of life and learning (capabilities) (Sen, 1999). I thus approached the NGO leader to talk about the future of the project beyond the initial six month agreement. He agreed that they could be part of the extended project and use their learning to benefit their NGO work. The ladies were overjoyed when I told them this and we started to set new goals and make new plans for the next few months. However, I soon realized that power relations also impacted on the honesty of the communication.

### *Communication 'problems'*

After agreeing to the change of focus in the project, the leader then told the female participants that they had to choose between this project and their membership of the NGO. Again I was put in a situation where I had to choose between possible negative ethical repercussions and my desire to help promote gender equity. The female participants informed me that the leader would never openly disagree with me, a university professor, but he was angry at their attempt to stand up to him. Unequal power relations, something that I had strived to avoid in the PAR process, were jeopardizing communication, not only between participants but also between me and the community. Due to my position as a university professor, the participants imbued me with what Bourdieu (1977) refers to as symbolic power, hampering any authentic dialogue on the subject. Unsure of how to proceed, I consulted with the funder who said that they would be happy for me to work with the girls, as their aim was empowerment of women. This smaller group has created a vision to start their own NGO, *Re a Lekana* (Let us be equal). They have created a website and made some videos to post on it; designed T-Shirts for the group; and are busy organizing a series of community interventions.

## **Learning to 'do' action research more effectively**

The above themes highlight some of the hindrances to the creation of a productive research partnership, but there have also been many benefits for the participants and myself. Grappling with such issues has helped me to understand the lived reality of the community members, and the need to become more empathic and supportive of their daily struggles. It has underlined the need for a dynamic and flexible research methodology, based on relationship, reflection and recognition. If I had not reflected throughout the process,

and had not held myself accountable to the underlying values and principles of PALAR, then I might very well have terminated the project when I had reached the initial goals – I had enough evidence to satisfy the funder, enough data to write an article or two and the participants had learnt new skills. However, my ontological commitment to the ideals of PALAR would not allow me to do this.

This experience has strengthened my belief in the need for academics to adopt flexible, emergent and dynamic research processes, working with participants, rather than gathering data from them. I have grown as a researcher (and a person) by reflecting on how best to manage the politics and problems to sustain a relationship which will help to enhance the dreams and goals of the participants and enable them to be better able to enrich their lives, the aim of human development (Sen, 1999). I want them to improve their ‘doings and beings’ (functions), to learn not only skills but the practical knowledge of how to use these skills to better their lives. I had to make a considered decision on this project as how best to proceed to do this. The overall aim of the project was to develop the participants’ skills to educate about the link between gender inequality and HIV prevention, to ultimately influence change in gender relations in their own and others’ lives. In this situation, these very gender inequalities were at play within the organization, something that I had not really thought about prior to engaging. I had assumed that the NGO would be well run and organized, that the management would be professional and skilled at their job, but I had not taken into account the fact that the NGO members were first and foremost unemployed youth from the community, who had been socialized by norms that I was expecting them to challenge.

The participants have also benefited – their reflections show that they have learnt new technical, pedagogical and intrapersonal skills and now believe they are more effective agents of change

You have given us a way to work with others, to realise we are not all the same and that we must not judge. The more we help others, the more we learn. Now I can listen to the girls’ voices in my sessions, and I learn so much from them because they have such different ideas. Yah, I can stand up for myself and help others to do the same. (P4, 15/4/2015)

The process allowed the female participants to challenge the gendered relations at play within the project, emancipating themselves to improve their capacity to learn and to use their skills for their own and their community’s benefit. Since the project aimed to raise awareness about how gender inequalities make women more vulnerable to HIV infection and other abuse, for me this was evidence of a successful outcome. Although I had imagined that the participants would become more proficient at spreading this

message in the community, I had not realized that they would first have to emancipate themselves. This strengthens the argument for a capability lens in PAR. Freeing themselves from a gendered situation has allowed the female participants in this project to blossom as advocates for gender equality. The PALAR process of critical reflection on values, thinking and behaviour helped to raise issues that would otherwise have remained as dangerous undercurrents, hindering the capability of the participants to be effective community educators.

This first step in gaining personal freedom to follow their own vision for a more gender equitable world can only benefit the female participants in their future efforts to create a more just life for themselves in a society characterized by multiple social challenges. They reshaped their gender identities within a safe relationship that allowed them to subjectively enhance their well-being by taking a new path; they were able to find the courage to challenge a male-dominated climate, and even if it meant breaking away totally, the new space they created for themselves will probably allow them to develop to the extent that they can one day interact with male colleagues in a more equal way. The importance of choice is paramount in the capability approach (Sen, 1999), and the freedom to choose was made available to these participants through their learning in the PALAR process. Taking such steps is not without risk, both to community participants and to the academic researcher, as it can lead to social isolation, retributory action or censure from institutional bodies, but freedom and growth is always accompanied by risk. Unless we are ready to use our 'power' as researchers to open up opportunities for such freedom to be attained, then our community engagement will fail to contribute to lasting social change.

## Conclusion

In terms of better understanding my research questions, I can now respond that critical reflection on this partnership revealed that it has been beneficial to us all, to some degree or other. I have learnt much that will enhance my ability to collaborate with community members in resource-scarce settings; all the participants, including the males, did learn skills and did become more aware of their personal learning needs; the five female participants who are now running with the project under the banner 'women against gender inequality' are setting and pursuing new learning goals, with a dream of setting up their own NGO. Whether this becomes a reality or not, the skills and personal growth they experience will only enhance their ability to improve their quality of life.

I emerge from this experience with key learning about factors that hinder or promote meaningful engagement for sustainable learning and development.

Patience and an ability to empathize with the lived experiences of community participants are central to enhancing the university–community research partnership. The researcher has to be able to put themselves in the shoes of the community participants, rather than judging them for actions that appear to go against the ontological values of the PAR process. Working in community settings also takes more time than expected, since participants have many life ‘interruptions’ which have to take precedence. Academics bound by strict time controls set by academic calendars and funders have to find a way to move at the pace of the community members otherwise valuable learning experiences will be lost.

Relationship must at the heart of such collaboration, rather than subject knowledge or research expertise. Relationships are built through prolonged engagement, based on commitment to democratic and life-enhancing values. On-going critical reflection by all project members on their own participation is thus vital to ensure that the engagement builds capacity of people to make choices that will improve their quality of life as they see fit, which might not be the same choices that the researcher would make.

Flexibility to allow for deviance from the initial research plan is also important, and the academic researcher must learn to be comfortable with this and be able to justify it to funders and ethics boards. A narrow focus on the research outcomes, rather than the process of relationship development, will not foster sustainable learning and development, as the deep-seated social and structural inequalities will remain embedded and constrain the freedom of participants to change their lives for the better.

A capabilities approach to evaluating the personal and social returns of participatory AL and action research can help to promote community engagement that disrupts deeply entrenched social norms that restrict learning and change. It requires the researcher to be more sensitive to structural inequalities and cultures that shape the responses of community participants. A concern with promoting ‘substantive freedoms’ (Sen, 1999, p. 15) calls for deeper reflection on the interaction between all members of the project to expose hidden motives, reasoning and needs. In this case, the female participants were able to improve their ‘functionings’ (Sen, 1999, p. 7) (improvement in pedagogical skills and knowledge to enhance effectiveness as community educators) but their ‘capabilities’ (p. 7) were constrained by deep-rooted gender norms. They were not free to express their ideas, develop confidence and determine their own learning needs until the initial project ended. Without the insight afforded by reflecting through a capability lens, I would have most likely withdrawn and lost a valuable opportunity to create a space for the female participants to use their learning to take action to improve their lives in a way that they valued. I was able to view the participants in a ‘holistic and humanist’ way (Lewis, 2012, p. 534) within their specific social and cultural context,

and this helped me to be more sensitive to the undercurrents of discontent within the project.

Community engagement undertaken by universities is too often no more than a 'means to an end' to satisfy policy requirements and produce research outputs. For sustained development to occur, engaged researchers have to develop a moral commitment to contribute to the well-being and freedom of community participants. From a capability perspective, well-being means feeling good about what we can do and achieve (Friedli, 2011, p. 13), leading to a sense of purpose in life. It is thus vital that community participants have the freedom to decide what will best enhance their well-being within their specific lived realities, rather than it being determined by researchers who work from a theoretical understanding. This article has argued that reflecting on the PALAR process through a capability lens ensured that a valuable opportunity for learning and development was not lost. This project had a gender focus, but the knowledge gleaned could be used to enhance community–university partnerships for sustained and relevant community development in any field.

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