

Community Engagement and Collaboration in the Formation of a Palar Project Team at University of Zululand: A Reflective Account

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Abstract

This article provides insights into the formation and lived experiences of the PALAR (Participatory Action Learning and Action Research) project team in their efforts to engage with communities in the King Cetshwayo District of KwaZulu-Natal. The project aimed to establish a self-care, self-paced intervention strategy for individuals living with Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus. The objective of the study was to explore how community engagement influenced the team's approach, processes, and outcomes. The article highlights the motivations of a multidisciplinary team of academics in collaborating with local communities, emphasizing the value of participatory methodologies in health intervention design. Personal narratives from team members offer reflective accounts of working collectively in a community-based research context. Community engagement served as a central pillar of the project, fostering imagination, collaboration, innovation, and a self-directed ethos among both researchers and participants. The study adopted qualitative phenomenological techniques and an autobiographical design to collect in-depth reflections from the PALAR team. Custom qualitative questions guided the process, eliciting rich and diverse experiences. These autobiographical responses were transcribed and analyzed thematically, revealing key insights into team dynamics, learning processes, and the broader impact of community engagement. Findings underscore the significance of community engagement not only in addressing local health challenges but also in shaping academic practice. The study contributes to the growing recognition of community engagement as a formal pillar of academic achievement in higher education. Ultimately, the article affirms the importance of participatory research in developing meaningful, context-sensitive interventions.

Keywords: reflection, relationships, community engagement, participatory action learning and action research

1. Introduction

This paper presents our personal reflections on the process of building an effective Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) project team. Working collaboratively with rural communities in the King Cetshwayo District Municipality (KCDM), we developed intervention strategies to support individuals living with Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus, focusing on self-care and self-paced approaches. The primary objective was to reflect on our individual and collective experiences, assess the unity within the team, and evaluate our progress toward collaborative maturity.

The study explores how community engagement within KCDM shaped the experiences of a multidisciplinary team of researchers from various faculties and disciplines across KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). By integrating individual narratives, we offer a holistic perspective on how collaboration was developed and sustained. Building and maintaining community partnerships in PALAR projects is complex and often challenged by power imbalances, where community partners may receive fewer opportunities compared to researchers (Cooper, Hurd, & Loyd, 2022; Gautier, Sieleunou, & Kalolo, 2018; Woods & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013). The literature consistently highlights the importance of reciprocity and mutual respect in ensuring sustainable community engagement.

PALAR methodologies are particularly suited for community-based initiatives due to their participatory, imaginative, collaborative, and self-driven nature (Woods & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013). Higher education institutions, especially in

South Africa, have increasingly embraced PALAR as it aligns with the national directive to position community engagement as a core academic function (Udekwe, & Obadire, 2024). While service learning (SL) remains a valuable model, offering students experiential learning and community insight, it is often limited by academic course outcomes (Bringle, Hatcher, & Jones, 2023). PALAR, in contrast, provides academics with a more flexible and inclusive approach for meaningful engagement beyond classroom boundaries.

Our project sought to address more than just institutional expectations. It was grounded in a commitment to social responsiveness and aimed to contribute meaningfully to communities through collaboration, not compliance (Udekwe, & Obadire, 2024). The university hosting this initiative actively promotes partnerships with local businesses, government structures, schools, and communities as part of its strategy to be an “engaged institution” (Mathunjwa et al., 2024; Yamamura & Koth, 2023).

The PALAR team, formally established in 2019, emerged at a time of opportunity and enthusiasm. Drawing from diverse knowledge and expertise, we collaborated to confront pressing challenges facing nearby rural communities (Chopra, 2022). Our team was built on a comprehensive, integrated model, recognizing community engagement as not only a moral obligation grounded in respect and reciprocity, but also as a practical and transformative approach to address multidimensional issues in society.

In this study, we affirm that community engagement is essential for fostering positive, sustainable change. Through voluntary, self-driven, and inclusive participation, PALAR offers a compelling model for how universities can bridge academic knowledge with community realities.

2. Literature Review

Participatory research refers to a collaborative decision-making process involving communities directly affected by the issues under study, as outlined by several scholars (Carnegie, Cornish, Htwe, & Htwe, 2020; Snijder et al., 2020). Although widely applied in various academic fields, it remains relatively underutilized in diabetes research. This underrepresentation is largely due to a lack of understanding and limited collaboration between academic researchers and community members (Belone et al., 2016; Muhammad et al., 2015). Furthermore, participatory research often receives insufficient institutional support, as it is commonly categorized under community engagement, which is frequently undervalued in mainstream academic research systems (Mathunjwa et al., 2023; Samuel et al., 2018; South & Phillips, 2014). Nevertheless, over recent decades, participatory methods have gained traction particularly in studies addressing health disparities and research involving marginalized populations (Macaulay, 2017).

Community engagement, closely linked to participatory research, is defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as a process involving collaboration with groups of people who share geographic proximity, interests, or similar situations to improve well-being (Cyril et al., 2015; Ahmed & Palermo, 2010). Born (2012) further describes it as a cooperative effort fueled by shared learning and vision, aimed at achieving collective goals. These definitions underscore the vital role of community participation in confronting shared challenges (Holmes et al., 2019; Wade, 2020). Establishing trust and relationships is foundational to forming sustainable partnerships that can positively influence community members' quality of life (Shandu et al., 2023; Matheus & Gaugler, 2020; Sagrestano, Clay, & Finerman, 2018).

This process of engagement requires patience, sufficient resources, and willingness to adapt institutional programs, policies, and procedures to accommodate community input (Bell et al., 2020; Waterhouse et al., 2020). Ultimately, community engagement enhances a community's capacity to address enduring social, economic, environmental, and health-related challenges. (Dube et al., 2025; Shandu et al., 2025; Byaello, 2022).

3. Theoretical Framework

This reflective paper is grounded in the principles of Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), a framework that emphasizes collaborative inquiry, critical reflection, and community empowerment (Mahadew, 2023; Neethling, & Nel, 2021). PALAR integrates action research with learning processes that are participatory, democratic, and transformative, making it particularly suitable for community engagement initiatives in higher education contexts. Drawing on Freire's (1970) theory of critical consciousness, this framework supports the development of mutual respect and co-learning between academics and community members. It aligns with the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET, 2010) policy directive that community engagement is a core function of South African universities (Mudau, Mafukata, & Tshishonga, 2023). By applying PALAR, the University of Zululand (UNIZULU) team sought to dismantle traditional hierarchies and foster inclusive collaboration in the formation of a multidisciplinary project aimed at addressing Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus. This

framework provided a reflective and dialogical foundation for engagement, enabling sustainable and context-sensitive interventions.

4. Research Methodology

This study adopted a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) methodology to foster deep collaboration between academic researchers, postgraduate students, and community-based stakeholders. PALAR is grounded in democratic dialogue and co-learning, where participants engage in iterative cycles of reflection, action, and learning (Mathunjwa et al., 2024; He et al., 2023; González, 2017). It is especially suited for socially embedded research aiming to generate practical knowledge while transforming both individual and collective realities.

The research team comprised eight members, each serving a triple role as researcher, participant, and co-author. This team included university academics, and community practitioners such as schoolteachers and health workers, ensuring diversity in perspectives and expertise. The Principal Investigator (PI) coordinated the study and oversaw the implementation of PALAR cycles. Academic supervisors offered theoretical and methodological guidance while promoting reflexive learning and participation.

Instead of traditional audio-recorded interviews, the study employed a qualitative, autobiographical method using written reflections. Each team member responded to five open-ended questions, co-developed to explore the PALAR experience, team dynamics, individual growth, and contributions to the research process (Butina, 2015; Wardell et al., 2021). This descriptive and narrative-based approach allowed participants to articulate their lived experiences authentically.

These written reflections served as the primary data and were subjected to thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework. The analysis focused on recurring themes such as democratic participation, reflexivity, empowerment, and capacity building. The process emphasized transparency and ethical self-disclosure, as discussed by Hickson (2016) and Mauthner and Doucet (2003).

The PALAR methodology enabled the dismantling of traditional hierarchical research boundaries. Through this inclusive and iterative process, participants co-constructed knowledge that was grounded in both theory and real-life practice. The combination of methodological rigor, team diversity, and reflective honesty ensured the richness of data and reinforced PALAR's commitment to transformation through collaboration and critical engagement (Lilley et al., 2022).

Presenting the narrative of their experiences through a set of questions added a consistent tone and voice to the stories, capturing the essence of the experience (Lambert & Hessler, 2018) and enhancing the readability of the article. Co-authors on the PALAR team were encouraged to reflect on their individual experiences working together, which could involve describing themselves or other team members and illustrating their interactions or collaborations as PALAR team members. They had the freedom to discuss experiences of any nature and scope. The PALAR study collaborators were surveyed using the following autobiographical interview questions: (i) How did you learn about the PALAR initiative? (ii) What motivated you to work with the PALAR team? (iii) How would you describe your collaboration with the PALAR team? (iv) Which PALAR principles do you adhere to, and why? (v) How would you characterize your interactions with other PALAR team members?

Each PALAR team member provided a narrated response to these five questions.

5. Results

The results section of the article includes personal accounts of the PALAR team members' interactions and their experiences working on the project. The participants' reflections, obtained through the evaluation of their autobiographical interviews, were compiled. This process of reflection contributes to strengthening the relationships among the PALAR project team members. To ensure consistency, instructions and suggestions were provided on conducting the autobiographical interviews (AIs), allowing all authors to approach their experiences as PALAR members from a shared perspective. Using a set of questions to describe their experiences enabled the team to capture the essence of their interactions in a unified tone and voice.

The participants were encouraged to reflect on themselves and their interactions with other team members, providing insights into how they collaborated as part of the PALAR team. Ethical credibility was enhanced by empowering participants to make deliberate decisions regarding the information they wanted to disclose. The self-administered autobiographical written interview process demonstrated their autonomy and full participation. The shared information provided by the participants in this study will enable other researchers to reassess their own working conditions. However, the transferability of the findings lies at the researchers' discretion, as it is based on the principles of

qualitative research, which I do not promote or endorse. Nevertheless, the credibility of the data in this study is derived not only from the first-hand accounts provided by the participants but also from the discussion of their individual experiences and the documentation of their involvement in the PALAR project.

To transcribe and analyse the autobiographical narratives, a semi-automated technique utilising natural language processing was employed for the automated scoring of the interviews (van Genugten & Schacter, 2022; Wardell et al., 2021). The PALAR team members' autobiographical accounts were collected using standardized structured interview questions, with their written responses serving as the transcripts and interview notes. The participants' responses were categorized according to the interview questions, and meaning units were generated from each participant's transcripts as part of the analysis process. The researchers then identified patterns and differences across all the transcripts. The findings of the autobiographical interviews conducted for this study are presented in the preceding section.

In the initial AI question, participants were asked how they learned about the PALAR project. Each participant provided a unique response to this question. The majority mentioned that they became aware of the PALAR initiative through workshops organized by the Institutional Community Engagement Office in 2019. Participants' answers varied, and they expressed as follows: [participants' responses].

Participant 1: "I became aware of the PALAR project at a workshop on community engagement held at the Bon hotel. During the workshop, we had the opportunity to give a presentation, and we decided to focus on establishing the PALAR project team."

Participant 2: "The Institutional Community Engagement Office organised a series of workshops where the concept of PALAR was explained. Through the activities in these workshops, a group of academics who were seated together and had collaborate."

Compared to simple community engagement, participatory action learning is deemed more effective, as emphasized by the authors (Wood, 2019; Zuber-Skerritt, 2015). The participants' interactions served as a source of inspiration for their collaborative efforts, indicating their alignment with the social learning hypothesis. They viewed the envisioned partnership as an innovative approach to addressing public and social issues. The diverse professional backgrounds of the participants were perceived as a strength for the community project, further motivating them to formalize their collaboration. Here are their specific statements:

Participant 1: "Furthermore, the principles and advantages of community engagement surpassed any other means of tackling public and social issues. The strategy of active involvement and the promotion of self-reliance and self-sufficiency were highly motivating."

Participant 2: "The team members were deeply engaged, and as we worked together in the workshop, a bond was formed."

Participant 3: "Once again, we represented different fields, which aligns with the essence of PALAR - working and learning across various aspects of life and engaging with individuals outside of your own field. Through this collaboration, we gained valuable insights from one another."

In addition to the autobiographical interview questions that explored how the team members became aware of the collaboration and what inspired their involvement, they were also asked to reflect on how their responses could best define their participation and engagement in the PALAR project team. Many participants highlighted specific actions they had taken, particularly in interacting with various communities at KCDM, indicating their active involvement. A common theme among the activities mentioned was the process of negotiating and establishing connections with the community, followed by assessing community access. The participants' responses to this question are provided below:

Participant 1: "I actively engage in the majority of community engagement activities we have organized. My role is to introduce our project's values to the community and to provide them with enlightenment and education."

Participant 2: "I am currently actively involved. For example, I was one of the colleagues who approached the traditional authority to seek permission for engaging with the KwaDlangezwa community, a nearby rural area at KCDM."

Participant 3: "I am driven, enthusiastic, and energetic in my involvement. However, it can be challenging at times due to various obstacles, such as limited time for interacting with the team and the communities we aim to collaborate with."

The participants' responses to the AI questions regarding the PALAR principles indicate a lack of effective answers. It remains unclear whether the importance of PALAR principles in identifying communities is recognized as a crucial

component of PALAR. This discrepancy highlights the need for the PALAR team to further examine their stance on these community engagement-related issues. The participants' responses are as follows:

Participant 1: "I believe in sharing my work with the people around me, dedicating myself to everything I do, promoting critical reflection in our learning, collaborating with indunas (traditional leaders) and community leaders, and shaping the character of individuals. It motivates me to apply my knowledge for the benefit of the people around me."

Participant 2: "...The importance of ethical sensitivity when working with diverse groups. The principles of respect and mutual understanding."

Participant 3: "...The importance of ethical sensitivity when working with diverse groups. The principles of respect and mutual understanding."

Participant 4: "I primarily adhere to the principle of being open to learning from others."

Participant 5: "I believe that no one is an expert in everything, but it is important to be a good listener and contribute meaningfully to discussions."

The AI questions regarding PALAR principles were not effectively answered by the majority of participants, as they did not mention them. It is unclear whether the participants consider PALAR principles to be a crucial component of PALAR when working with the communities they intend to collaborate with. This discrepancy highlights the need for the PALAR team to examine their position on this community engagement-related issue. The responses of the PALAR team members are as follows:

Participant 4: "... I believe in sharing my work with the people around me, committing to everything I do, promoting critical reflection in our learning, collaborating with indunas (traditional leaders) and community leaders, and shaping the character of individuals. It allows me to utilize my knowledge to empower the people around me."

Participant 5: "...The importance of ethical sensitivity when working with various communities, the foundational values of respect and mutual understanding, and reciprocity in formal partnerships."

Participant 3: "I generally embrace the idea of being open to learning from others... No one is a master of all trades, in my opinion, but we do need to actively listen and participate in conversations."

The findings revealed the challenges encountered during the project, such as teamwork, aligning team members' goals, accountability, insufficient team skills, and funding. Time constraints and lack of commitment from some team members were also mentioned. To address these challenges, the team needs to establish a detailed schedule that outlines each stage of the project and ensures agreement among all members.

PALAR assists participants in developing their commitment, responsibility, and capacity for reflecting on personal experiences; it is a learning process through interaction. Effective communication, critical thinking, and community support are essential. To ensure that community engagement in research is respectful, equitable, and beneficial to all stakeholders, future studies should consider the best practices for academic and community partners to enhance their understanding of participatory research methodologies.

6. Discussion and Recommendations

This study's findings are presented alongside a reflection on the formation and functioning of the PALAR project team. The data revealed that participants developed meaningful connections with one another through their involvement in the project. These relationships were often driven by a shared purpose and a strong desire to contribute to community development initiatives. Participants' motivations included personal growth, professional development, and a sense of responsibility towards the communities they serve.

Participants shared diverse experiences regarding how they engaged with others on the team, highlighting collaboration, mutual support, and respect. However, despite their enthusiasm, it became evident that many participants lacked a deep understanding of the underlying principles of PALAR. Their justifications for engagement, choices, and methodologies were often not clearly aligned with PALAR's core values of democratic participation, critical reflection, and co-learning. This points to a gap in the facilitation or orientation phase, suggesting that further training and ongoing dialogue around PALAR methodology are necessary.

Reflective discussions demonstrated that while participants could describe their interactions well, their ability to articulate how these interactions related to transformative learning or systemic change was limited. This suggests a need for improved conceptual clarity and more deliberate integration of PALAR principles into each stage of the project.

During the closing sessions, participants identified a range of challenges they encountered, including logistical coordination, unequal participation, and inconsistent communication. In line with the principles of community engagement (CE), they also proposed practical solutions such as clearer role definitions, regular check-ins, and capacity-building workshops that demonstrate their willingness to improve collaboration and effectiveness.

Overall, the reflections indicated a strong engagement with the process and a shared aspiration to deepen learning and impact. This aligns with the goals of the university's CE office, which emphasizes reciprocity, shared ownership, and transformation. The findings suggest that while foundational relationships and enthusiasm were present, a more structured onboarding into the PALAR philosophy could enhance participants' confidence, agency, and contribution to long-term outcomes.

7. Conclusion

PALAR's focus on action learning within an action learning set makes it highly suitable for enhancing university-community research relationships. Engaging in PALAR has provided opportunities for deliberate learning reflection. The design, implementation, project evaluation, and dissemination of knowledge have all incorporated valuable learning experiences and meaningful engagement. PALAR's distinctive attributes have facilitated involvement in the community, as evidenced by visits to KwaMthethwa and Esikhaleni. By influencing the perspectives of team members and community leaders, PALAR has fostered the development of collaborative partnerships that benefit everyone involved.

The findings suggest a potential lack of clarity concerning specific components of PALAR as a methodology for community engagement, as evidenced by participants' limited ability to clearly articulate their strongest support for its core principles. Participants did not explicitly mention or elaborate on the standard principles, necessitating further explanation of their decision-making process. Furthermore, it was evident that most participants shared personal experiences to illustrate their interpersonal relationships within the team. This finding emphasizes the importance of reminding team members to prioritize unity and embrace the responsibilities associated with their membership. Only when the principle of unity is upheld can a team effectively function as a cohesive unit.

To ensure that community engagement in research is conducted in a respectful, egalitarian, and beneficial manner for all stakeholders, future studies should consider the most effective techniques for enhancing academic and community partners' understanding of participatory research methodologies.

8. Limitations

This study, while insightful, had several limitations. The use of written reflections rather than audio-recorded interviews limited follow-up opportunities and may have constrained expression due to participants' varying writing abilities (Butina, 2015). The small, purposefully selected cohort limits generalisability, as participants were embedded in both academic and community practice (Mathunjwa et al., 2024). Dual roles of participants as co-researchers and community members may have introduced interpretive bias (Hickson, 2016; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Additionally, literacy levels and language fluency could have influenced the depth of reflections. Time constraints associated with academic timelines restricted the number of PALAR cycles and thus limited the potential for deeper transformation (He et al., 2023). Finally, while the local context enriched authenticity, it also limited broader applicability without adaptation. Future research should explore longitudinal designs with diverse participants and incorporate multimedia tools to deepen reflection and inclusivity.

9. Competing Interests

The author(s) declare no competing interests.

10. Author's Contribution

Conceptualization, N.L, M.L.M.; methodology, N.L, M.L.M; writing - original draft preparation, N.L, M.L.M.; data screening/data extraction, quality assessment, writing- review and editing, N.L, M.L.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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