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CO-DESIGNING A COMMUNITY CENTRE IN USING MULTI-MODAL INTERVENTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The rural-urban migration of young people leaves the elderly in a vulnerable position that threatens the social sustainability of rural communities. This article presents an innovative and multi-modal design approach utilised within a community engagement intervention conceptualised with the Lotlhakane¹ village community in the North West Province. The intervention is designed to specifically support the elderly, also, revive and disseminate sustainable indigenous knowledge and practices. The aim is to collectively, in collaboration with the community, develop and design a community centre that will support the above, in addition to advocating for the transferral of indigenous knowledge and practices to the next generation.

Key words: Participatory Action Research (PAR), Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), sustainability, community engagement.

¹ Lotlhakane is a rural village situated in Ditsobotla municipality in the North West Province of South Africa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Participatory Methods in action-based research are considered to be enabling mechanisms that allow ordinary community members to play an active and critical role in decisions that affect them. By so doing Participatory Methods challenge the conventional relationship between the researcher and those being researched; focusing on democratic and non-coercive research with and for participants (DeFour-Howards, 2015).

Indigenous knowledge defines the foundations of traditional beliefs and practices. Traditionally, this knowledge is transferred by word of mouth and through ritual ceremonies, from one generation to the next. However, with the current lack of viable opportunities and employment in rural areas there is the challenge of retaining young people in non-urban areas. As a result, the elderly and frail are left alone without adequate care. In addition, indigenous medicinal knowledge for healthcare and other socio-cultural purposes is disappearing, due to modernisation and because it is not recorded. The migration of the youth to urban areas further endangers indigenous knowledge because it leaves the elderly without anyone to transmit or transfer the knowledge.

In this paper, we present innovative and multi-modal design approaches within a community-engaged intervention. Our aim is twofold, firstly to collectively design and develop a community centre for the elderly that cares for the frail and values, disseminates and sustains indigenous knowledge (cultivation and management of medicinal plant resources) and practices (building and house decoration techniques). Secondly, our aim is to promote and support the transference of indigenous knowledge from one generation to the next.

The principal purpose of collaborating with a community is to offer a paradigm of research and learning using a Freirean premise that inverts the academic notion of power and knowledge. Each phase requires the design of an iterative action cycle that accommodates participatory practice and evaluation from community partners. This methodology accommodates failures, or challenges, in each intervention and ensures that the voice of community members leads the action. Although we are advocates of Participatory Action Research (PAR), bearing in mind the possible socially and environmentally just solutions it can derive, we are also aware that in certain instances PAR can reproduce the very same binary power relations it seeks to challenge, thereby threatening sustainability (Kendon, Pain & Kesby, 2007).

In the sections that follow, we will discuss the theoretical backdrop that informs our perspectives within the designed intervention, i.e. PAR, indigenous perspectives in research and community engaged learning in higher education. Thereafter we will discuss the first two phases of our intervention and the methods we used in these phases. We will pay particular attention to the method of using arts as a collective process and means of engagement, citing both the homestays and community-engaged arts practice as transformative activities that can cultivate intercultural understanding. Lastly we will discuss and analyse the data collected, particularly the impact and learning experiences derived by the students through the homestays and community-engaged arts practice.

2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

PAR presents a counterhegemonic approach to research, challenging traditional research objectives and embracing multivocal perspectives, particularly those previously marginalized, oppressed and excluded (Kendon, Pain & Kesby, 2007). In this way PAR can fit into an indigenous research agenda, prioritizing self-determination, the socio-economic growth of communities and the restoration of traditional practices and materials (Berman, 2017, p. 11). Hence, co-designing a community centre using both indigenous and contemporary approaches by way of Participatory Methods allow visitors to the site (students and staff) an opportunity to listen, envision translate, as well as visually record a scenario envisaged by the community elders.

Traditional medicines are utilised extensively in tribal and rural areas for primary healthcare, at times these are the only healthcare systems accessible (Monakisi, 2007). Traditional medicines are significantly cheaper than Western medicines and for this reason are more a feasible alternative, particularly in areas where primary healthcare services are inefficient or inadequate. In this way indigenous knowledge, in the form of traditional medicines, can provide sustainable and environmentally sound approaches to agriculture and in particular the management of natural resources. It is well known that development activities that work with and through indigenous knowledge have important advantages, particularly the ways in which indigenous knowledge and traditional ways of learning are pivotal to the maintenance and sustainability of a community. For instance, indigenous perspectives on ways of living together and using resources sustainably can have a profound effect on the reduction of CO₂ emissions.

Action and reflection cycles in complexity-sensitive community-based research create praxis and generate meaningful evidence. Visual arts are considered to be a powerful approach within a collective process, fundamentally because the visual is threefold and “can serve recursively as a mode of inquiry, as a mode of representation, and a mode of dissemination” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 378). In the aforementioned statement, Mitchell (2008, p. 378) draws on the connotative meanings attached to objects, i.e. those drawing from autobiography and memory, as well as denotative history. The purpose of teaching in service of the public good and teaching for change remains a challenge for ourselves as academics, researchers, teachers if we are to accept our role in graduating critical, responsive and caring students who have agency in their communities. Community “engagement, facilitated in a genuine manner can be transformative, leading to change on the part of institutions, community partners and students, as it requires

ongoing reflection and evaluation strategies designed for continuous improvement” (Norvell & Gelmon, 2011, p. 265). According to the philosophy of transformative arts-based learning, excellence in teaching involves engaging students in the structures of deep learning, the outcome of which is personal agency.

In Sustainability (2013), Thiele defines sustainability as “a coherent set of interrelated beliefs and values that establish how collective life might be better organised”. The Brundtland Commission 1987 further extends on Thiele’s definition, stating that sustainability is “meeting the needs of today without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The latter definition, incorporates social justice practices, ecological integrity, economic growth aspect which we envisage for the project, unlike many orthodox research projects, our endeavour will have a lasting contribution on the Lotlhakanecommunity.

3. METHODOLOGY

A participatory and user-centered design approach is used to gather data and assess community needs, as well as for the design and development of the centre. The aim is to collect the narratives and stories from the elders and advisors in the community and for them to be archived and shared, preserving traditional indigenous knowledges. Given the importance of ethical considerations and respectful engagement in conducting research, all participants who contributed to the project signed an informed consent form. Also, all guidelines stipulated by the Department of Science and Technology with regards to the protection of information about the medicinal use of indigenous plants and its knowledge holders will be adhered to.

This paper presents only the process of the first two cycles, setting the stage for the next phase of co-operative design. The centre is proposed to also revive and use indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in the development and building of the structures through the application of local and eco-friendly building materials in collaboration with local artisans. The initial needs assessment was conducted on site during the pre-phase using an adaptation of Asset Mapping. Asset Mapping is a community-centred process that uses a visual methodology to determine needs and possibilities from community members (Delones & Rahimi, 2017, p. 154- 155). It involves breaking into groups of community members according to the themes/concerns identified, e.g. healthcare; land (and site); and indigenous and sustainable use of materials. Thereafter the community’s resources and obstacles are plotted on a map of the site, through drawing and painting. The visual map showing the strengths and deficits of the potential sites for the centre, such as the river, the clinic, fertile land and the proximity to resources, is presented back to the group, and provides sufficient needs analysis to the Kgosi² for him to determine a suitable site for development.

Before embarking on a community action students are required to attend workshops on art- and design-based approaches for development and social action. These workshops include an experiential learning module for community-engaged arts practice comprising of an introduction to PAR, ethics of engagement, sustainable development as well as art-based approaches that may include design thinking and design for social development. Participatory Methodologies of PAR (Reason & Bradbury, 2013) , Most Significant Change (MSC) (Davies & Dart, 2005), Appreciative Inquiry and Visual Narrative are some of the underlying methodologies aimed at producing knowledge and action that is directly useful to a group of people and empowering people to construct and use their own knowledge (Reason, 1994, p. 335; See Berman & Allen, 2012).

Community narratives inform all stages of the project, starting with the terms of engagement. Narratives are harvested through Photovoice, a process where community participants produce photographs to tell vivid stories about their lives (Berman, 2017, p. 14; Delgado, 2015, p.19). Photovoice has proven to be a valuable method to generate data and build relationships across population groups and diverse settings (Delgado, 2015, p.18). It is a visual research method that uses photography and stories to investigate a problem with a group of participants. The Photovoice interviews were conducted at homestays and proved to be an important tool in facilitating learning and exchange.

Cultural immersion was used as a method to introduce students to understanding the quality of life of participants and which lead to more intimate encounters and exchanges with the local community. Each student was invited to stay two nights with ‘home parents’. Students were organised into groups of two to four, ensuring at least one Setswana speaker for translation in cases where the ‘home parent’ does not speak English. During debriefing sessions, through conversations and reflective essays, students often express awe at the level of strenuous work by the ‘home mother’, the generosity and hospitality of their hosts and the desire by the hosts to both teach and learn from the students. This created a greater equality for mutual exchange and co-learning. The students contribute something to the household, each home received an agreed fee per student.

Students used their experiences and understanding, acquired through the Asset Maps, Photovoice interviews and personal exchanges in the homestays, to draw out scenarios and engage in a processes of ideation to present to the chief and elders in the fourth coming visit. The three students whose designs were chosen followed the brief that incorporated an aspect of the community’s narrative history and traditional weaving, house decoration and irrigation. The community feedback was collated to support the next phase in 2019.

Students experience structured learning opportunities with real-life problems through community change proj-

² The Paramount chief (Kgosi) in this instance is in a position to allocate the site that is deemed suitable by his advisors which are also the elders participating in the needs assessment workshops.

ects using IKS and employ cultural fluency as a mechanism through which sustainability is valued as a socially-just outcome. The long-term impacts of the project would be a Community Centre that is responsive to the cultural and social requirements of the community elders and the NGO Lebogang Thuso Kopano (LTK) who are the initiators of the collaboration between the University and the Lothlakane community.

3.1. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Measures or indicators may change as an evaluation process unfolds. Evaluators or researchers work with project participants and leaders to co-create evaluation approaches and tools that are both useful and match the local context. PAR uses a double-loop learning cycle of participatory action research which encourages individual and organizational learning. The notion of double loop learning initially introduced by Argyris and Schon (1978), pushes researchers to challenge the norms and assumptions that frame their practice. In this way double-loop learning can also support organisations to question what they do and interrogate the list of assumptions that drive their work (Popplewell & Hayman, 2012, p. 6-7). In this intervention, we extend this exchange of learning to participatory evaluation. We see the purpose of evaluation is to improve and support the flourishing of projects in which evaluation becomes a developmental and collaborative process.

2017: Pre-Phase Visit: Writing the proposal and business plan

A 4-year business proposal and budget were compiled with the University of Johannesburg and submitted to the National Lottery Foundation in North West Province.

2018 April

Phase One Part One: Student and staff field visit to the site

- Site visits
- Photovoice interviews
- Presentation of history and context by the Kgosi
- Home-stays
- Group workshop on imagining a centre
- Painting the mural in the Kgotla³

2018 October

Phase One Part Two: Reporting on results and outcomes

- Photovoice interviews consented to and consolidated
- Presentations and feedback: Group workshop to discuss and provide further direction
- Architecture design brief: Four designs selected for presentation
- Visual Art and Industrial Design: Photovoice interviews transcribed and translated

2018: November:

- Designing class briefs for the next phase of 2019 student interventions
- Designing and printing Photovoice booklets and publishing the results of the four designs for distribution to the community and students for further analysis and to design the next phase

4. CONCLUSION

Inclusionary, complex and community-motivated projects present opportunities for transforming paradigms of education and research. Boyte (2014) defines this mode of teaching as renewing the student-centered tradition of “educating for democracy” that develops “civic agency through public work”. This paradigm understands citizens as “co-creators of the world, more than deliberators about the world, and democracy as a society, not simply an electoral system” (Boyte, 2014, p. 3). This is the premise that unravels the notion of hierarchies of knowledge and power in the academy and engages students in different ways of being and acting in the world.

Apart from the ways in which students’ participation in this project destabilised their prior conceptions about rural communities and sustainable ways of living, particularly the perception of the ‘inferior nature’ of indigenous medicines in comparison to western medication, it became clear that there is much to be learnt from IKS. The domains of academic, personal and civic learning came together most directly in questions relating to cultural identity and positionality, and the responsibility that comes with privilege in an unequal society. In this way students were also motivated to become more active citizens in their own communities. Community engagement that is research driven, problem focused and theoretically informed is crucial in achieving sustainability by transforming the educational experience and providing significant value to communities and the organisations it serves. It does so by allowing the students and educators involved to see how their ideas matter in their social application. In turn students have felt empowered to bear the responsibility of tapping into the knowledge of others to contribute to collective participation in efforts that deepen democracy.

³ A Setswana word, meaning a public meeting place or community council or traditional law court where the council (lekgotla) often meets to discuss community matters. A kgotla is predominantly found in rural areas.

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