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Co-researching complexities: Learning strategies for edge walking in community–university research partnerships

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Abstract

Community–university research partnerships (CURPs) comprise a diverse group of stakeholders who share differing capabilities and diverse insights into the same issues, and they are widely regarded as valuable to navigate the best course of action. Partnering as co-researchers is core to nurturing these partnerships, but it requires careful navigation of complexities. The different insider and outsider positionalities occupied by co-researchers highlight experiences of 'walking on the edges' of each other's worlds. This not only challenges these collaborations, but also enables a depth of understanding that may not be achieved in CURPs where the luxury of, or effort in, building a team of co-researchers to collect, analyse and write up data is not present. This article focuses on learning strategies to advance the co-researching capacities of CURPs where stakeholders occupy divergent positions. The focus will be on lessons from a co-researching partnership comprising a university-affiliated academic researcher, a local Kenyan non-governmental organization (NGO) and members of a community in which the NGO worked. We argue that applying selected learning strategies may facilitate positive experiences of edge walking and enhance the meaningful two-way sharing required for cross-cultural CURPs. It is recommended that community and university research partners examine the utility of these learning strategies for strengthening co-researching in CURP contexts.

Keywords: community–university partnerships, participatory, co-researchers, research teams, learning strategies, reflexivity

Key messages

- Community–university research partnerships are strategic alliances that can create opportunities for different stakeholders to widen perspectives from which to consider solutions to community-identified issues.
- Six learning strategies which emerged from the subjective experiences of co-researchers provide valuable insights about bridging complexities when diverse and cross-cultural positions are occupied in community–university research partnerships.
- Encouraging engagement in 'edge walking' in CURPs promotes opportunities to deepen meaningful partnerships.

Introduction

Partners in research must navigate tricky tensions when building cohesion and understanding of each other's divergent positions. Reaching this joint space where learning and teaching between partners is mutual can be messy. It becomes increasingly complicated when cultural and contextual nuances are thrown into the mix. In our experience, fostering a strong partnership comprises trial and error before strategies that work well for all partners are developed.

This article provides insight into one cross-cultural community–university research partnership (CURP) involving a Kenyan non-governmental organization (NGO), members of a rural community and a Western academic researcher to shape safe spaces for intergenerational sex talk. Strategies for shaping strong relationships among members of CURPs are limited, and existing information on research teams is centred on loose principles for practice. As such, we considered our CURP project in Kenya as an excellent case for reflections on the strategies that emerged and for contributing new insights into existing knowledge on learning strategies. In assessing fieldnotes and research partner journals that were kept throughout the duration of the project, we reflected on the question: How do learning strategies advance the co-researching capacities of CURPs where stakeholders occupy divergent positions? We argue that within cross-cultural CURPs, strategies that encourage the experience of *edge walking* should be considered to help keep partners on task, reflecting often, and sharing in frequent communication.

The authors reflect on the implementation of learning strategies to navigate complexity that surfaced within this particular partnership. Aside from the research-specific learnings within the project setting, personal transformations from being a co-researcher are considered. These strategies were intended to build a strong CURP and reduce distance between academic researchers and community partners (who are researchers in their own right). We conclude that the learnings which transpired through the process of becoming co-researchers will be valuable to other researchers desiring to enter a CURP, in particular one defined by varying position along the insider/outsider continuum (that is, the power that privilege affords, which is dependent upon social class, economic status, ethnicity, race, history, exposure to ideas, and experiences) (Herr and Anderson, 2005). This article importantly documents the 'how to' of growing co-researching relationships, and it shares learning strategies that facilitate co-researching processes for navigating complexities embedded in these partnerships. This will allow future researchers and community members, entering into such a relationship, both to gain a fuller understanding of what works in collaborative spaces and hopefully to inspire creativity in this complex context.

Participatory community–university research partnerships

Community–university research partnerships, alternatively referred to as community–academic partnerships or community–university partnerships can be defined as 'a spectrum of research that engages community members or groups to various degrees, ranging from community participation to community initiation and control' (Tremblay, 2015: 31). Such partnerships enable exchanges between diverse stakeholder groups where differing perspectives and capacities can be shared to work towards a mutually agreed upon outcome (Schutz et al., 2004). For those partnerships that are increasingly participatory, community stakeholders are often co-researchers or co-designers,

with equal to majority input in the project's direction. This high level of participation fosters new roles for both parties; academic researchers gain community insights and perspectives they may not be accustomed to within the academe, while community stakeholders are presented with a platform to share their expertise, and enabled to take co-ownership of the research process (Plumb et al., 2004). Thus, when all parties are engaged and their combined wisdom is mobilized, CURPs can lead to learning reciprocity, resulting in personal and communal benefits.

Despite the positives, these partnerships are not without their complexities. Well-meaning intentions for truly collaborative partnerships can easily be derailed when efficiency is valued over effectiveness. In such instances, where outputs and deliverables are emphasized, tasks within partnerships are carried out as tick-the-box exercises where community stakeholders risk becoming passive recipients of ideas from academe (Moore and Ward, 2010). Maintaining partnership accountability to its original goals, upholding partner role responsibilities and respecting commitment boundaries become difficult in a time-pressured funding climate where reasons for entering into the partnership may vary drastically between both sides (Kearney, 2015). Co-researching, as a key component of the partnership, generates a personal stake in the project, and may help to mitigate these complexities. However, important preconditions for entering into a potentially flourishing co-researching partnership include: recognition of local expertise as legitimate knowledge; willingness to value the diversity each stakeholder in the partnership brings to the table; power sharing aligned with commitments and goals of all stakeholders within the partnership; and acknowledgement that different capacities are available on both sides of the partnership (Davies, 2016; Janes, 2016; Schutz et al., 2004).

Applying the principle of 'capacity building' in practice can be difficult to navigate in CURPs. Capacity building is very much the vogue term in the field of participatory research and partnership approaches. Healy (2001: 98) asserted that capacity building can be a dangerous endeavour when the academic researcher assumes that such processes require 'finding the most appropriate participatory ways to convince the "uneducated" of the merits of our own educated convictions'. This raises the question, does the need for capacity building assume the absence of capacity, or, as Janes (2016: 78) suggested, make assumptions that the community is somehow lacking 'the right capacity'? Israel et al. (2010) distinguished capacity building as a core principle of working with communities, since it ensures mutual benefit for all partners, especially, those in community-academic partnerships, where research activities should balance with action to produce benefits to the community. Building a strong collaborative research team is one viable solution to navigate these challenges. Research teams ensure that partners are held accountable and that the process is mutually beneficial.

Overview of community–university research partnership: The Creating Conversations project

Louis and Bartunek (1992) stated that as early as the 1980s, robust research was dependent on well-functioning collaborative relationships between diverse groups of stakeholders. Grills and Rowe (1998: 252) built on that assertion, emphasizing the importance of accounting for cultural and contextual responsiveness in building these partnerships:

An active, participatory research team reflective of the cultural and psychosocial reality of a given population can help projects avoid or

diminish the pitfalls of cultural bias maintained by the researcher and his/her western empirical tradition.

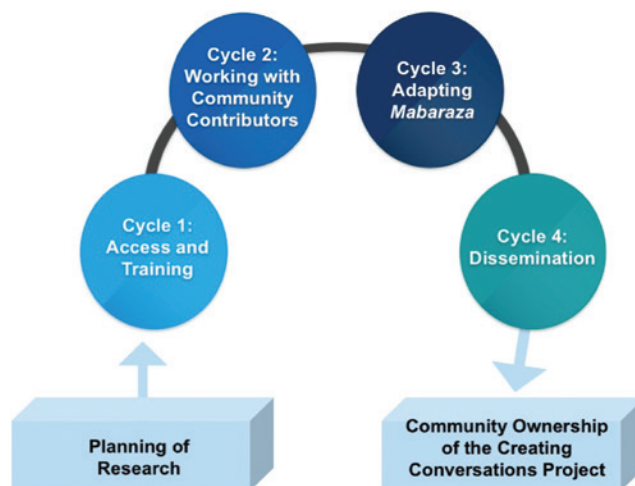
Our research team comprised local members from the partner Kenyan NGO – synonymously referred to as *local knowledge experts* – who had deep local insight, and an academic affiliated with a university. In 2015, this diverse group of stakeholders was core to the successful implementation of a CURP project entitled *Creating Conversations*. This project took into consideration local knowledge, built on resources that were available, and allowed for innovation of how those resources could be used.

The project’s main aim was to test a Kenyan traditional gathering space, called a *baraza* (or *mabaraza* in the plural), as an adaptable tool for intergenerational sex talk (Chubb, 2018). *Mabaraza* are embedded into the social, and now the political, fabric of rural Kenyan communities (Naanyu et al., 2011). Adapting the space was an effort to re-infuse traditional elements of sex education, which involved adult-to-child dialoguing in a natural open setting. ‘Sex talk’ involved communication about the act of sex, but also ideas about consent, gender-based violence, respect, protection and access to health information. The co-researchers encouraged information to be shared, debated and clarified, and encouraged members from the community to take stock of, and devise solutions to, their self-identified problems, instead of acting as passive participants in Western-shaped programmes. The research team helped the community-at-large achieve this across four cycles, as shown in Figure 1.

At each cycle, the local knowledge experts as co-researchers confirmed the findings and provided feedback to the academic researcher (part of the co-researching team), and, where necessary, other community partners, informing the next step. Five data collection methods were used: semi-structured interviews, photo-journal interviews, focus groups, video-recorded co-gender and gender-divided *baraza*, in addition to each co-researcher keeping a reflective journal from project start to finish. Approximately three hundred participants were engaged in total, with the resulting outcomes being locally derived concepts for sexual and reproductive health mentorship for youth and adults.

Criteria for selection as a co-researching team member for the *Creating Conversations* project were similar to those documented in the literature: an in-depth knowledge of cultural and contextual influences that would be impacting on

Figure 1: Research design (source: author)



research implementation, data collection and analysis; having a sustained bond or working relationship with the partnering community; and foundational understanding of research processes from ethical issues, sampling and recruitment through to data collection and analysis (Burlew et al., 2018). To ensure that each member of the co-researching team had the necessary research skills, it was a requirement to have successfully completed the qualitative community-based research training workshops offered in Cycle 1. Once the team was selected, a statement of collaboration (SOC) was developed as part of the CURP, detailing responsibilities, an overview of the duties, time commitments and payment. The SOC was treated as a living document between the co-researchers and several community members who chose to partner in other ways (for example, mobilization efforts, facilitation and access negotiation) on the project. In addition, a terms of research (TOR) contract was developed outlining a month-by-month breakdown of tasks that co-researchers had to complete for each week to ensure that the research process flowed smoothly.

The original co-researching team was a carefully selected group of seven individuals (including the academic researcher). In selecting members from the local NGO, the academic researcher (who remained the principal researcher) sought out those individuals who acted and advocated on behalf of the community and their concerns. A final team of five emerged for the duration of the project. The local knowledge experts were all proficient in English and Kiswahili, had received at least one level of university or college education, and were all from rural communities in the Mombasa region on Kenya's coast. Local knowledge experts with varying positions in the partner NGO and community, along with the academic researcher, worked as co-researchers across all cycles of the project. Thus, the co-researching team was characterized by partners holding both insider and outsider status in relation to the community members with whom the research was conducted.

The insider–outsider research team: CURP co-researchers as 'edge walkers'

At face value, the defining categories 'insider' and 'outsider' can be two strongly contrasted positions. In reality, insiders and outsiders to the research topic at hand experience variable degrees of participation and association, and roles in relation to the research setting – meaning that these positionings actually exist along a complex continuum (Herr and Anderson, 2005; Thomas et al., 2000). Literature has focused largely on the different relationships that insiders and outsiders have to the research problem, and the value in bringing together diverging perspectives and lived experience (Kerstteter, 2012; Thomas et al., 2000). Although the literature on this is increasing, it is not well documented how researchers can exchange their capacities to bridge the differences between them, gaining deeper insights into each other's worlds. While it may be constructive for each co-researcher to assume a role that plays on their strengths, having a working understanding of each other's capacities may contribute to the cohesiveness of the entire team.

The local knowledge experts supported the academic researcher – a doctoral student at the time – in meeting the study aims through: cultural/contextual skills training; ensuring research questions, aims and objectives aligned with the needs of members from the ethnic-cultural community partners; collectively analysing data and developing the research findings; and determining recommendations through a culturally responsive lens. Together, through exchange of research, cultural and contextual information, the partners became edge walkers of each other's

positionalities. In one of its earliest usages, edge walking was described as the ability for individuals to ‘walk between worlds’ – cultural, ethnic or spiritual worlds – all while resisting the need to conform. Instead, edge walkers were thought to inhabit the third space, neither fully immersed in one side nor the other, existing successfully between embracing one’s unique identity and participating skilfully in the dominant societal identity (Krebs, 1999). Tupuola’s (2004) notable use of the ‘edge walker’ concept described the ability of migrant or generational migrant Pasifika young people in New Zealand who are able to effectively navigate between the new identity of the dominant culture and their own unique cultural identity.

In the context of CURPs, the authors define edge walkers as partners who may hold different ethnic, social, educational, cultural, spiritual or political positionalities, but who are able to traverse multiple positions along the insider–outsider continuum, as a result of effective capacity-building experiences within their diverse partnership. It has been argued that researchers who work in insider–outsider partnerships that span boundaries of diverse cultural and contextual environments may encounter ‘existential dilemmas’ regarding ‘involvement, responsibility, and acceptance’ (Louis and Bartunek, 1992: 105). The Creating Conversations partners confirm these dilemmas to be true. However, being party to partnerships where there are opportunities to build capacities of all partners can enable resolution of existential crises that will inevitably arise. While reaching a true insider position is not realistic as an academic researcher working in partnership with diverse members of communities, occupying both pseudo-insider and various outsider positionalities with respect to the community can enable academic researchers to become effective edge walkers. These researchers can successfully touch the edges of different worlds (that is, frames of knowledge), but they are never fully insider or outsider.

Learning strategies for strengthening co-researching teams

The answer to Janes’s (2016) question about whether the need for capacity building assumes the absence of capacity or lack of the right capacity was clear: it was not about building capacity, but about harnessing the capacity of all partners for mutual benefit. Research could not occur without local knowledge experts to help traverse the cultural norms, practices and behaviours that became an essential element to fostering relationships within the community. Thus, the ‘right capacity’ was lacking on both sides, making the relationship between the academic researcher and the local knowledge experts on the research team mutually advantageous. Herr and Anderson (2005: 69) consider the process of carrying out participatory research with the analogy ‘designing the plane while flying it’. This is very true when conducting needs assessments to determine community priorities that essentially dictate how, and which, team capacities are nurtured. The ‘in-the-moment’ development of a participatory research study demands that all members in the partnership get creative in the working relationship to safeguard their actions as researchers. This is not to say that the project is free from direct and intentional engagement. In fact, scholars Howard and Rawsthorne (2019: 33) push for practitioners to move beyond the old adage of ‘making it up as you go’, and instead encourage deeper reflexivity in determining the significance of a project for each stakeholder – creating a culture of learning from one another. For example, the academic researcher learned about the cultural nuances of behaviours in the traditional *baraza* (that is, the appropriate greetings, protocols for speaking, listening and loitering in the space), culturally acceptable topics for discussion and those to

Table 1: Learning strategies to address complexities within co-researching teams

Complexities	Learning strategies
Fostering 'academic' and 'local' capacities	1. Theme-based peer teaching 2. Literature circles 3. Homework
Navigating expectations and realities	4. The statement of collaboration as a living document
Personal and interpersonal stressors constraining research processes	5. Reflective journaling 6. Sharing sessions

avoid, the language that should be used to frame the topics to suit the community context, as well as the importance and capacity to maintain both professional working relationships and friendships with her co-researchers. In addition to learning the ins and outs of conducting a participatory research study, the local knowledge experts on the team learned to navigate conflict better, debunked some of their assumptions about academics from global North countries, and learned the importance of holding themselves and their partners accountable in the work they did within the local NGO.

The focus was therefore deliberately on facilitating mutual *learning*, and hence an exploration of the most effective strategies to enable such mutual learning. In doing so, dual objectives of fostering self-reliance or ownership and remaining responsive to the needs within the context can be achieved. In sticking to the aeroplane analogy, there were moments in the later phases of the engaged research where the team dynamics plummeted, and this was accompanied with frustration and less than optimal performance in terms of achieving deadlines. In these moments, *the wings of our metaphorical research plane were damaged*. Several learning strategies were implemented in an effort to bridge the capacity divide at various points in the research and, ultimately, work towards strengthening the research team. Seabi (2011: 240) suggested that learning strategies, while not consistently defined in the literature, take into account 'behaviours relevant to learning, such as motivation, organization of information, planning, notes taking, concentration ability, and so on'. Thus, for the purposes of this article, learning strategies are techniques that combine these factors to facilitate the development of knowledge or skills. The literature on learning strategies is extensive, but knowledge about how learning strategies can assist the development of research partnerships is not well documented in community development or community-based research literatures. Adding insights about learning strategies in this context strengthens both the research and educational literature. The choice of learning strategies for within the Creating Conversations project was informed by theoretical foundations from disciplines including education, conflict management, social work, communication and community development. In this article, the authors focus on describing six learning strategies that were specific to the context of the Creating Conversations project. The authors have expanded on what they might have done better with hindsight to assuage the issues that surfaced. The six learning strategies that emerged to navigate complexities related to the co-researching team dynamics are summarized in Table 1.

Fostering 'academic' and 'local' capacities

A prevalent complexity within CURPs, and indeed other forms of collaborative research, such as academic–indigenous community partnerships, is getting over the tendency to view one partner as an expert in relation to the other (Adams and Faulkhead, 2012). Many indigenous and traditional communities perceive relationships with researchers

as hierarchical, which has the potential to further disenfranchise already marginalized groups (Adams and Faulkhead, 2012; Smith, 2013). Following the acknowledgement that nurturing capacity is required on both sides of the partnership, learning strategies are an effective way to enable that, and to support all co-researchers to develop an edge-walking positionality. Theme-based peer teaching, literature circles and homework were three learning strategies used within the Creating Conversations project to foster the capacity of co-researchers to edge walk.

Theme-based peer teaching

During the initial weeks of the co-researching team's formation, the use of theme-based peer teaching sessions was an opportunity to share diverse expertise. Peer teaching is a popular strategy of learning embraced by several disciplines such as social work, teaching and learning, and theatre research, but it is particularly relevant in the community-based research context (Doolittle et al., 2016; Kempenaar and Shanmugam, 2018; Nandan and Scott, 2011). The main goal of this learning strategy is to build on the strengths of each individual and the knowledge they bring, to give their fellow co-researchers a deeper insight into a specific topic. This was accomplished through short sessions focused on specific themes, such as: the tribal relationships or normative behaviours we might encounter and the practices of respect to uphold; how to describe the project when inviting the larger community to participate; confidence in speaking and interviewing; and appropriate language use when talking about sensitive topics. The first endeavour as a team was to be extremely honest around what Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998: 119) defined as the normalization of not knowing – 'being flexible and humble enough' to admit when you 'truly do not know'. Peer teaching enabled both the academic researcher and local knowledge experts to start from where they were and, through exchange, build towards common ground. For research-specific knowledge, the academic researcher used this strategy to contribute knowledge on interviewing skills and consent processes. Using role-playing scenarios of how questions in the interview schedule and focus group guide might unfold when in the field is a common and effective learning strategy to reach mutual understanding in CURPs (Burlew et al., 2018). Peer teaching also fostered cultural sharing and nurtured capacity around sexual health knowledge discussions and cultural appropriateness, linking theory to everyday practice:

It was interesting seeing how everyone blended in very well with our conversation even though we had very different career backgrounds and aspirations. The fact that participants were active in listening and sharing ideas was really good ... Role-plays was a very practical way of laying out what we understood from the theory she gave us. To me, I felt that it was not all about practice but letting us appreciate our own ideas without being led through it. It improved my confidence and I started thinking beyond the box. (Research Team Member 1, Reflective Journal)

Lenette and colleagues (2019) noted secondary transformations – those that are non-specific to the original research outcomes (such as confidence in facilitation) – as being common in participatory work.

Literature circles

Literature circles were a second learning strategy used to foster capacity. The academic researcher helped the local knowledge experts to access peer-reviewed content on

areas related to the project. After reading and making notes, each co-researcher was required to share their summary of the article and discuss its relevancy to the development of a safe space where youth and adults could openly have discussions about sex-related issues. Engaging in this strategy, local knowledge experts established a sense of criticality with regard to assessing validity or responsiveness of research as evidenced by the following quotation:

The literature review can be very exhausting ... no, it is!! Just when you think Google Scholar has or should have the answers for everything you type in, only then do you begin to appreciate dialogues in research (excerpts from transcript data) when you get adequate information. Some articles make you wonder whether research was really done or if someone just typed up their own ideas!!! (Research Team Member 1, Reflective Journal)

As a result of this exercise, this local knowledge expert encouraged the academic researcher to take a deeper dive into the literature and consider the epistemic oppression of distinct local knowledge in the realm of academic evidence. The academic researcher was inspired to build a stronger knowledge base on culturally harmful practices specific to the major tribe in the local community. Her co-researchers felt that the cultural and ethnic-specific knowledges she had prior to commencing the project were not sufficient to begin having conversations with community members. As was the case in the example above, the local knowledge experts helped guide the academic researcher to locate and read alternative sources of evidence that she would not have accessed before discussing the relevance of the topic with locals during these literature circles. Several policies that the academic researcher considered crucial to understanding the context before participating in the literature circles were disregarded once the co-researchers informed her that these policies, despite being supported by the government, were not implemented in any standardized way, especially in the partnering community. This was a good reminder to take stock of what constitutes evidence, and to answer the call for more inclusive practices around making space for multiple ways of knowing in academe and other sectors (Etmanski et al., 2014).

Homework

Completing homework enabled each co-researcher to put into practice the research skills gained. This included writing annotations of literature articles in conjunction with explaining their relevance to the context, transcribing the first round of data collection, and creating individual codebooks to conduct an initial analysis of the data. These exercises advanced basic research capacities of the partner NGO members so that they could conduct future research studies independently. In addition, it was a way for all co-researchers to explore the field of community development from an analytical lens and to question current practices. Rather than, for instance, relying on external organizations' implementations strategies, research team members were coming up with their own:

The most helpful things I learned today were how to appreciate the fact that a story, the stories of our community members, could be interpreted in so many ways. We need to start looking at the programmes we run in the community to know if we are seeing all the different perspectives. I have learned to appreciate research as a complex process. (Research Team Member 4, Reflective Journal)

This new critical awareness encouraged the local knowledge experts, as members of the partner NGO, to hold their community and international partners accountable. For the academic researcher, conducting an initial analysis and developing her own codebook as homework served to expose underlying assumptions she may have had about the community when giving the reason for assigning a code. When the opportunity arose later in sharing sessions (described below) to unpack these assumptions about why a particular code or theme was emerging, the local knowledge experts offered alternative explanations that the academic researcher had not considered.

Navigating expectations and realities

It is not uncommon for all stakeholders entering into the co-researching collaboration to feel overwhelmed at some stage with the extent of the effort to see the project to successful completion. General complexities emerge on both sides of the partnership when moments of reflection raise doubts. For community partners, these may be along the lines of: How is this benefiting me? Who is getting more out of this partnership? Am I being compensated fairly? Whereas, academic partners may ask: Is the work I am doing here being appreciated? Can my partners recognize that I am coming at this from a genuine place? The emergence of these questions risks positioning the partnering relationship in an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy – characteristic of the insider–outsider relationship (Smith, 2013). In situations where the academic researcher was considered an outsider, and a person's interpretation of their value and worth was only in terms of how a local knowledge expert would benefit from the relationship, expectations about the significance of the relational process of community work were challenged. Local partners raising the question 'How will this benefit me?' is a valid stance, as historically, researchers in communities have the reputation of being exploitative (Savan et al., 2009). This level of mistrust was difficult to resolve at various points throughout the fieldwork. Returning to the SOC is a key learning strategy that teams can use to re-evaluate expectations for the project and of each other.

The statement of collaboration as a living document

The SOC, also referred to as a memorandum of understanding is a document commonly used in participatory research to navigate power-sharing dynamics and foster realistic expectations within research teams (Hacker, 2013). For the Creating Conversations project, the team agreed that the SOC was a living document to be revisited at any point upon a co-researcher's request. The SOC covered the purpose of the CURP, ethical principles, and objectives and responsibilities of the collaborative relationship, as well as access to, storage of, and dissemination of data. A key element under the topic of responsibilities that presented a challenge was the agreed upon compensation in the SOC. After fully participating in the seven months of combined training and fieldwork, perception of the workload shifted, and dissatisfaction among the local knowledge experts on the team was noted. Revisiting the SOC opened up conversations around distribution of funding, a strained funding climate, the effort that had been put into obtaining grants for the project, and the hourly wage against the hours worked. Returning to the document aided co-researchers in gaining perspectives about the scope of work, which was sometimes more difficult than they had anticipated. Plumb and colleagues (2004) recommended clearly delineating the benefits of the research to members of the community, including those who have directly partnered as co-researchers. Following these authors' suggestions, using the SOC regularly at monthly meetings with

co-researchers ensured that it was in fact a living document and it could regularly be adjusted for managing expectations.

With regard to funding, local knowledge experts are often external to the realities of research policies and procedures in terms of grant applications and how grant distribution should be allotted. Tensions arose in our co-researching team when a mini-grant was awarded to cover Cycle 4 activities, including transport of the team to and from the research site, a computer for the team and partner NGO, and all co-researchers being treated to meals at group analysis meetings. Initially, the local knowledge experts saw this grant as having the potential to increase their fees. However, the salary was pre-established and had already been adjusted once within the SOC. While the grant money saw perks for the local knowledge experts in terms of better transport, meals and devices to complete work, the new funding source hindered communication and working relationships for a short time. This finding is echoed in research by Plumb et al. (2004), who noted that lack of breadth and depth of understanding with regard to formal research procedures and processes on behalf of local knowledge experts can lead to unequal participation and act as a barrier to the depth of interpersonal relationships that can flourish in the partnership.

Personal and interpersonal stressors constraining the research processes

Several constraints on effectively implementing the research goals arise from both personal and interpersonal factors. For several of the co-researchers, the demands of participation in the research were difficult to juggle alongside common personal stressors, such as family care responsibilities, job commitments external to the research, and voluntary activities within the NGO. Internal conflicts also crept in as the local knowledge experts familiarized themselves with research processes and questioned their capacity to put the skills into practice or whether their voice was being heard in the development of the research. On an interpersonal level, not unlike any other group process, frustrations arose due to differences in personality, and related to access to facilities and, as mentioned earlier, compensation. In one event, where two local knowledge experts entered into an argument regarding computer usage privileges for analysis processes, it was clear that strategies were required to diffuse and resolve the conflict. Two learning strategies, reflective journaling and sharing sessions, were essential to resolve personal or interpersonal challenges and vital to a well-functioning team, along with maintenance of trusting relationships for the Creating Conversations co-researcher.

Reflective journaling

Keeping a reflective journal enables researchers to explore and affirm their subjective positions in relation to those participating in the study (Ortlipp, 2008). Participatory CURPs demand reflexivity in the relationship between the academic researcher and partners. Richardson (2000) described writing as a method of inquiry, in that the practice of writing allows us to construct our world through words. She noted that researchers continue to attempt writing as a means of sense-making despite the inability of words to produce an exact representation of the studied world. Richardson (2000: 924–5) asserted that:

Although we usually think about writing as a mode of ‘telling’ about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a

research project. Writing is also a way of 'knowing' – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable.

Hence, each co-researcher was required throughout the process to document their ideas about the study and their feelings around developing a researcher identity. The journaling powerfully assisted a realization of the personal challenges between being a researcher and being a member of the community. This highlighted a need for appropriate skills to traverse this well. One local knowledge expert had this epiphany early in the process, as she actively engaged in reflecting on her journey:

It is annoying having to work [regular job at NGO] on the weekends but it's all sacrifice. I must go to work today, have meeting to sit [sic] and a lot of minutes to write down. Unfortunately, [after arriving at work] the meeting didn't happen as planned. We had to push it to next week because very few people turned up. Maybe it is because everyone gets exhausted by the end of the week and they just want to rest, I assume. The day goes by lazily, but gladly it ends.

I do my research work at home and decide to use the rest of the weekend using Google Scholar!!! Thank God for [name anonymized]'s help. I find amazing stuff but it's frustrating that I can't seem to download full text, not unless I purchase online! I keep trying and reading, hoping that what is able proves sufficient. A boring weekend of reading and more reading – hmmm, who is to say I am not a researcher? (Research Team Member 1, Reflective Journal)

Despite annoyances with juggling her time, the local knowledge expert equally delighted in learning new techniques while coming to understand the roles of a researcher. Several authors note the development of researcher identity as a secondary transformation resulting from being part of a co-researching team (Lenette et al., 2019). This local knowledge expert also revelled in our different interpretations of the same community scenarios that evolved in the *baraza* space. She noted these in her journal which, after sharing with the academic researcher, fostered a mutual sense of understanding and safety in each other's differences, and ultimately enabled learning from one another. These opportunities for shared learning and teaching in a team must be at the centre in the design of participatory CURPs. Hall and Tandon (2015) noted that this acceptance of different epistemological stances is necessary to enhance the transformative impacts and extend the possibilities for democratizing knowledge produced through partnership. Building on this, we also argue that using the strategy of shared personal reflections from journals among co-researchers creates opportunities to expand one's own lens for perceiving any given situation.

For the academic researcher in this partnership, reflective journaling was a method to work through 'the interpretive crisis', which Denzin (1994: 501) described as a problem of determining the appropriate amount of influence a researcher should have on a study, and how, or if, it should be controlled. A researcher's influence in a CURP is inevitable, but the extent and timing for treading the fringes of being an insider can be a difficult dance for academic researchers, who may not grasp their potential power in a situation. Scholars have named this challenge as working within a 'negotiated space' (Hudson et al., 2010: 55–6), where partners gain the ability to move between knowledge systems to unlock novel ideas – the ability to edge walk. In this sense, edge walking is a function of the new 'in-between' identity (Diversi and

Moreria, 2009) at which one can arrive during partnership. However, before gaining the ability to edge walk, the co-researcher should engage concepts such as the nature of sharing space and power, or understanding the impact of one's own privilege, at a metaphysical level to map out a personal philosophy. To manage these challenges, the academic researcher strived to record her reactions to participant responses, collaboration suggestions and personal opinions, and the times she felt confronted. She wrote about the power dynamics between the participants and herself, along with the undercurrents between participants of different status. Returning to her journal excerpts regularly throughout the duration of fieldwork gave the academic researcher opportunity to think deeply about which instances made her feel more like an insider, and which conjured feeling of the outsider status. Journaling advanced the academic researcher's stance on these polarizing positionalities to eventually move beyond thinking of her research identities as a dichotomy between being inside or outside the community, to consider what instances promoted the experience of edge walking. An excerpt from the academic researcher's journal, which was written as pseudo-poetry during fieldwork for the Creating Conversations project (Chubb, 2018: 239), evidences the transformative impact of dealing with the personal stressor of sitting on the outside and working to understand what it means to occupy an insider position:

The space between scholarship and personal relationship
 The line is thin in this work.
 I stand on either side –
 between building relationships and documenting them;
 between listening to stories and interpreting them as data;
 between weighing the rewarding moments against the challenging ones;
 between carrying my unearned privileges while simultaneously working to
 unlearn it.

Those in-between spaces where I initially felt so unsettled – between
 insider and outsider, are now the spaces where I catch my breath:
 Like spreading my arms out, the feeling I am flying, on the back of the
 boda-boda [motorbike] ride after a long day, I am laughing so hard at
 Kay, who is singing loudly along to the music booming out of her mobile;
 'it's our theme song' I say, thinking whatever the lyrics were had been well
 suited to what we learned or needed that day.

Those types of moments, the in-between spaces where I catch my breath,
 between gathering knowledge and understanding it;
 the spaces used for thinking and experiencing are the spaces in this work
 where I now feel most at home. (Academic Researcher journal, 18 August
 2015)

This excerpt represents the possibilities that embracing the act of edge walking can offer. This process involved transforming what was once understood, letting go of assumptions, being open to new ways of knowing, and conceding that the academic researcher's view on sex-related issues in the community would shift as a result of entering into partnership. Understanding and being comfortable with her positionality was the academic researcher's most significant personal stressor that brought the greatest learnings from being a co-researcher. Linked to the next strategy, sharing the journals in weekly meetings, also enabled mutual learning. Through sharing the reflective journals, the co-researchers were exposed to thoughts on team dynamics and perspectives on the community. The – often contrasting – perspectives surfaced descriptions that presented a '360 degree' view. In addition, by journaling challenges,

successes and annoyances that arose, the team was able to collectively agree on the best way forward before conflicts escalated.

Sharing sessions

This sharing sessions strategy is noted by various scholars as being effective for assisting team members in navigating emotional challenges along with the demands of carrying out research processes (Grills and Rowe, 1998). The common practice of setting group rules was observed, by agreeing that only one person would speak at a time, that respectful language was to be used at all times, and that each person was given sufficient time to feel heard. The sharing sessions sometimes ran high with emotions, and it was visibly more difficult for some people to express their thoughts on specific issues. These sessions did not end until a plan of action to move forward peacefully was achieved. For some members of the team, this process was an enjoyable and educational experience:

As always, we discuss the research together with the team and share personal feelings and remarks. I enjoy this part of our meetings, because then you do see and understand how people feel about the whole research [process]. (Research Team Member 2, Reflective Journal)

Sharing sessions also extended into weekend retreats, where team-bonding activities and relaxation encouraged authentic sharing and, thus, a deeper knowing of each other as co-researchers, which enabled deeper conversations about the research and the context, and eventually benefited the individuals and the communities served.

Concluding reflections on learning strategies for edge-walking research teams

There are many possibilities for complexities to arise during the design and implementation of CURPs, where a primary goal is to foster relationships and advance learning for the benefit of communities. We reflected on six strategies to deal with the three categories of complexity that emerged during our project: (1) fostering academic and local capacities; (2) navigating expectations and realities; and (3) personal and interpersonal stressors constraining research processes. These strategies can purposefully be implemented in future CURPs to facilitate knowledge democracy – the act of ensuring that all partners are comfortable to share and feel heard, and are transformed through participation in the process of producing knowledge (Etmanski et al., 2014; Rowell and Feldman, 2019). Each of these strategies encouraged the collaborating partners to interrogate whose interests were being served, and to refocus, when necessary, on the community. There is so much to be said about the processes of teaching and learning within complex community-based environments. However, we argue that these strategies, when adapted appropriately to the context, will assist with navigating the complexity.

When growing a team of co-researchers, learning strategies that respond to the culture and context within which the partnership arises are extremely valuable. These strategies help shape a shared understanding of each other as stakeholders, of the communities being served, and of the project. During our project, partners returned to the drawing board time and time again to determine how we could improve our working relationship, perform two-way transfer of knowledge in a digestible manner, or better understand and be open to each other's different assessments of what was occurring in the community. Building co-researching teams to navigate the complexities

embedded in such a partnership allows all stakeholders entering the relationship to gain a fuller understanding of what works in collaborative spaces, but it also inspires creativity in the context.

The strategies used in this particular CURP served to address the power imbalances in the relationship, nurture different capabilities and deepen edge-walking experiences. Unlike more traditional research studies, where researchers can 'parachute in', train fieldworkers as assistants to collect data, and return to the familiarity of their context to make sense of the information gathered, CURPs framed within highly participatory approaches are inherently more engaged, and they thus allow for opportunities to maximize reciprocal learning. Accepting that there is as much learning for the academic researcher as there is for all community partners justifies the intentional introduction of learning strategies. Learning skills enabled all co-researchers to assert their voices, better understand the community, and take shared responsibility over the direction of the project. The local knowledge experts noted a sense of co-ownership of the Creating Conversations project as well as their roles within it, which in turn enabled understanding of, and commitment to, the necessary steps to implement sustainable processes for change.

The academic researcher had to challenge herself to explore ways of knowing that were contradistinctive to her typical reality. Edge walking in the lives of her co-researchers permitted the academic researcher to take off her rose-coloured glasses to see the messiness of working alongside community members, and to accept that – contrary to the models and frameworks provided in research texts, and the tendency of researchers to set out a definitive plan – working with communities does not subscribe to a given formula. Embracing surprises and setbacks, and different paces and visions, strengthened the critical capacity of the academic researcher not only to grasp but also to endorse different perspectives that allowed for methods better suited to the community of practice. As an academic researcher working alongside diverse partners, understanding one's positionality is an endeavour that should be thoughtfully engaged in, to ensure that accountability and authenticity remain at the centre of such relationships. Exploring these processes and outcomes highlighted tools that worked well and areas that required improvement, as well as the value in bringing ideas to fruition in collaborative realities. Growing the knowledge base on what contributes to effective co-researching relationships – and, more specifically, edge-walking experiences – can encouragingly enhance best practices for working in partnership while reducing complexities within the processes of engaged research.

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