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# Participating in a community-based participatory research module: A reflective inquiry

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## Abstract

This commentary piece, using a narrative inquiry frame, explores the experiences of five individuals who came together to participate in a community-based participatory research (CBPR) module. Owing to the short time frame of this accredited module, when the module was live, a particular focus was directed towards dialogical techniques to build trust and respect within the group and subsequently generate potential research questions. The inaugural experience of collaborating on a CBPR module stimulated unique feelings, reflections and learnings for participants, many of which took time to surface. This article aims to make sense of those experiences to support those wishing to engage in CBPR initiatives.

**Keywords:** community-based participatory research, reflection, narrative inquiry, trust building, knowledge democracy

### Key messages

- A community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach that incorporates active and regular reflection has the potential to facilitate transformational learning for participant researchers.
- Narrative inquiry embarked upon together by a mix of stakeholder participants provides a useful frame for examining the strengths and opportunities of recent CBPR initiatives.
- There are hidden challenges and opportunities associated with the CBPR process, which need to be unpacked and understood for optimum impact and individual development.

## Introduction

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a partnership-based approach to research that engages community members as co-researchers, together with students and academics, in all aspects of the research process. Both community and academic knowledge are shared, as is decision making and ownership (Israel *et al.*, 1998). This type of research is explicitly committed to benefiting 'the participants either through direct intervention or by using the results to inform action for change' (ibid.: 175). CBPR has been identified as a means to rectify what critiques of the academy call

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'higher education's disconnection from communities and the growing concern about the professoriate's exceedingly narrow definition of research' (Strand *et al.*, 2003: 1), or the 'growing feeling that scientific research is aimed at abstract knowledge or profit and not sufficiently geared towards the needs and concerns of society' (European Commission, 2003: 3). It is with this value set that lecturers at University College Cork, Ireland (UCC) approached the design and implementation of their organization's first CBPR module. The motivation behind developing a CBPR module for PhD students was to equip higher education students with community-engagement skills and to develop their active citizenship skills generally. There are several learning outcomes:

- Recognize the principles of community-based participatory research and identify strategies for applying these.
- Outline the key steps involved in developing and sustaining community-based participatory research partnerships with civil society organizations.
- Synthesize the principles of community-based participatory research and apply them in students' research/research design.
- Discuss the relevance of research in society, and the potential impact of research on individuals, groups, communities and society.
- Identify common challenges faced by university–civil society organization partnerships, and recommend strategies and resources for overcoming them.
- List participatory methods for including the voices of multiple stakeholders in decision-making processes. Develop the capacity of all partners to support and sustain authentic community-based participatory research partnerships.
- Critique the role of the university in society and civic engagement in higher education institutions.

As part of the module's assessment criteria, the early stage PhD students from a wide range of disciplines practised reflective journal writing to record, process and evaluate their experience on the module. Students were required to create journal entries after each community visit and after each classroom session. In the classroom sessions, students were encouraged to share elements of their journal with a student partner (pair and share) or the wider class. The students submitted the completed journal of entries two weeks after the module ended, and they were provided with feedback on their reflective accounts. Guidance for the practice of academic journal writing was provided in class through academic instruction (for example, Moon, 2004; Gibbs, 1988) and informal feedback from peers. This combination of instruction and feedback supported students to develop their reflective skills and move from the position of narrator or bystander to a more active participant in the CBPR process. The practice of journal writing, and that of exchanging journal entries, provided students with a unique opportunity to understand their peers' perspectives and to challenge their own interpretations of nuanced instances that occurred in the community sessions. Community participants were encouraged to take notes as they saw fit, and the community employee and academic staff also reflected regularly.

From January to April 2016, UCC PhD students embarked on a CBPR module with a partner organization called Westgate Foundation – a community-based organization providing services such as day care, community housing and social activities to older adults. In this article, we assign the term 'members' to include all the individuals from the Westgate Foundation who participated in this module. The use of the word 'members' throughout this piece is distinct from the wider group of individuals who are ordinarily considered members of the organization but not of this research partnership, nor does it extend to Aisling, who is an employee of Westgate

Foundation. These members (the majority over 80 years of age) included individuals who live on-site in the purpose-built sheltered housing, individuals who live in the local community and avail of Westgate Services (activities such as a choir or bowls club) and individuals who volunteer for Westgate Foundation's key services, such as meals on wheels. Additionally, in this paper, 'CBPR participants' refers to all participants in the module (students, community members and staff members from both organizations).

The module consisted of a total of five, three-hour meetings with Westgate Foundation, taking place every second week, and four classroom-based sessions (students only) in between. Participating on the module were three university staff members, eight PhD students, an employee of Westgate Foundation and approximately 23 members of the Westgate Foundation.

Members of Westgate Foundation had limited interactions working with the university sector. Any direct experience was limited to them being the research subjects. Understandably, they were familiar with the 'research on' model and not familiar with the 'research with and for' model. Rooted in the values and principles of Israel *et al*. (1998), Strand *et al*. (2003) and others, this CBPR module aimed, in part, to change that reality and to provide an opportunity for members of this particular community to draw upon their own lived experiences to guide and generate important research themes and, as a consequence, influence the university's research agenda. Tools, methods and approaches that embody this approach, and that were used in similar projects, are captured in a report from an H2020 Responsible Research and Innovation project, EnRRICH (Enhancing Responsible Research and Innovation through Curricula in Higher Education). This report, entitled *Resources for Enhancing RRI Understanding and Prompting Debate on Societal Issues in the Curriculum for Early Stage Students* (Hally *et al*., 2017), can be accessed on the Living Knowledge website.

For the first iteration of the module, it is important to note that there were no articulated expectations for either the partnership itself or associated partnership outcomes. There were several reasons why the partnership did not identify research objectives or define the nature of what was to be researched prior to the module commencing: neither stakeholder group knew each other; time constraints imposed by the academic semester in which the module took place; and the module coordinator wanted to adhere to CBPR values and principles. It was therefore proposed that the participants would *discover what was to be discovered* together. In this instance, the partnership with the community organization was considered a pre-research or exploratory phase in which participants could democratically decide upon what would be explored throughout the partnership. This was a unique approach taken for this particular CBPR partner. In subsequent CBPR partnerships, the research area has been more clearly outlined, but the individuals (from both university and community organizations) are always careful not to overly define the research challenge so that all participants, not just those involved in the pre-module preparatory stages, have an authentic opportunity to direct and mould how the research partnership develops.

## Methodology

This paper outlines the experiences of five participants in a new CBPR module for multidiscipline PhD students: two PhD students (Katarzyna – known as Kasia – and Sarah), one community member (John), one community employee (Aisling) and one academic staff member (Ruth). These five individuals are both participants in the CBPR module and authors of this paper. To maintain an organic connection between

author-participant individual accounts and the themes explored in this paper, all participants agreed that this paper should feature their real names.

In the months following the completion of the partnership, five participants met to discuss what it was like to participate in this experience, and they made a plan to record their thoughts and reflections in a detailed reflective journal. The group met at intervals during 2017 and 2018, initially to exchange their detailed journal entries and then to assist in deepening reflection. Common themes emerged that supported the five author-participants to focus their ongoing reflections. Through a narrative inquiry lens, this paper draws on these individual accounts to bring to bear the most salient messages with regard to the impact of the learning on the individuals and the various stakeholder groups, and the subsequent implications for the future. Narrative inquiry can be defined as a way of understanding individual and collective experience through 'collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus' (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 20).

The author-participants worked collaboratively to merge and make sense of the various accounts. John and Kasia read each other's narratives, Sarah read Ruth's narrative, and so on, and through inquiry and discussion the writing group began to identify common themes. The writing group split into small groups, each taking a particular theme and each group reading their peers' developing narratives and coming together to ensure there was a connection across each theme. The writing group met in different locations, trying to be considerate of each other's circumstances. While we regularly gathered in the same room in the university because of the university's central location and the opportunity for privacy, we also met in other venues. For example, Ruth met John in his home in the Westgate Foundation, Sarah and Aisling met in a coffee shop, and so on. In late 2017, one of the authors, John, passed away: may he rest in peace. The remaining authors continued to meet to develop the paper, and made every effort to represent John's voice. In late 2018, it was collectively agreed that the paper could benefit from a lead author (Ruth) to complete the final edits before submitting it for publication. Ruth shared all iterations with the authors, and kept them up to date on the progress of the paper.

## Key learning

In the months following the module's completion, some module outcomes were clear and tangible. For example, the collaboration generated three concrete research proposals that were then directed into UCC's engaged research unit, CARL (Community–Academic Research Links), for future students to undertake as their credit-bearing research projects. CARL is similar to what is often referred to as a 'science shop' in other European higher education institutions or organizations. The three research proposals contained research questions organically generated throughout the CBPR initiative. These questions related to:

1) barriers created by technology
2) positive ageing
3) security and safety in the community.

In the academic years following the CBPR initiative, two undergraduate university students with no link to the CBPR partnership undertook topics 1 and 2 generated by the CBPR process. For example, a final-year social work student examined the topic of positive ageing. She organized research sessions with many of the same individuals from the Westgate Foundation who participated on the CBPR module to listen to and understand their perspectives with regard to the topic of positive ageing.

The subsequent research that occurred as a result of the leads generated by the CBPR process was enhanced by the authenticity of the research questions – questions that were generated over several weeks with careful consideration. As a result, community participants sincerely owned the research topic and were equipped to engage confidently, as community researchers, with the student researchers. This was a significant transformational learning for several of the community participants who had engaged with researchers in the past but had felt little connection to the research topic as it had not emerged from their voice or the voice of their community.

The creation of the three research proposals, and the subsequent research undertaken by future students, is a clear and undisputable output from the collaboration. The focus of this paper, however, is on the other learnings that took more time to crystallize, and that came to the fore for the five author-participants through their narrative inquiry lens. These learnings relate to: identifying the need to collaborate, the deep complexities associated with establishing relationships and building trust, embracing the process and managing anxieties, and individual transformations.

## The need to collaborate

Each author-participant's account reflects a desire to engage in a collaborative manner for social change within the community. The university wanted to introduce a new CBPR module for postgraduate students, and needed a viable community partner to actualize that goal. Aisling, through her work, realized that there were few spaces for older adults to speak and share opinions:

> During many conversations with Westgate Foundation service users/ residents there were shared concerns and issues highlighted by various older people. These issues of concern could be related to anything political, or service delivery within Westgate Foundation. What I noticed was that people were reluctant on an individual level to do anything about these issues, even though I tried to encourage them. So, I got to thinking, could there be a space within Westgate Foundation where people would feel comfortable speaking about issues of concern and collectively taking action? (Aisling)

The starting point for the community sector engagement with the module was this lack of opportunity and confidence for older people to take collective action. Through his experience with the project, John, an octogenarian participant from Westgate Foundation, reinforced Aisling's initial observation with regard to the lack of spaces for discussion and collective action of older people:

> This partnership provided an outlet for older people to express what they wanted to say, to talk about the problems that older people experience in their lives. I believe older people have very little opportunity to express their opinions, and to share their unique perspectives on societal developments and life in general. The process gave an outlet for people to express themselves. (John)

Older people who participated in the project felt that they had a lack of opportunity to exercise their voice, and to contribute their unique perspectives on societal challenges that they had accrued through a lifetime of experience as citizens. They felt invisible, and they wanted to be heard. The opportunity to participate in a community participatory research project with university students unearthed a strong desire for

intergenerational interactions where political discussions could take place and active citizenship could be exercised. While community members were strongly interested in the opportunity to be heard, first and foremost, they also articulated their expectations from the partnership. In particular, community participants were vocal with regard to what they did not want for the CBPR experience. Some expressed concern, pointing to the use of formal academic language or 'jargon' as a possible barrier to engagement and genuine partnership. Moreover, some did not appear confident that this process would value their life experiences as sources of knowledge, benefit them directly or promote real change. The simple act of the community verbalizing this preference motivated module instructors to consistently encourage community participants to be leaders and directors of the participatory project, so that they had responsibility for harnessing their unique knowledge and generating outcomes that had the potential to impact their lives. This approach was warmly appreciated, and it contributed in no small way to creating equity across stakeholder participants.

The longing to tackle societal challenges through community collaborations was also experienced by the PhD students enrolled on the module, coupled with a desire for hands-on learning opportunities. The module offered an opportunity for students across the disciplines to collaborate together, enabling multidisciplinary learning:

> This approach to learning broke up my usual solitary PhD journey, and was interactive, dynamic, relational and situational. It invigorated me. (Sarah)

CBPR approaches are designed to facilitate experiential discovery, and the course leaders worked hard to engineer an environment conducive to discovery. In particular, effort and thought were directed towards establishing relationships, trust and safety among the different partners and participants. Although trust is a characteristic synonymous with any form of participatory research, the reflections of the author-participants revealed several complexities associated with building trust, which needed to be unpacked.

## Establishing trust and building relationships

Establishing trust between the different stakeholders engaged in this learning process was essential. This began with initial meetings between UCC representatives and Aisling, as community representative. Being transparent with regard to factors such as participants' expectations, and asking how we could build a respectful environment where people felt confident to express themselves, was an important first step in establishing rapport, and a research relationship based on mutual trust. Reflecting on the first meeting with Ruth, the module coordinator, Aisling states:

> My first meeting with Ruth, one of the module coordinators in UCC, challenged my assumptions, as Ruth was honest about a lack of experience in working with older people, and asked for advice. (Aisling)

As Stoecker (2008: 118) states, 'academics must be comfortable admitting how much they don't know – and how much they have to learn by collaborating with the community'. All participants, on some level, felt vulnerable, especially with regard to how much they did or did not know about each other or the topics we would be discussing. This admission laid the fertile ground for the partnership discussions to take place.

In the opening session, students met each other and the module lecturers for the first time. In the second half of the opening session, they were joined by a

community participant, Michael, and by Aisling. The initial meeting that Ruth had with Aisling sensitized Ruth, and subsequently the students and co-teachers, to the type of concerns that Michael and his peers had about engaging in such a process. If Ruth and Aisling had not met privately prior to the module commencing, Aisling would not have had the chance to relay any fears and anxieties held by the group around the process. Similarly, Ruth would not have had a chance to speak to the students about the community partner, something she believed could only be done in person with the students. She believed students would have found it challenging to adequately hear Michael's words if they were focused on trying to figure out who Michael was, how he was different from Aisling, where he fitted within the context of this new module they were taking, and so on.

On that day, representing his organization, Michael was the messenger for the Westgate Foundation members, and his opinion of 'the academics' had the potential to bolster or undermine the proposed research. Michael was invited to meet with students, express his expectations for the research relationship, and build an initial bridge between the university and the community. Michael's honesty about the challenges of living alone, following the death of his lifelong companion, his wife, immediately created a connection with the students, who related with compassion to the sharing of his experiences of being an older man in his community. While he came armed with a research question about bees, students also realized that active listening with community members also meant listening for the societal challenges that were not packaged as research questions, but reflected the reality of living alone as an older person. Grief was one of these oft-cited unacknowledged themes that emerged throughout the research process. This ability to share intimate experiences, and the ability of students to listen, was central to the ongoing research relationship. University participants were beginning to gain an understanding of the complexities associated with building trust. Aisling captures the budding solidarity and trust that was sparked on that first meeting between Michael and the students:

> Michael spoke of his love for his wife and the intense feelings of loss since her recent death. He also spoke about the importance of being engaged in services to help counteract elements of isolation and depression associated with loss and grief, often experienced by older people. Michael was met with respect and understanding, and this first meeting was core in how the process unfolded. (Aisling)

The week after Michael's visit, students and university staff entered the community, and the relationship building continued. The tempo for engagement had been established during the initial meeting with Michael, and this was continued within the community, as reflected upon by John:

> I thought the students were wonderful, they were accommodating, and understanding, and they had a good sense of humour. They wanted to do what was right. The students cared, and you know they cared because they asked good questions and followed up on previous conversations. I felt that the students were engaged and deeply interested in what we had to say. (John)

The necessity of, and challenges around, building trust is one of the most frequently discussed elements of CBPR, and it requires careful consideration at all stages of the partnership (Jagosh *et al.*, 2015; Simonds *et al.*, 2013; Eckerle Curwood *et al.*, 2011). The experience of this project was that a well-structured collaboration, where a visible

effort is made to create an environment, and where all participants feel safe to share and express themselves, helps stimulate memorable outcomes. Kasia captures this:

> While taking part in the CBPR module, I was humbled by the degree of personal investment and trust given to the process by our community participants. Through their courage, we all had a much deeper educational experience. (Kasia)

The process of building trust is not accomplished easily, and it can be fragile (Jagosh *et al.*, 2015; Christopher *et al.*, 2008). In this project, trust was built through careful planning, listening, patience and, importantly, by holding on to anxieties for the greater good of the partnership. Within the classroom, the instructors ensured that the sequencing and delivery of material paid particular attention to the omnipresent challenge of securing trust in CBPR partnerships, and their subsequent fragility. In addition to utilizing the practice of reflective writing to expand upon the intricacies of trust, instructors introduced a case study-based article that detailed numerous CBPR projects (Banks *et al.*, 2013). The article presents a variety of partnerships, all of which raise questions with regard to the ethics of community-based participatory research. As a result, students could draw comparisons between what they were experiencing and the experience of the researchers featured in the article. Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation is also a reliable tool to understand the different levels of participation that can exist, and to demonstrate to students why particular power imbalances might be at play. Classroom theory supported the students, in real time, to have a more profound understanding in relation to how participants may be feeling, the implications for trust building, and how to navigate potentially sensitive scenarios.

## Embracing the process and anxieties

All stakeholder groups – the community employee and participants, and university staff and students – encountered varying levels of anxiety. For Aisling and Ruth, the anxieties were primarily concerned with providing a quality experience for all participants and effectively representing their organizations. For example:

> As the visits continued, challenges arose around the day-to-day service delivery within Westgate Foundation, such as noise levels, people gathering in areas that were blocking doors, which was potentially disruptive to day care attendees. This was highlighted to me by a Westgate Foundation staff member, and I was fearful that if I brought it to the attention of the UCC group, they would be anxious and it would disrupt the research process. So I kept it to myself. As a consequence, inside I was ulcerating and carrying anxieties around the process. (Aisling)

There are few studies that focus on the feelings of anxiety that can emerge among CBPR participants. However, Allen *et al.* (2011) indicate that for those new to CBPR, a certain level of anxiety is to be expected, and prior training or preparation is unlikely to prevent emerging anxieties. Sarah reflects on Aisling's admission regarding her containment of emerging anxieties when the partnership was live:

> Aisling became a container for the anxieties of 'maybe this will fail', 'maybe the community won't engage', while enabling students and members of the Westgate Foundation community to just focus on the research. The experience of being a container for these emotions wasn't evident in the module. It was only later and through our own reflective processes that we

> each began to discuss the emotional impact of doing this type of work, and the anxieties attached with letting go of previous ways of knowing, and new ways of working. (Sarah)

Aisling, although experiencing anxiety, presented herself as calm and confident throughout the process. For students learning on the module, there were varying levels of anxiety. As Sarah had experience of participatory research, she did not experience anxiety. Kasia, on the other hand, felt anxious about the loss of control of the research process. This was a view held by many of her peers, and again reinforced the necessity for all participants to acknowledge the importance of *trust building* in a CBPR project. While the research process demanded preparation, it also required adept reflexivity throughout the emerging process. Through the use of reflective discussion in class, and in reflective journal entries, students were able to work through and process the anxieties as a group.

For module coordinators, anxiety about whether or not the partnership would succeed was evident, but this remained hidden during research encounters. Chávez *et al.*'s (2008: 81) analogy between learning and dancing was useful in conceptualizing these different emotional experiences of participation:

> Like dancing, CBPR has the potential for making research partners feel exhilarated, awkward, controlled, and free. The dance involves being aware of differences and respecting while some people appear to be natural dancers, others need more time and instruction as they experiment with movement.

In subsequent CBPR collaborations, the dance analogy has been a useful code for managing students' anxieties around the participatory research experience. For the university instructors, managing their own emotions and anxieties has come to be part of each year's CBPR experience, almost like a 'frenemy' showing up. Without experiencing emotion, there would be little indication that the partnership is making progress – trudging through the rough patches to get to a more enlightened place together. In this partnership, it was the ability of research facilitators, Ruth and Aisling, to internally manage emerging anxieties during active research and learning encounters that supported the partnership to succeed.

For the older people in the community organization, there was a fear of what the process might entail. For many, the university represented the elite. This partly represents a seismic change in access to higher education, which took place in Ireland during their lifetime (abolition of higher education fees in 1996). An opportunity to collaborate with the university was something that evoked anxiety, as well as excitement, with many assumptions about what the university was, what students would be like, and whether there would be mutual recognition and respect. In subsequent iterations, instructors have become adept at supporting participants through the different stages of anxiety that they inevitably experience. Instructors point to the complexities associated with building trust in partnerships, and they encourage participants to *get comfortable being uncomfortable* for a period of time.

The importance of reflection was evident in students' engagement with their reflective journal entries, and their subsequent discussion of those entries in class. There was also a short amount of time provided to students after each community research session to 'decompress', or unpick any particular learnings or anxieties that had emerged in the session, with the promise that these would be discussed further in the next classroom-based session. Providing this time for reflection, and underlining the importance of reflection, allowed all participants, but particularly the students,

to air observations. These observations were a starting point for structuring future participatory sessions with the community partner, demonstrating to our partner that we are in tune with their preferences with regard to the best way to develop the research process. A simple example of how reflective practice influenced the CBPR method and the partnership's goals relates to an instance when someone had difficulty making herself heard. This instance is specifically referenced in one of John's reflections in the theme about individual transformations, but it was also discussed while the module was live by the students who witnessed this occurring. In class, we were able to discuss how best to navigate this challenge in a way that did not disempower or disenfranchise anyone. It was interesting to learn later that this challenge was also reflected upon by community participants, and this further emphasizes the need to provide time, space and instruction for considered reflective practice for all partners.

The lack of instruction and acknowledgement of reflective practice for community participants is something from which the module lecturers have learnt. The module lecturers now provide all participants with new notebooks for the purpose of reflective journaling, and they share with community participants the same instructions that students receive for reflective writing, should they wish to engage with the practice at that level. Additionally, in early coordination meetings, the instructors highlight the value of having a private debriefing session after each participatory research session, so that participants can decompress and are not left with questions or concerns that may fester. Instructors suggest ways in which community partners can hold these debriefing sessions, and also how to carry the learnings from these sessions into upcoming participatory meetings. By having both an articulated plan for purposeful, honest communication, and the tools to uphold that honest communication, instructors have been able to create fertile conditions for strong CBPR projects.

## Individual transformations

As the partnership progressed, everyone began to transform their views, roles and understandings, although this was not entirely visible to everyone at the time of the partnership. For the students, because others largely contained the anxieties, their learning was supported, and it enabled them to concentrate on participation. In further iterations of the module, the university staff became more skilled at discussing and reflecting on emerging anxieties, and also supported students and community participants to do so.

The necessity to embrace anxiety and face fears created a certain shift in how participants viewed each other, interacted and came to understand how knowledge is created and democratized. All individual accounts recorded notable transformations, as a result of the CBPR project, in relation to knowledge and research constructs, and the personal and professional implications experienced on account of those transformations. For example:

> Readings offered in the CBPR module, and the experience as one of the participants, have allowed me to realize that democracy in the learning and research environments is a conscious choice and performance dependent on all actors. (Kasia)

For author-participants, their relationships with themselves also changed throughout the process, as awareness and understandings developed. John became a facilitator for other older people, who were perhaps less confident to engage in the process and to make their ideas and questions heard. In this extract, he talks about observing that a peer was struggling with participating due to a hearing difficulty:

> At one particular point, I felt sorry for a woman who had hearing difficulties. She eventually spoke up and said that she could not hear what was going on, and I saw that people kept speaking over her. When she spoke up, it arrested our consciousness and made us tune into what she was experiencing and to be more considerate of her. When she did speak, she was extremely articulate and had important points to make. That was a lesson that I learnt, and it was very important because she had a lot of good things to say. (John)

John's ability to facilitate parity of participation was integral to the research process, as he became an advocate and leader within his community. While engaging with the narrative inquiry frame, John shared with the group the level to which he was actively performing a facilitator role with his Westgate Foundation peers. He was able to recognize when a peer was reluctant to participate fully in the various conversations occurring, and he skilfully, yet discreetly, worked to engage this peer. He became the bridge between the university participants and the community participants. Ruth, Aisling, Kasia and Sarah gained an appreciation for just how much work John, and perhaps some of his peers, were doing in bringing all community participants along at times when they were finding it difficult to engage, for whatever reason. This was a hidden learning uncovered by our narrative inquiry focus, and something that author-participants have benefited from in subsequent work, for example, actively watching out for natural community leaders and working with them to enhance their community's engagement with the project at hand.

There was also a direct transformational learning for John, who articulated that this research process emphasized a desire in him to become politically active on issues facing his community, a position he grew confident to fulfil. It helped him to see that he was a strong leader, and that his experience working in hotels and other organizations had developed distinctive leadership skills that he was not necessarily able to name prior to this research process. Similarly to John, the research partnership nudged Kasia to re-examine how she viewed the activities and functions of higher education institutions (HEIs) and, going deeper, to analyse her approach to her disciplinary practice and teaching. The module helped her to critically engage with her own position as a PhD student in applied psychology, and it influenced her research and teaching style moving forward, leading her to question previous assumptions about teaching and practice. The experience also stimulated questions for Sarah in relation to the role of HEIs in supporting learners to become 'whole persons' or active citizens (Tassone *et al.*, 2018):

> The CBPR module was evidently designed to include a routine provision for 'headspace' to facilitate reflection, and the social space for peer discussion. I believe these elements and support should not be viewed as 'extras' in HEIs but requirements for a responsible scholarship. (Sarah)

A sense of community and solidarity in their situations emerged for the older participants, who may not have known each other as a community before, with friendships lasting beyond the lifetime of the research process. The democratization of the spaces in which we worked and learnt became more important. For the community service, in which the research took place, this was evident in new strategies that placed participation of older people centre stage, and for Aisling in her role as a social worker, which now embraces more participatory approaches.

One of the most resonating learnings and transformations for Ruth related to the degree to which those 'outside the university' view their ability to effect change and

to meaningfully contribute to research priorities and agendas. Although she had read about this, and was familiar with her colleagues' experiences, she was nonetheless surprised by the community participants' inclination to view their knowledge and experiences as inferior to those of the university participants:

> On our first meeting with the community participants in their community setting, I expected to meet with a powerful, organized and energized group. However, the individuals I encountered were similar to respectful school pupils waiting for instructions from authoritative teachers. Evidently, because we came from a university, the community participants readily appointed us as the authority and sat quietly, pen in hand. I noticed a reluctance among the community group to speak, and layers of self-consciousness when communicating; a fear that they would say 'the wrong thing' or use 'the wrong words' etc. (Ruth)

The relevance and critical arguments of key theorists such as Dewey and Freire, presented in the module's classroom sessions, were brought to life for all university participants, but particularly for Ruth and the PhD students. Witnessing first hand the tendency of community participants to defer to university participants, particularly in the early stages, university participants could connect more strongly to the writings of Freire, for example.

A much-analysed part of CBPR is the readiness of the community to engage effectively in a CBPR process (Andrews *et al.*, 2012; Plested *et al.*, 2006). In engaging in CBPR, there is a body of work that has to be done by the higher education researchers for community partners' readiness to engage in the research equitably and with confidence. Many community participants entered the initiative with low confidence and a fear of being judged or being unable to participate due to varying levels of educational attainment:

> The experience changed some of my views. For example, I did have certain fears from the outset about working with students and staff from a university. I feared that because I did not have the same level of formal education, that it might work against me. (John)

With this particular group, narrative and dialogical techniques helped to build confidence and a realization that they had a strong knowledge base that uniquely positioned them to raise issues of importance to their community, and play a role in affecting them. In this instance, the use of dialogical techniques was appropriate because it provided an opportunity for Westgate Foundation members to build their confidence while also achieving something of merit. In subsequent years, as a direct learning from the first iteration, instructors have paid particular attention to the factors that may contribute to the community participants' confidence and willingness to engage in the module. For example, appreciative inquiry was adopted as a method with an organization more recently, because the community members were experienced working with HEIs and had a deep knowledge base with regard to the topic identified as the focus for the engagement.

Community participants' self-perception that their capacity and potential to effect change is inferior to that of those 'inside' the university does raise a question for the 'third mission' (universities contributing meaningfully to society through research and knowledge production) of HEIs, and for how effective HEIs are at actualizing and fulfilling that third mission. An underlying outcome for all participants of this CBPR project, therefore, was that the collaboration facilitated the ability to challenge existing

positions and ways of doing and knowing. The transformative learning and reflection that can occur through CBPR partnerships is eloquently expressed by John:

> I think education is one of the most important things in life, it is one of the things that harnesses people to do good. Those who cannot access education, as a consequence, have less opportunity to avoid poverty and to move up in life. I was a good student and when I went to England, I got an opportunity to train as a chemist, which I turned down. I regretted that for the rest of my life. Interacting with UCC on this particular partnership stirred up those memories and thoughts. The experience reassured me that the world of higher education is somewhere that I could belong. (John)

John shared with the group that while he had an opportunity to attend higher education, he was unable to avail of it. He had a question his whole life as to whether higher education would be a place where he could belong. By participating in the module, he realized that it was. This research process validated this lingering question: would I have succeeded in higher education? John's reflection not only illustrates the powerful journey of the participants – how their relationships, awareness and understanding has shifted; it also underlines the necessity for community–university partnerships. Without engaged research collaborations, spaces and opportunities for diverse groups to share and exchange knowledge for a common purpose are too few.

## Conclusion

In coming together to write this paper, through a narrative inquiry frame, several months after the module had reached its natural conclusion, author-participants learnt far more about their individual experience participating in the module than they would have if they had gone their separate ways. Without the time and structural pressures of the accredited module to adhere to, author-participants had a unique opportunity to examine the partnership with relative objectivity and discover interpretations of their experience through those of their fellow participants, thereby facilitating individual transformational learnings. The decision to name ourselves in this paper helped the author-participants to be more honest, and to connect more deeply to our individual experiences taking part in the university's inaugural CBPR module. The author-participants believed it would be inauthentic to anonymize those featured in this paper, especially considering the emphasis throughout on trust building and honesty. It was important for this paper to be written in a way that is accessible and open. Choosing to not name ourselves, we believed, would have situated us more as 'academics', and therefore would not have been faithful to the rich and diverse contributions made by all those involved in the module.

While the need to collaborate may not always be obvious, dedicating time and energy towards building trust and strong relationships can highlight significant communication gaps across diverse groups in society, and can in turn demonstrate just how vital community–university partnerships are. For research-academics interested in CBPR methodology, the necessity to invest in the careful construction of the partnership conditions is an important implication. Overlooking the time necessary to build rapport and to facilitate authentic engagement with CBPR could lead to poor or uninspiring outcomes.

As first-time CBPR participants, we gained an appreciation for the necessity to surrender to the process and allow the collaborative project to take its own path

(with careful steering, of course). This included the need to embrace particular anxieties surrounding the partnership's direction and future.

The CBPR collaboration set off a specific transformation in each of us and changed our world views on things such as the role of the university, the democratization of knowledge, and the immense enrichment that can come from achieving something (big or small) with people from different communities. Applying narrative inquiry as our primary method for understanding and making sense of our experiences was useful in identifying these transformations and, importantly, acknowledging the significance of the process for each of us.

This CBPR module is commencing its fifth iteration, and the key learnings have informed subsequent iterations of the module.

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- University College Cork, Ireland, a large research-intensive university based in the south of Ireland
- Westgate Foundation, Cork, Ireland, a community-based not-for-profit organization with a range of services for older adults (over 60s), including day care, social housing and social activities.

## Notes on the contributors

This paper is dedicated to the memory of **John O'Connell**.

**Ruth Hally** is a civic engagement project coordinator at University College Cork, Ireland.

**Aisling Murphy** is a social worker with the Westgate Foundation, County Cork, Ireland, a community social service for older adults that promotes independent living, self-determination and autonomy.

**John O'Connell** was an octogenarian living in Westgate Foundation, County Cork, Ireland. He was an advocate for older people's rights and social change. John sadly died shortly after he participated in this project.

**Sarah Robinson** is a postdoctoral researcher in the School of Applied Psychology, University College Cork, Ireland, and was a PhD candidate when the writing process began.

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