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Citation for published version

Parkinson, Tom (2018) A Trialectic Framework for Large Group Processes in Educational Action Research: The Case of Academic Development for Syrian Academics in Exile. Educational Action Research . ISSN 0965-0792.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2018.1532803>

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Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

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A Trialectic Framework for Large Group Processes in Educational Action Research: The Case of Academic Development for Syrian Academics in Exile

Abstract

The term ‘large group process’ (LGP) refers to a range of participatory approaches to community engagement, geared towards exploring and/or identifying solutions to shared issues and problems, and planning change. Primarily used for applied purposes, they can be also used as a method of inductive inquiry in social research, particularly within action research projects. In this methodological paper I outline and critically evaluate an LGP design implemented within an action research project focused on the needs of Syrian academics in exile. The LGP elicited multi-level data from a geographically-dispersed community, while simultaneously constituting a relational learning experience and community action event for the participant population, and therefore aligned with the threefold aims of educational action research. The paper makes three significant contributions: a model for LGP design that elicits participants’ collective and individual meaning frames; a trialectic framework for ensuring that the research, action and learning aspects of educational action research projects are mutually-supporting; and an accompanying orientation to researcher-participant relationships that may help to enhance the epistemological validity, catalytic validity and ethical foundations of projects.

Keywords

Action Research, Reconnaissance, Large Group Processes, Participant-Researcher Relationship

Introduction

The terms ‘large group process’ (hereafter LGP) (Martin 2005) and ‘large group interaction method’ (Bryson and Anderson 2000) refer to a range of participatory approaches geared towards exploring and/or identifying solutions to shared issues and problems, and planning change. Although primarily used in institutional or community settings for applied purposes, they can be used as a method of inductive inquiry in social research, particularly within action research projects where addressing problems inherent in the research context and ameliorating the circumstances of participants are stated research aims (Martin 2005). In this methodological paper I propose, outline and reflect critically upon an LGP design implemented as part of an educational action research project focused on the academic development needs of Syrian academics in exile. The LGP design facilitated the elicitation of multi-level data from a geographically-dispersed community, while simultaneously constituting a reflective learning experience and community action event for the participant population.

In the following section I consider the underlying principles and epistemological characteristics of LGPs, with reference to some extant models. Turning our attention to education research, I highlight points of affinity between LGP work, participant-led pedagogy and inductive inquiry, and propose a trialectic framework for action research LGP design in education settings.

In the subsequent section I set out the context and focus of this study, namely the experiences of Syrian academics in exile. I summarize the remit and aims of the Council for At Risk Academics’ Syria Programme (hereafter Cara SP), through which the research was undertaken, and offer a rationale for an LGP approach to reconnaissance within an action research design.

I then discuss the design and delivery of a residential LGP event in relation to our trialectic framework, and outline our approach to analysis. Following a brief indicative summary of project findings, I reflect upon the delivery of the event and discuss the epistemological and ethical insights that arose in relation to notions of reciprocity and friendship in action research (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson and Wise 2007) and friendship as method (Tillmann-Healy 2003). Finally I discuss the operational challenges that the project team encountered and the resulting adaptations made for the subsequent phase of the project. The paper contributes to the methodological research base in three ways: by offering a model for LGP design that wards against researcher-led, assumption-driven inquiry and facilitates the elicitation of participants' gestalt understandings; by offering a trialectic framework for educational action research to ensure that the research, action and learning aspects of a project are mutually-supporting; and by proposing an accompanying approach to researcher-participant relationships that may enhance the epistemological validity, catalytic validity (Lather 1986) and ethical foundations of projects.

Large group processes

LGPs are events designed to engage communities in 'thinking through and planning change' (Martin 2005, 200). They are used across a variety of social domains. Although a number of proprietary approaches exist, (e.g. Open Space, Future Search, Technology of Participation, Group Relations Conferencing, Gather), any discursive activity in which multiple stakeholders explore shared issues and formulate strategies can arguably be considered a group process. Based on their review of several approaches, Bryson and Anderson (2000) suggest that anything from as few as eight to more than 2,000 might feasibly qualify as 'large', depending on context.

I Since their beginnings in the 1940s, LGPs have predominantly been used for applied, rather than academic research purposes. Bryson and Anderson (2000) identify two parallel and largely discrete narratives in LGP development. The first sits within organizational management and stems from the work of Kurt Lewin and Wilfred Bion and their colleagues in the US and UK respectively. Lewin and Bion's work on groups precipitated a shift away from the inherent functionalism and senior management focus of scientific management (Bryson and Anderson 2000) towards inclusive models of problem-solving that involved worker groups, and drew theoretically from psychoanalysis. Interest in participatory problem-solving grew, led by organizations such as the National Training Laboratories in the US, and in the UK by the Tavistock Institute under the chairmanship of Eric Trist (who had first engaged Lewin as a consultant). In organizational contexts, the work of Art Kleiner was hugely influential in advancing the notion of “learning histories”—organizational stories that incorporate experiences and perspectives from beyond the executive tier, and which serve to institutionalize reflection as a collective process.

The second narrative identified by Bryant and Anderson (2000) is located within civil rights and environmental activism, where participatory models were developed for direct community engagement in the 1960s. LGPs are now commonplace across many domains, and models are regularly hybridized to suit particular settings. As such, these previously discrete narratives have converged and dissipated within a multi-context field of theory and practice. Proprietary LGPs have burgeoned since the 1980s and are now employed across the private, public and third sectors for a range of purposes, including conflict resolution, strategic planning, product development and community engagement. The pioneering work of the Esalen Institute, whose founders Michael Murphy and Dick Price drew upon Buddhism and Taoism alongside their training in human

psychology, might be considered a third narrative and has proved highly influential in relation to holistic and gestalt practices.

Design and delivery can vary markedly. LGPs used for exploratory purposes, such as Open Space Technology (hereafter OST) (Owen 2008), eschew predetermined agendas and are instead designed to provide an arena for collaborative exploration and self-organization around emerging themes and issues. Other LGP designs are, in contrast, overtly structured and proceed with more clearly articulated goals (e.g. Real Time Strategic Planning, Technology of Participation, Charrette). Typically, tasks are predetermined, time-limited and sequential, and specialist vocabularies are often used. Some LGPs are structured and managed using bespoke computer software (e.g. Decision Conferencing).

Notwithstanding these differences however, all LGPs should adhere to common principles of meticulous design (even where structure is deemphasized), valuing all participants' contributions equally (Bryson and Anderson 2000), 'rigour, 'reflection and care' in delivery (Tavistock Institute 2017), and taking both the process and results seriously (Bryson and Anderson 2000). Implicit in all LGPs are a subjectivist ontology and epistemology, and a cybernetic worldview wherein all elements of social systems are seen as related and complexity is understood to accumulate across intersecting systems. As such, 'qualitative sense-making' (Tavistock Institute 2017) sits at the heart of LGP design.

Despite widespread use across professional and organizational domains, LGPs lack visibility, and arguably credibility, within academic contexts. Due to their genesis and development in applied work, most LGPs lack a substantial evidence base in empirical research (Bryson and Anderson 2000), and their origins in psychoanalysis, social psychology and organizational management are

rarely acknowledged explicitly. Furthermore, the glossy branding of many proprietary LGP models are aesthetically at odds with the more sober vernaculars of academia, possibly deterring would-be users within academic research. With due care and consideration however, LGPs offer a rigorous method of inductive inquiry in social settings, and might feasibly be aligned with a host of qualitative research methodologies. In particular, the structural and epistemological characteristics of LGPs can be harnessed and put to use in ways that are ‘consistent with the values and goals of action research’ and can ‘generate learning and social change’ (Martin 2005, 200). In the following section I explore the affinities between LGPs and action research more closely in the context of educational research, and propose a trialectic framework for LGP research design.

Large group process design for educational action research: A trialectic approach

Action research projects are oriented towards solving actual problems and ameliorating participants’ situations (Mills 2007). Neumann (2005) describes how the ‘house style’ of the early Tavistock Institute combined Kurt Lewin’s pioneering action research work with the applied clinical research methods developed by psychoanalysts at its precursor the Tavistock Clinic. As such, action research methodology has underpinned LGP design since its beginnings, and although LGP applications today **may not be** identified as action research explicitly, working with communities to make sense of complex phenomena and experiences, and planning subsequent action, remains the foundation of LGP work.

LGPs are instances of learning (Martin 2005; Owen, 2008), in which insights are shared and collective knowledge is generated. They are therefore inherently pedagogical, and possess an obvious affinity with the participatory, learner-centred and peer-learning pedagogies used in fields such as professional practice and academic development. In education contexts therefore, a

trialectic emerges for LGP design within action research projects where the action, research and learning aspects overlap and are mutually supporting. This can be presented as a heuristic framework (figures 1,2 and 3) to guide the formulation of project aims and the subsequent design of LGPs. In the remainder of this paper I discuss the application of this framework in designing and delivering an LGP event, within an action research project responding to the needs of Syrian refugee academics in exile. In the following section I summarize the context and problem under focus.

Academic development for Syrian academics in exile

Syria's higher education sector has been decimated since war broke out in 2011, and thousands of the country's academic staff have fled. Many Syrian academics in exile are living in desperate circumstances, and face considerable barriers to continuing their work, including psychological trauma, visa issues, accreditation problems, lack of resources, isolation from scientific communities and deskilling (Bakarat and Milton 2015). The Council for At Risk Academics' Syria Programme (Cara SP) seeks to assist Syrian academics exiled in neighbouring countries in sustaining their academic work by providing in situ support. The Cara SP is funded by the Open Society Foundation and private donors, and receives in-kind support from UK universities, primarily in the form of academic staff volunteering pro bono.

Following an initial scoping exercise (Cara 2016), the Cara SP was devised across three strategic strands: English for Academic Purposes, Research Incubation, and Academic Skills Development (ASD). While the first two strands had clear and focused objectives from the outset, little was known about the academic development needs of the Cara SP participants. Accordingly, the ASD strand was approached as an iterative action research project, to allow for information gathering, leading to situational understanding and informing subsequent action.

The Turkey-based Syrian academics registered with Cara (n=100) are domiciled in cities across Anatolia. The majority have been unable to find paid employment, and many feel isolated from their scholarly communities and have no access to professional development opportunities locally. Holding an event at a central location therefore enabled us to bring together a dispersed community, gain first-hand insight into their experiences and develop situational understanding, engage the community in collaborative problem-solving and strategic planning, and provide an authentic, active learning experience. It would thus address all three aspects of the trialectic framework (figure 3). In the following section I outline the design and delivery of our LGP, situated within an action research design.

Design and delivery

One LGP model, the charrette, was the starting basis of our own design. A charrette is a time-limited workshop in which stakeholders discuss and propose solutions to a particular problem. Charrettes have been used for a range of purposes, including community-based problem-solving (Sutton and Kemp 2006), governmental decision-making (FHWA 2015), architectural planning (Kennedy, 2017), and collaborative work in higher education (Webber 2016). Benefits include non-hierarchical dynamics (Webber 2016), adaptability to a range of situations (Kennedy 2017), a commitment to social goals and a focus on democratically-derived consensus (FHWA 2015). In these respects the charrette approach was ideally suited to addressing the action aspect of the project. However, we needed to ensure that our LGP design would also address the research and learning aspects. In terms of the former, we needed to elicit participants' perspectives and yield group- and individual-level data for subsequent analysis, but without imposing a pre-determined conceptual framework or path of inquiry. What Hollway and Jefferson identify as 'the conventional assumption of social research that the researcher asks questions' (2009, 302) can restrict participants' stories by imposing the

researcher's ordering of themes and prior assumptions. This can lead to false impressions of linear causality across interviewees' responses, with the interviewer rather than the interviewee determining what is relevant before, during and after the interview. In following the researcher's line of inquiry through subjects' experiences, question-and-answer approaches risk de-contextualizing the data, which in epistemological terms can work against a holistic understanding of a subject's gestalt – the 'meaning frame' in which their experiences exist in relation to a larger whole (Hollway and Jefferson 2009, 309).

Hollway and Jefferson (2009) suggest similarities between the principle of eliciting a subject's gestalt and the psychoanalytic method of free association. Free association stands apart from the conventions of traditional narrative inquiry by allowing meaning to arise through 'associations [that] follow pathways defined by emotional motivations, rather than rational intentions' (309). While most qualitative researchers will not share the psychoanalyst's overt interest in the subconscious, free association can arguably better accommodate the full scope of subjects' meaning frames, and techniques derived from free association can be incorporated into qualitative research designs to mitigate against the pitfalls discussed above. In doing so, the researcher relinquishes much of their control over the path of inquiry, and the research agenda arises instead from the research subjects' associative pathways. In group contexts, incorporating free association activities also allows group members to access one another's meaning frames and work towards group-level understanding.

As outsider researchers, we knew little about the context or community under focus. Interview methods would thus have afforded us an inappropriate degree of thematic control and cut a researcher-driven interpretive pathway through the participants' experiences. By incorporating activities informed by the principles of free association, we were able to stimulate and support

participant-driven inquiry, strategic planning and learning, aligned with all three aspects of the trialectic (figure 3).

The LGP was held at Boğaziçi Üniversitesi in Istanbul over two days in April 2017. Although situated at the Northwestern-most point of Turkey, Istanbul is the country's major transport hub and was thus easily accessible to participants via internal flight or coach. All participants of the LGP (n=29), together with the researchers and Cara employees, stayed in a hotel close to the university. Participants were familiar with the objectives of the Cara SP, and were briefed in advance about the aims, objectives, thematic focus and participatory nature of the LGP. The participants represented approximately one third of the Syrian academics registered with the Cara SP, and were a representative sample in terms of gender, age, region of domicile, seniority and disciplinary background. The facilitators (n=3, including the author of this paper) are academics from UK universities, working on a voluntary basis.

The LGP was delivered in Arabic via two interpreters who translated communications between the participants and facilitators, participants' discussions with each other (where requested by the facilitators), and written outputs. The workshop was facilitated by three UK-based academics (including the author of this paper). The group activities spanned one full day, with several refreshment breaks and a lunch break. An individual writing task was undertaken the following day.

Informed by the principles of free association, as a first activity (figure 3, Activity a) the participants were provided with post-it notes and asked to write down (or draw) anything that the phrase 'being an academic' made them think of. They were encouraged to write quickly to generate as many responses as they could, and to resist the urge to self-edit. Working at their tables initially,

each group of participants stuck their responses onto a banner fixed to the wall. When the banner was full, the participants were invited to read across the post-its, discuss them with their colleagues and take photographs using their phones for the following exercise.

In the second activity (Activity b) the words, phrases, images and sentences elicited in the first activity were ordered into thematic clusters by the participants, working collaboratively and discursively in table groups of five or six. This enabled participants to verbalize their thoughts and associations, explore connections within and across themes and share insights and experiences. Each group was asked to assign names to the resulting thematic clusters.

The cluster names were gathered from the groups and written on a whiteboard. The facilitator of this exercise worked with the whole group to explore and refine the categories conceptually, identify duplication across the categories, or create new categories that might house two or more of those previously identified. Through this process, a list of twenty-seven categories was reduced to five thematic priorities: disciplinarity; responsibility; teaching; research; and collaboration. These were assigned to working groups of five or six and taken forward into the following activity (Activity c).

The groups were asked to explore their themes discursively, reflecting on their experiences and identifying challenges and opportunities. Groups were encouraged to keep their discussion general, rather than focus on the detailed specifics of their own individual circumstances at this stage. Each group was asked to document their insights in the form of a poster.

As a final LGP activity, the working groups shared their findings in the form of short presentations. Each presentation was followed by discussion by the whole cohort, chaired by the LGP facilitators. This allowed for members of other groups to contribute, and all participants were

invited to record any additional thoughts or insights on post-it notes and stick them to the relevant poster (activity d).

The facilitator-researchers took notes of discussions throughout the day, recording salient issues and themes. Together with the translated written outputs of the day's activities (posters, post-it notes), these constituted the group-level data. However, we also needed to capture data pertaining to the specific experiences and needs of individuals, since the remit of Cara SP was to support the population at group and individual level. Accordingly, (activity e), each participant was asked to draft a personal development plan (PDP). This took over the course of the second day, during which the participants also engaged in other activities related to the English for Academic Purposes strand. Participants were asked to use the thematic categories that emerged from the LGP as a structure for their PDPs, and to identify short-term and long-term opportunities and challenges associated with each. Thus while the individual activity was inevitably structured according to a pre-existing framework, this structure derived from the earlier, reflective activities rather than the researchers' assumptions, did not follow a question-and-answer model, and was broadly thematic rather than specific. It could thus better accommodate the scope of participants' gestalt than an itemized survey. The PDPs (n=29) were translated into English for analysis.

Self reconnaissance

Dillon (2007) suggests that action research should entail both situational reconnaissance—focusing on the context and problem under focus—and self reconnaissance, for which the researcher reflects upon their own position in relation to the research and interrogates their assumptions^{1,1}. This was undertaken prior to, during and after the LGP event by the project team, over email and telephone (Figure 3). Reflections were shared with the Cara SP steering group, whose

members include academics from several UK universities, Syrian academics and senior Cara staff. As academic developers working in Anglophone, developed contexts, self-reconnaissance also entailed reflecting on the curricula, resources, pedagogies, aims and values that characterize academic development work in such contexts, and considering the extent to which these were transferable or relevant to the context under focus. Undertaking this self-reconnaissance alongside situational reconnaissance elicited a critical awareness of the situatedness of our own understandings of academic development, helping to ward against unchallenged assumptions and biases. In particular, it brought us to consider the risk of paternalistic power dynamics inherent to our status as representatives of a powerful and resource-rich country with a colonial legacy within the Middle East region. It also resulted in a resource inventory and skills analysis, germane to the applied aspect of the project. The concomitant process of self-reconnaissance can also therefore be seen to align with all aspects of our trialectic.

To summarize at this point, our final data set comprised group- and individual-level qualitative data pertaining to the experiences of Syrian academics in exile in Turkey, complemented by records of our (the outsider researcher-facilitators') self-reconnaissance in the form of email transcripts and the minutes of steering group discussions. While the latter were not integrated into the qualitative data set as texts, the disposition engendered by self-reconnaissance informed our analysis throughout and our insights and reflections were integrated discursively at the point of write-up, constituting a form of reflective triangulation.

Analysis

Hollway and Jefferson (2009) argue that coding in qualitative research—the process by which data are combed and allocated into categories for analysis—can further decontextualize data and

afford the researcher an inappropriate level of control over respondents' meanings after the event. In light of the steps taken to mitigate for these risks in data collection, it was important to maintain our efforts in our approach to analysis. For this reason we decided against using computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), which can promote a 'drag-and-drop' approach to coding, fragmenting the data into sentence-length units and depositing them into emerging category nodes, thus risking decontextualization (Hollway and Jefferson, 2009). At the same time however, the scope of the data necessitated some form of thematic categorization.

Here we reiterate the sense-making principles of LGPs, discussed earlier, and the inductive nature of our own LGP. In this regard, the phases of data collection and analysis are less straightforwardly sequential than in typical qualitative studies where the latter is conceived as a largely discrete process occurring after the former. Rather, in this study a significant portion of inductive analysis was embedded within the data collection process, with the participants themselves establishing a working thematic framework and making sense of their experiences. For this reason, we decided to preserve the categories that emerged from the LGP. We then used an inductive approach informed by Thomas (2006), reading and rereading across both the group-level and individual-level data to allow for recurring issues to emerge within and across categories. Each theme was then written up in narrative prose, with verbatim examples chosen for verisimilitude. Taking a narrative approach enabled us to preserve associations between themes as they existed within the data set. As such it should be considered a key element of the analytical process, rather than as a write-up following analysis.

To ensure inter-rater reliability, initial analyses was undertaken by two members of the project team independently. However, in light of our concerns regarding the risk of de-contextualizing the data, discussed above, we did not undertake a quasi-quantitative, formula-based inter-rater test

(e.g. Cohen 1960, cited in Iacobucci 2001; Lombard 2002). Instead, a softer approach was taken in which both initial analyses, in the form of written reports, were circulated to the Cara SP steering group. These were compared qualitatively, and found to be consistent.

Findings

As this paper is methodological in focus, it suffices to note here that the framework of disciplinarity, responsibility, teaching, research, and collaboration that emerged from the LGP, and was subsequently used to structure the individual PDPs, helped us to effectively synthesize our analyses of group- and individual-level data, and to identify general group priorities and challenges as well as those rooted in the specifics of individuals' experiences. This framework also helped to configure our own self-reconnaissance (Dillon 2007) towards the action aims of the project, and the needs of participants.

From the data, a picture took shape of a community that had experienced significant trauma and continued to face barriers—legislative, bureaucratic, social, financial, resourcing, psychological—to academic engagement across all of the five themes. However, an overwhelming sense of responsibility to participate in the eventual rebuilding of Syria also emerged at group and individual level, and was the primary motivation for wanting to continue academic work. It became clear that the academic development needs of the participant community were markedly different from those typical of academic communities in the Western, developed, resource-rich and non-crisis contexts in which the researchers are based, and that as action researchers we needed to work closely with the participant community to formulate effective and context-relevant approaches to academic development that met their needs, but also connected them with the global academic project. This realization proved to be a pivotal discovery of the project thus far, and defined the problematic for

the subsequent planning and action phases of the action research cycle. In the remainder of this paper I reflect upon the research design and delivery in terms of challenges, limitations, and future adaptations.

The researcher-participant relationship: towards an ethic of friendship and reciprocity in action research

So far in this paper I have focused on the planned stages of our LGP and the accompanying individual activity, which constituted the formal data collection points. Not accounted for thus far however are the informal interactions that occurred between the Syrian participants, facilitator-researchers (including the author of this paper) and Cara staff outside of these activities—at breakfast, lunch and dinner, and in the evenings when plans were made by small groups to visit cafes, or to sit and chat in the communal areas of the hotel. We had not anticipated the significance of these activities prior to the event, but they have since brought us to reflect deeply on the nature of the participant-researcher relationship in the context of our study, and its significance in terms of our trialectic framework and research design.

In the course of all qualitative research projects, participants and researchers intersubjectively construct relationships (Pitts and Miller-Day 2007). Relational understanding develops incrementally through interaction, observation and reflection, as research populations ‘negotiate how private and how candid [they] will be, how separate and how together, how stable and how in flux’ (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 732). Research by Pitts and Miller-Day (2007) suggests that the relational trajectory between a researcher and their participants is punctuated by ‘turning points’ (182)—events, acts, or sustained periods of engagement—that usher in a closer relationship.ⁱⁱ Although the events documented in this paper occurred at the outset of a longitudinal project, and

represented many stakeholders' first encounters with one another, the residential setting was such that all parties spent a considerable time in each other's company, and relationships inevitably passed through turning points; by the end of the event, participants and researchers had exchanged personal email addresses, shared photos and connected on social media. This was a natural consequence of relationship- and community-building, but arguably runs counter to the role-bound expectations and implicitly guarded spirit common to social research protocols (Blake 2007). It became clear these relationships would likely develop further over the course of the project, and we therefore needed to approach the researcher-participant relationship differently, and 'as a cross-section in time of a longer relationship and a longer cycle of exchange' (Maiter et al. 2008, 322). This has epistemological, methodological and ethical implications for the project, and is pertinent across its applied, research and learning aspects.

Validity. Pitts and Miller-Day (2007) note that in naturalistic research, trusting relationships can be 'a necessary condition for ensuring trustworthiness and validity' (179). Without them, suspicion, resentment and anxiety can inhibit communications and corrupt the resulting data. As a point of rigour therefore, significant attention should be given to establishing trusting relationships in action research where the problematic 'relates to a moment of historical existence which lies at the juncture of relationships' (Blake 2007: 413) and emerges a posteriori through interaction.

For the current project, which is transcultural and entails a conspicuous power imbalance, rigidly role-bound and guarded relationships might work against the establishment of trust and reciprocity. Blake (2007) notes that 'trust arises from within relationships at a personal level' (415), and that normative research protocols that seek to protect participants, while important,

ultimately represent an unsatisfactory ‘surrogate’ for authentic trust, and that ‘the easy camaraderie born of friendship and underpinned by trust is undermined by an implicit assumption that the research may lead to harm, exploitation or suffering’ (416). Blake (2007) reasons therefore that engaging more closely with participants on a personal level ‘is perhaps a better way to create an honest, trustworthy and ‘safe’ research environment’ (415, my emphasis). Allowing for authentic, naturalistic relationships to develop thus emerged as both an ethically and epistemologically important aspect of the study, ‘permitting [both researcher and researched] to explore the complex humanity of both self and other’ and giving rise to ‘knowledge and action directly useful to those being studied’ (Tillman-Healy 2003, 733). Doing so arguably works to enhance not only epistemological validity, but also catalytic validity (Lather 1986)—the extent to which the research project empowers its participants and effects social change.

Existing approaches offer starting points for recognizing and accommodating authentic relationships as a legitimate dimension of research practice. In particular, Tillman-Healy’s (2003) model of friendship as method and Maiter et al.’s (2008) notion of reciprocity resonate with our experiences of the current project. According to Maiter et al. (2008), substantial resources should be devoted to supporting relationships between the researcher and participants, and ‘reflexive exploration of power/interests and possible outcomes [should be] a priority’ (322). Such an approach works to break down hierarchies in the the research setting and engenders reciprocal dialogue between social equals. Similarly, friendship-as-method as proposed by Tillmann-Healy (2003) entails ‘reflexively attending to and actively resisting hierarchical separation between researcher and participants’ (733), and ‘demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying “them” to studying us’ (735).

I make the caveat here that neither approach should be equated with an obligation to enter into unwanted friendships. Friendship-as-method is not a strategic conceit and should never be coercive or invasive. Rather, it simply requires that we research with an ‘ethic of friendship’ (730) and approach participants ‘as we would potential or actual friends: with a desire for mutual respect, understanding, examination, and growth’ (746). Friendship-as-method is not absolutist and can therefore be incorporated into qualitative research projects to varying degrees. Tillman-Healy (2003) argues that an ethic of friendship can underpin research relationships across the spectrum of familiarity, and not only when a relationship is well-established. Importantly for this project, it acknowledges that ‘a project’s issues [can] emerge organically’ (735) as the researcher and participants get to know each other over time and work together to ‘mutually identify a problematic [and] negotiate contextualized solutions’ (Blake 2007, 412). Framing our project in terms of reciprocity and friendship supports an holistic approach and further helps to accommodate participants’ gestalt, discussed earlier. The research, action and learning aspects (figure 1) are mutually supporting, epistemological (research) validity and catalytic (action) validity are mutually enhancing, and priority is placed on relational learning within the research community comprising participants and researchers.

To accommodate friendship-as-method, a change of approach to ethics is necessary going forward. In particular, informed consent cannot be satisfactorily established a priori. Howett and Stevens’ (2005) suggestion of ‘negotiated authorization’ throughout a research project is arguably better suited to the unfolding nature of the research processes and problematics of participatory action research. While all formal data collection is undertaken with participants’ permission, the specifics of consent— anonymity preferences, what details included and what are not, and so on—

are negotiated post-participation, when participants ‘know what they have said and have a better idea of the process involved’ (Blake 2007, 418).

Beyond this, a more sustained engagement between the researcher, the participants, the wider community and the relevant ethics committees, might allow for the ethical dimensions of the study to be negotiated inductively (Blake 2007). The Cara SP steering group, which comprises representatives of all of these stakeholder types, offers a framework for implementing such an approach.

Gender. Of the twenty-nine participants in the charrette, only one was female. To an extent this reflects levels of engagement in the wider Cara SP, which is overwhelmingly male despite Syria’s pre-crisis academic population being comparatively gender-balanced, and despite Cara’s efforts to raise awareness of the Cara SP among female academics in exile. There are a number of possible factors behind this. Firstly, Islamic societies are often characterized by comparatively rigid gender delineations, with domestic responsibilities considered to fall primarily within the female purview. In a refugee context, female academics may not have access to the level of domestic or childcare support that they did pre-crisis as members of the Syrian middle class, and accordingly may prioritize home and family life where male academics may prioritize professional life. Secondly, recruitment to the Cara SP occurs primarily through word of mouth, and gender-segregated social norms may impede the flow of information from male participants to prospective female participants.

Beyond this, however, and of immediate relevance to this paper, it is possible that methodological factors impacted on the gender [im]balance at the charrette event. Writing of the Egyptian context, Gross and Jacobs (2013) note that women felt unable to participate in Open Space events unless able to stay at home or be accompanied by a chaperone, effectively precluding many from participating

in residential events. If this is indeed the case (and research is currently being undertaken to investigate reasons for non-participations), then addressing this issue presents a significant challenge. As discussed in this paper, LGP approaches align persuasively with the research, action and learning agendas of the project, and have significant epistemological advantages over other methods. These advantages would need to be weighed against the significant shortcoming of excluding women, which runs counter to the spirit of Cara's work and also to the inclusive aims of this project. At the same time however, the Cara SP has finite resources, and despite requiring substantial financial outlay and coordination, the residential, whole-cohort LGP event in Istanbul was nonetheless cost-effective in comparison with other possible strategies (such as undertaking smaller events in participants' locations), which in any case would not have succeeded in bringing the cohort together- also a core aim of the Cara SP (see Figure 2). We therefore need to advocate for increased participation among female Syrian academics in exile, but also remain sensitive and respectful to their values and cultural norms; there is arguably an inherent risk of paternalism and cultural supremacy, however well-meaning, in transcultural projects, particularly where there is an imbalance in power and resources. There is scope for using online spaces to convene LGP events, and a bespoke online interface is currently being used to deliver webinars and EAP tutoring. This possesses the functionality, in theory, to support the activities involved in our LGP, and while the dynamics of interaction would inevitably be very different, this may offer a suitable compromise. In addition, future funding might be allocated for the provision of dependents' and chaperones' travel, and childcare provision at residential events.

Polychronic vs monochronic. In preparing for the workshop, we erred on the side of caution in terms of pacing and time management. Our concerns in this regard related mainly to the workshop activities themselves; we reasoned that participants might be unfamiliar with participatory

approaches and therefore need instructions to be repeated or explained, or might engage with tasks tentatively (and thus slowly). Furthermore, we anticipated that working through interpreters would impact significantly on the pacing of the workshop, and streamlined our design accordingly. In the event however, the most significant time factor impacting on the pacing of our LGP was participants' punctuality. As facilitators we were reluctant to begin or resume tasks without all participants present, but breaks, which were taken in a neighbouring room with a tea urn, overran significantly throughout the day despite reminders. This was anxiety-provoking for the facilitators, who were already concerned about time pressure, but many participants did not appear to feel this sense of urgency and, conversely, seemed reluctant to limit social interactions to formal break times and in some cases encouraged the facilitators to relax and join them in drinking tea.

This may be due in part to cultural differences. The concept and usage of time has been shown to differ across monochronic ('m-time') and polychronic ('p-time') cultures (Hall and Hall 1987). Common to Western and highly developed contexts, monochronic cultures conceive of time as an asset, as linear and as divisible into units; structure work around the completion of successive tasks one at a time; and value promptness. Polychronic cultures on the other hand are common to Eastern, developing contexts and engage more readily in multi-tasking; are less concerned with promptness; and prioritize social interaction (Manrai and Manrai 1995). A related dualism concerns the 'time setting' (Manrai and Manrai 1995) of social exchanges, which Triandis et al. (1988) suggest is more individualistic in modern (typically Western, highly developed and affluent) cultures and collectivist in traditional (mostly Eastern, less developed and less affluent) cultures. Social exchanges in the latter are more time-consuming and prioritize the development of personal relationships over the exchange of 'universalistic resources' such as information and tangible assets (Manrai and Manrai 1995).

Approaching time conception and usage at culture-level risks ignoring differences between individuals and groups, differences across activities, and differences across time within cultures (Manrai and Manrai 1995). Moreover, with cultural interaction increasingly commonplace due to trade liberalization, mobility and the internet, populations globally are subject to acculturation, albeit to different extents. Thus, while it is well to be sensitive to difference, it is important not to approach the monochronic-polychronic dualism in essentialist terms. Rather, a broader understanding of time conception can help to temper expectations and identify pragmatic solutions for overcoming potential differences. The notion of time setting (Manrai and Manrai 1995) is pertinent to the researcher-participant relationship discussed above; time for the trust to develop authentically is a point of rigour and (epistemological and catalytic) validity, and therefore must be accommodated going forward. A less linear and time-critical approach to LGP design may support these aims, blurring the distinction between leisure and work time, and engendering a more holistic approach to the project wherein action, research, learning and community-building are again mutually-supportive.

Conclusion

The LGP-centred research design and delivery set out in this paper enabled us to further the project aims across its action, research and learning aspects simultaneously, and to work in ways that accommodate the developing relationships between participants and researchers, as collaborators. The trialectic framework undergirding this design brought us to systematically attend to the action, research and learning aspects and ensure that they took place in symbiosis. Our LGP approach, incorporating free-associative techniques and participant-driven activities, ensured that the project accommodated participants' gestalt meaning frames, eliciting their needs, experiences and

perspectives at group and individual level, while the researchers' concurrent engagement in self-reconnaissance drew to light, and thus mitigated against, normative assumptions and biases.

As discussed, the approach was designed purposively in relation to the specifics of the context, population and problematic under focus. Nonetheless the approach, or aspects of it as set out in this paper, might be adapted to a range of educational action research settings which share some of the characteristics of our research. Firstly, where improving the lives of participants is an explicit aim, LGPs offer a means of engaging participants as a group to work together to build understanding and plan. The cumulative, inductive structure set out in this paper is ideally suited to projects in which promoting situated, relational learning among participants is desired, and allows researchers to work with participants to explore and address an emerging, complex problematic and elicit bottom-up and gestalt insight is sought by the researchers. Where, as in our case, the researchers lack understanding of the context and of participants' experiences, an LGP design of this kind will allow the researchers to develop understanding through activities that are simultaneously of direct benefit to the participants, where traditional means such as interviews and focus groups may feel transactional or a delay to the action-planning process. Finally, our LGP design might be adapted to other research contexts where the community under focus are dispersed geographically; despite the initial cost implications of bringing the community together, an inductive LGP can yield rich group-level data within a relatively short and condensed timeframe, which might not be otherwise be possible using other methods.

Beyond the LGP design, we suggest that the trialectic framework proposed in this paper might be usefully applied in the majority of educational action research projects, both at the level of formulating objectives and at the level of process design and activity planning. Our exploration of the participant-researcher relationship in the context of longitudinal action research will, we hope,

resonate with the experiences of researchers working across a range of contexts, and the notions of friendship and reciprocity may be of conceptual utility both in the planning of research activities, and in formulating appropriate ethics protocols.

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ⁱ Some might consider this to be an unhelpful distinction, and indeed Lewin (1946) conceived of reconnaissance as a more holistic process extending across all aspects of an evaluation.

ⁱⁱ Tillman-Healy (2003, citing Buber, 1988 [1923/1937]) proposes that as relationships develop in this way, communication may shift ‘from I-It (impersonal and instrumental’), to I-You (more personal yet role-bound), to moments of I-Thou, where [participant and researcher] are truly present, meeting one another in [their] full humanity’ (732). While is not space to explore this in depth here, we should note that in Buber’s (1923) terms this marks a move from the experiential to the relational, and thus has epistemological implications for how empirical research might be conceived of in this context.

Figures

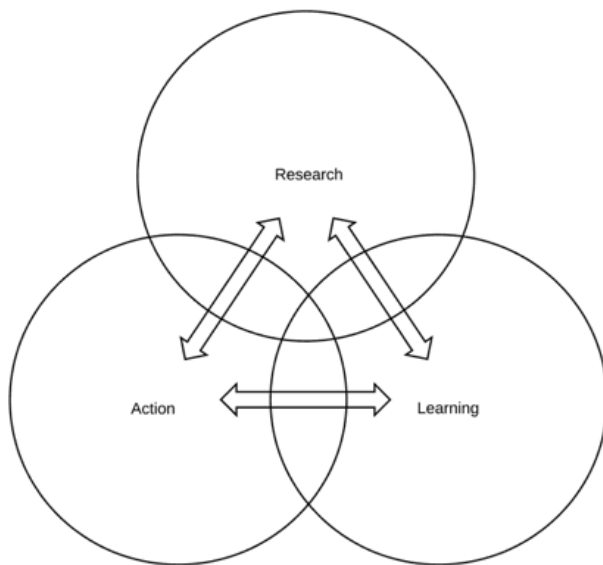


Figure 1. A trialectic framework for action research in education contexts

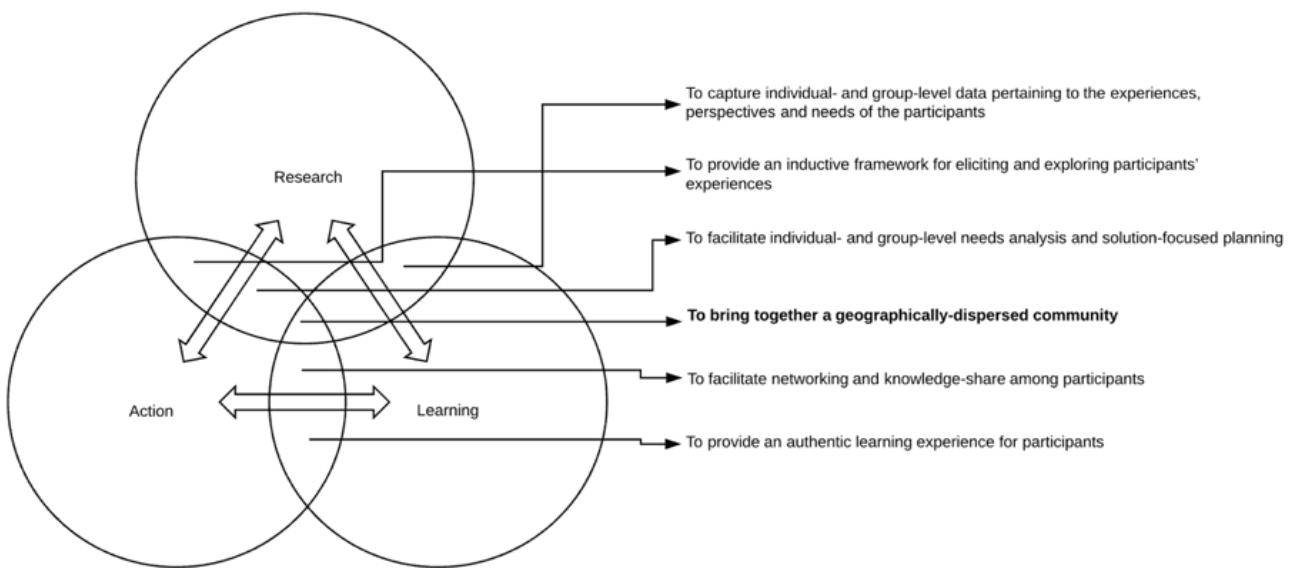


Figure 2. Research, action and learning aims of the project.

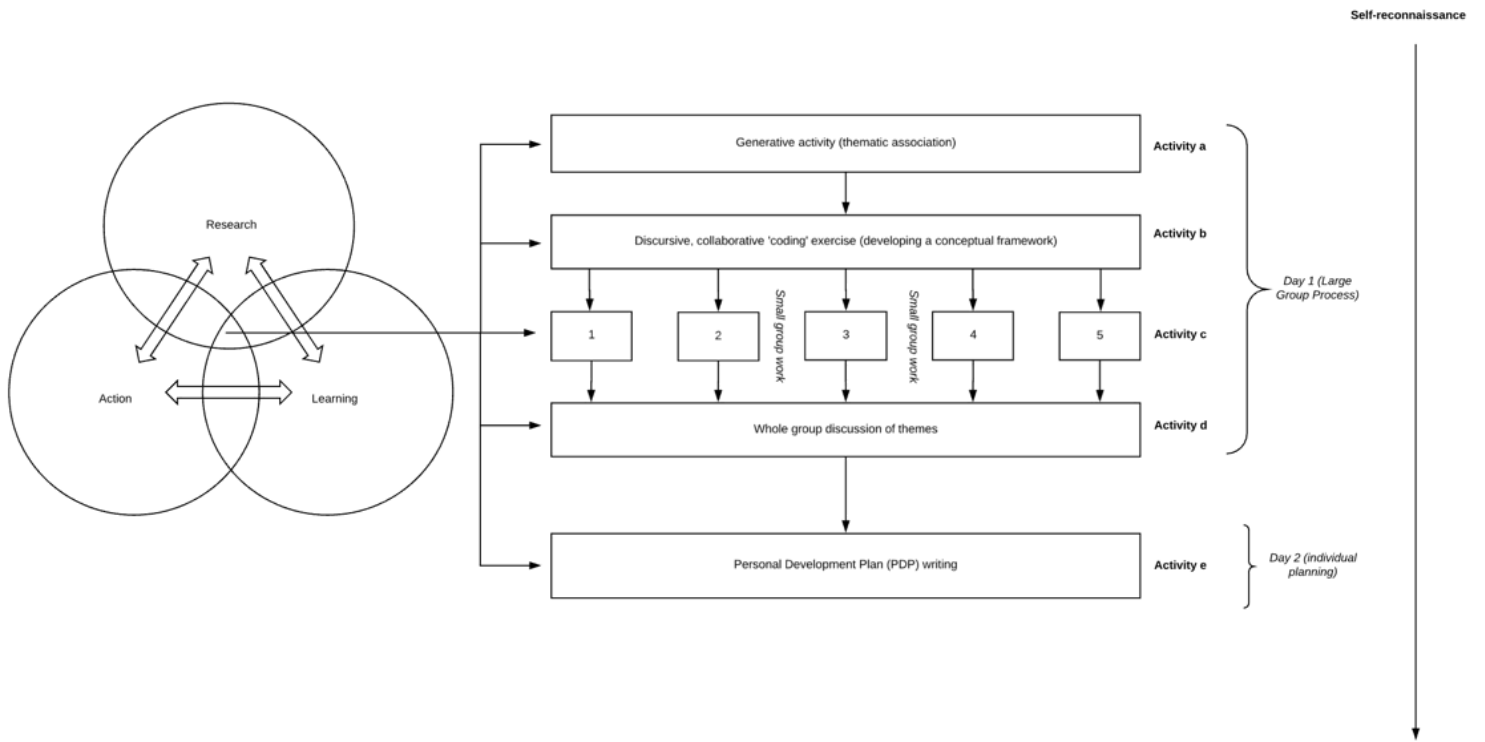


Figure 3. Reconnaissance design, incorporating situational reconnaissance (group- and individual-level data collection) and self-reconnaissance.