



Southern African Rurality in Higher Education

Southern African rurality in higher education: towards a participatory and decolonising methodology

Sue Timmis (University of Bristol), Emmanuel Mggwashu (University of Rhodes), Kibbie Naidoo (University of Johannesburg)

sue.timmis@bristol.ac.uk

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Introduction

This paper aims to set out the influences that guided the methodology adopted in the SARiHE research project, its key principles and methods that contributed to our approach. The research has investigated how students from rural areas in Southern Africa negotiate the transition to higher education foregrounding the social and cultural capital they bring, how they are shaped by their home, school and community and what the experience of being at university has involved.

The following research questions have guided us:

1. How can the complexities of rurality be conceptualised in relation to higher education?
2. What are the dimensions of rurality as experienced by students transitioning from home to university in the global south?
3. How and in what ways do students negotiate the transitions from rural home, school and community and how does this influence their trajectories through higher education in Southern Africa?
 - a. What are the challenges for students from rural areas facing higher education curricula, which remain imbued with colonialism?
 - b. What are the practices that shape approaches to learning of students from rural areas in universities in Southern Africa?
 - c. How and in what ways do digital technologies, social media and mobile communications influence rural students' higher education trajectories?
4. How and in what forms might inclusive and living curricula be developed that build on the experiences of all students, including those from rural contexts in Southern Africa?

In this working paper, we will briefly discuss the underpinning approaches and issues that have informed our methodology, before outlining the key principles, phases and methods undertaken. We then reflect on the strengths and limitations of our approach and how this could be further developed. First we begin with examining how participatory and decolonizing methodologies have informed our approach.

The Southern African Rurality in Higher Education (SARiHE) project undertaken by Principal Investigators - Sue Timmis (University of Bristol) and Thea de Wet (University of Johannesburg) with Kibbie Naidoo (University of Johannesburg), Sheila Trahar, Lisa Lucas, Karen Desborough (University of Bristol), Emmanuel Mqgwashu (Rhodes University), Patricia Muhuro (University of Fort Hare) and Gina Wisker (University of Brighton). We were accompanied on this project by 72 student co-researchers and 10 institutional researchers, we fully acknowledge their contributions. The project (2016 – 2019) was funded by the Newton Fund, the Economic and Social Research Council (UK) and National Research Foundation (South Africa) – Grant number ES/P002072/1.

Co-operative inquiry and participatory action research

Co-operative inquiry (Heron, 1996; Heron & Reason, 2001) which underpins many participatory methodologies argues for an approach that values subjects as co-producers of the research outcomes where research is undertaken “*with* people not *on* them or about *them*” (Heron, 1996, p. 19).

“...all those involved in the research are both co-researchers, who generate ideas about its focus, design and manage it, and draw conclusions from it; and also co-subjects, participating with awareness in the activity that is being researched.”
(Reason, 1994, pp. 41- 42)

Action research and participatory action research both have their roots in co-operative inquiry and are very commonly found in educational research (for example Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009), health and social science professions (for example Asaba & Suarez-Balcazar, 2018; Bozalek & Biersteker, 2010). Yet, action research within education has been criticised for overly focusing on the voices of professionals in practice without ‘genuinely engaging the voices and perspectives of others involved in the practice’, for not being sufficiently critical and for avoiding ‘unwelcome truths’ (Kemmis, 2006, pp. 460–461).

Whilst our study was not designed as action research, it draws from the principles of participatory research and co-operative inquiry and explicitly tries to address the critiques outlined above by working directly with students as co-producers of knowledge, and aiming to ensure that the research maintains a critical perspective on the issues investigated. Furthermore, we designed the research to explicitly adopt a decolonising approach, which is discussed in the following section.

Decolonising methodologies

De Sousa Santos (2014, p. 207) writing in his book on Epistemologies of the South argues that ‘all knowledges are testimonial because what they know about social reality (their active dimension) also reveals the kinds of subjects of knowledge acting on social reality (their subjective dimension)’. This suggests the importance of valuing different knowledges and recognising that subjectivities and knowledges are inseparable. This is important in understanding how historically scientific research has sought to subordinate or devalue other knowledges whilst maintaining the dominance of western and Eurocentric scientific knowledge (de Sousa Santos, 2014). Furthermore, through colonialist and imperialist approaches to science, indigenous knowledges have been viewed in much the same way as mineral resources or military power, seeing them as there to be ‘discovered, extracted, appropriated and distributed’ (Smith, 2012, p. 61). This critique of extractive research has also recently been made by the Wits Fallist group in South Africa, a writing collective that emerged from the student protests of 2015-16 (Chinguno et al., 2017). The group express their anxiety in having to construct an alliance with a progressive research centre: “white academics have always capitalised on Black wretchedness and struggles (experiences) for their own gain. They often write the so-called ‘high rated’ books and journals about Black lives and experience while they are literally disengaged from the real Black experience” (Chinguno et al., 2017, p. 19). If we want to continue to research student experiences and student learning - because we feel that this is necessary in order to inform pedagogic innovation and policy changes - we need to be critically reflexive, and consider carefully the methodological approaches and concepts and principles we should be adopting. So how can we research in a way that is not extractive, researching *with* students, rather than *on* them?

In this study, we employed a participatory methodology, aiming for this to be a more democratic or decolonising mode (Bozalek & Biersteker, 2010) and which also attempts to avoid a deficit positioning of under-represented students. Our methodology has been developed from an earlier community inquiry model (Timmis

& Williams, 2013) and from a more recent project where under-represented students worked as co-researchers to research their own learning lives (Timmis, Yee, & Bent, 2016). It also draws on the participatory action learning and cognitive mapping approaches employed in the Community, Self and Identity project (Leibowitz et al., 2012). Bozalek & Biersteker (2010, p. 553), writing about participatory action learning argue that, these approaches, whilst not explicitly advocating co-production 'call for a critical self-consciousness on the part of the researchers/facilitators as well as a concern with social justice, and seek to lead to some action based on the needs identified by the communities involved'. Co-production within a community of inquiry model combined with participatory action learning approaches form the core of the methodology we have designed and implemented. By working alongside students as co-researchers to research their own lives but with a structured programme of support to do this, we aimed for research that would give the students an opportunity to investigate their personal histories and practices, give voice to their communities and the different knowledges they bring into the university space and to develop valuable experience of research and advocacy. Therefore, whilst our approach cannot be seen as action research, it shares the core value that the purpose of research should be to bring about social change and social justice.

Kovach (2010, pp. 42–43) refers to participatory methods of data collection as a conversational method which is a means of gathering knowledge found within Indigenous research. The conversational method is of significance to Indigenous methodologies because it is a method of gathering knowledge based on oral story telling tradition, congruent with an Indigenous paradigm. It involves a dialogic participation that holds a deep purpose of sharing story as a means to assist others. It is relational at its core. In our study, co-researchers told their through pictures, digital artefacts depicting their way of looking at their educational journeys through their own eyes and not those of another person, bringing to the fore their experiences and interpretations.

SARiHE research design

Fieldwork was conducted during 2017 and 2018 at three universities: 'Urban', a 'comprehensive' university with a balanced focus on research, teaching and technology, 'Town', a rural, research-led and 'previously advantaged' university, and 'Local', a rural, teaching-led, 'previously disadvantaged' university.¹ These universities were chosen to represent different types of universities where rural

¹ These names are pseudonyms

students are strongly represented and in different parts of South Africa (Gauteng and Eastern Cape).

The research design consisted of two phases: phase 1 (2017) involved us working alongside three teams (one at each university) of student co-researchers to research their learning lives over a period of approximately nine months initially but with further activities during the following 18 months. Phase 2 (2018) involved interviews with senior leaders at each of the three universities and focus groups or interviews with academic staff from STEM and Humanities disciplines.

Phase 1

Second year undergraduates from rural backgrounds were recruited as co-researchers from three institutions. Students were studying on either STEM or Humanities programmes. We began with 72 co-researchers and 64 continued throughout phase 1 which is a very low attrition rate. The main activities took place over approximately nine months and were framed around a series of seven workshops with activities in between sessions using an iPad. Many co-researchers have been involved in activities since the end of phase 1 (which are discussed later in this working paper).

The project has been guided overall by the *core research team* - these were the two Principal Investigators and seven Co-Investigators, together with a part-time Research Associate and Administrator, based in the UK who were directly funded to work on the project. The core research team developed the handbook and provided overall leadership and guidance. Data gathering sessions and liaison with co-researchers were facilitated at each university by a *local research team*, including co-investigators, Ph.D. students, researchers, academic developers and administrators based in the university in question. In addition to the local research team, the Research Associate provided further support and guidance via WhatsApp groups set up for co-researchers.

Sampling

Volunteer and snowball sampling methods were conducted at each university with some variation, depending on local contexts. Students from STEM and Humanities (including Education) disciplines who self-identified as coming from a rural background attended an introductory meeting and were invited to participate in the study as co-researchers. Students were selected from the volunteers with an aim to recruit 24 co-researchers from each university.

There was a need to acknowledge the complexities of rurality and what ‘coming from a rural background’ actually means. We employed the categories provided by the South African Statistics Agency, specifically from their publication investigating appropriate definitions of urban and rural areas (Statistics South Africa, 2003). We adopted the categories of ‘formal rural’ and ‘tribal area’ to differentiate the types of rural areas and obtain a balanced sample of those from formal rural and tribal area backgrounds. Rurality is both spatial and non-spatial and so we conducted sampling using both types of indicators. For example – we defined a rural area in terms of low population density but also in terms of the civic and commercial amenities available, including schools. This is because some areas, particularly tribal areas may have an equivalent population density to some urban areas in South Africa so of itself population density is not sufficient to determine a rural area or background (Laldaparsad, 2006). We aimed for students who lived and attended school in a rural area (formal rural or tribal area) for at least the first sixteen years of their lives. This was because there is a proportion of young people who are sent to fee-paying boarding schools in rural areas but their family home is in an urban area and they are not part of our target sample. The school attended is therefore critical. Another complexity is that some students who might meet the other criteria in the sampling frame, were not born or grew up in South Africa, for example those from other Southern African countries. Whilst these are an interesting group, we were particularly interested in those born and raised in South Africa who have had to experience the displacement effects of apartheid and so this also guided our decision-making.

Figure 1 below sets out the sampling frame used to select students for the study.

1	From a rural background: 'formal rural' (e.g. farm, small holding) or 'tribal area' (e.g. tribal settlement). No fewer than 18 students should come from a tribal area.
2	Lived in rural area for first 16 years. No fewer than 12 students.
3	Attended school in a rural area for at least seven years.
4	Gender: male/female As balanced as possible.
5	Ethnicity: indigenous black community likely to be majority Approximately 20:4 black/white disadvantaged students.
6	Study programme: STEM or Humanities Majority of Humanities students from the Social Sciences.
7	First generation in university (parents with no higher education background).
8	Country of birth: South Africa and other countries No fewer than 18 students from South Africa.

Figure 1: SARiHE Sampling Criteria

Ethics

Ethical thinking and ethical mindfulness were central to the approach we have taken, in particular in relation to rights and responsibilities of all members of the team including the co-researchers. Full ethics applications were submitted and approval granted at all the universities involved and informed consents were sought and obtained with all those taking part. Co-researchers were asked for their consent at the outset in session 1 and then again in session 7 where they were specifically asked for consent for sharing their data more widely (for example images and documentaries produced). In week 2, they were asked to sign a contract for the iPad which they collected. In line with their roles as co-researchers, this formed part of the contract for their involvement in the research. We would allow them to keep the iPad in exchange for participation in the research and keeping the iPad safe and in good condition or they were required to inform us of any difficulties or theft.

When constructing the methodological handbook for Phase 1, we also developed a set of ethical principles to share with all members of the team, in particular the co-researchers. These were discussed during the first meeting with co-researchers. See Figure 2 below.

SARiHE Ethical Principles

The following principles have been agreed as principles we should all bear in mind throughout the project.

- Student co-researchers' privacy and confidentiality should be assured. Participants may choose to be identified by name or remain anonymous (through a pseudonym) in the research. If co-researchers choose to remain anonymous, the project team will ensure that their participation in the study is confidential.
- Co-researchers have control over the data they submit to the project and can select out anything that they do not wish to share. Co-researchers will be able to access their data at the end of the study and have a copy of the digital documentary they create.
- During workshops, co-researchers will be asked to share their experiences in small discussion groups. Prior permission must be sought – and given – to share anything that is discussed in small groups with the larger group throughout the whole period of the project.
- Two members of the project team will have immediate access to any data that co-researchers share to the SARiHE Evernote account. The wider project team will also have access; however, the other co-researchers will not.
- The local research teams (plus core research team) will have access to audio recordings of workshop discussions, which will be stored on site-specific folders in the Data folder on Google Drive.
- Co-researchers should be made aware of what will happen to their data – information may be used in reports, published papers, or presented in public using a pseudonym, but participants' name or personal identifiers will not be used without their permission. Specific permission will be sought to use any digital data/images in publications and other materials.
- Co-researchers have the option to withdraw from the study at any stage in the research process. If participants withdraw, their digital entries will not be used in the research, although data from group discussions will be used and anonymised in the standard way.

Figure 2: SARiHE Ethical Principles 2017 - From SARiHE Handbook

Consent forms and information sheets were also provided for Phase 2 with senior leaders and academics. They were given opportunities to ask questions and to review the scripts once transcribed.

Data Gathering Methods

The student co-researchers participated in seven face-to-face workshops over approximately nine months, involving group discussions, drawing, mapping and focus groups. A handbook was agreed and written by the core research team to ensure each site had all the information, relevant forms and methods in one place and could refer to this to ensure consistency across the three research sites². Co-researchers were each given an iPad and they created longitudinal, personal accounts and representations of everyday practices in their rural communities and in their university academic and social lives by collecting a series of digital artefacts using an App called Evernote (or in some cases Google Docs) with a specific focus for session. These included diary entries, audio recordings, drawings, photographs and other artefacts, chosen by co-researchers to represent their lives. In the final part of the process, co-researchers also produced their own digital narratives, combining digital artefacts previously collected. Multimodal methods are helpful in reducing reliance on writing and language, especially in a second language (Rohleder & Thesen, 2012). Co-researchers received initial training and were supported throughout the data collection period with both technical and research questions. There were some technical difficulties, especially with the application Evernote which had reduced the space available in the free version of the application (in line with many applications who offer a free version and then reduce its facilities to persuade users to upgrade) and with synchronisation which made it difficult for some students to upload. Whilst this had been used previously in similar studies, it would appear that a more commonly used application would have helped overcome some of these difficulties. The table below provides an outline of the seven sessions with co-researcher. Sessions were between 90 and 180 minutes in duration.

Session Title	Focus
1. Welcome and introduction to the project	In this session students are introduced to the project. They consent to being part of the project, develop and agree to a set of rules of engagement which included issues of confidentiality, managing disagreement, helping each other, how to build the community/how to communicate. Students share thoughts on what rurality is.

² This handbook is being refined and will be developed into a toolkit and freely available on our website shortly.

<p>2. Learning in rural areas Part 1</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) Activity involves • Co-researchers 'Mapping their rural learning world – learning in and out of school'. The drawings are discussed in groups. • Co-researchers photograph their drawings and upload to Evernote. • Plenary report-backs and debriefing (recorded).
<p>Learning in rural areas - Part Two</p>	<p>Critical Incidents and Story-Telling: Co-researchers given time to select one critical incident on learning in rural areas in diverse settings (e.g. family, school, church, traditional cultural activities, using technology) and to compose this into a story, including an explanation of why they chose it. The stories and ensuing discussion are recorded and uploaded</p>
<p>Focus: Transition to higher education</p>	<p>Student co-researchers draw or depict on iPad their lifeline or 'river of life', depicting their transition to university. The following questions are suggested to enable the co-researchers to focus on this transition:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When did you first hear about university? • Did someone encourage you to apply? • What was the role of digital technologies and the Internet in the process? For example, in gaining information about universities or applying? • What other ways did you use to gather information e.g. newspapers, radio etc.? • Why did you choose this university? Did you have any connections in this city? • What were the key turning points in your life that made it possible for you to go to university? <p>Co-researchers asked to consider strengths/supports; hurdles/challenges; and how they navigated the transition to higher education. Photographs and recordings saved on Evernote.</p>

Learning at university	<p>Co-researchers share one item they have collected in Evernote in groups of four, discussing what these activities meant to them, with the following prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is this typical of your experience of university teaching and learning? • How might it be similar to or different from learning before university? • What has helped you in your learning beyond formal classes, e.g. digital technologies and the Internet? And in what ways? • What special steps has this required of you, if any? • What sort of social networks do you rely on?
Learning and Values	<p>This session took the form of group discussions where co-researchers reflect on the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is valued in rural areas?</i> • <i>What is valued in the university?</i> • <i>What is valuable to you now? (in either)</i> <p>Co-researchers receive advice and resources to help develop their digital documentaries.</p>
Sharing documentaries	Co-researchers share and reflect on documentaries.

During the first session students were introduced to the project, decided on rules of engagement and discussed and signed the consent form. Students also shared their initial understanding of rurality through a drumming or clapping exercise where each participant completes the sentence ‘Rurality means’

The focus of sessions 2 and 3 was on learning in rural areas. During session 2 students were given iPad minis and were shown how to use their devices. Co-researchers depict ‘Mapping my rural learning world – learning in and out of school’ During session 3 co-researchers are given time to select one critical incident on learning in rural areas in diverse settings (e.g. family, school, church, traditional cultural activities, using technology) and to compose this into a story, including an explanation of why they chose it. The story can only illustrate one aspect of learning in a rural area, so they need to choose it well. The story should last no more than ten minutes. In groups of four, co-researchers narrate their stories.

After the stories have been told, in the group, co-researchers are asked to comment on each other's stories by pointing out what is interesting, what is different, what is common. The discussion is then recorded and uploaded.

Phase 2

Interviews aimed to explore with the institutional representations how they managed access, support underrepresented students and the issues around rurality. Focus groups investigated support for students from rural areas, inclusivity and diversity within the curriculum and pedagogic practices contradictions and tensions. Focus groups and interviews investigated how inclusive and living curricular might be developed.

In phase 2 (April – May 2018), in order to explore the views and understandings of the experiences of students from rural areas, eight interviews were conducted with senior leaders and academics at all three universities. Interviews explored how institutions manage access, support under-represented students and the issues around rurality. Focus groups and academic interviews investigated support for students from rural areas, inclusivity and diversity within the curriculum and pedagogic practices and contradictions and tensions and how more inclusive curricula might be developed. Senior leader roles included, for example, Deputy Vice Chancellors with responsibility for learning and teaching, Deans of Faculty and senior roles with responsibility for students, the first year experience and student counselling). In addition, three interviews with academics from STEM and humanities disciplines along with three academic focus groups were conducted. There was some variation in how these were constituted, depending on local constraints, for example at one university, there was one focus group with different disciplines and subject areas represented, whereas in another university these had a disciplinary focus and in the third university, individual interviews were found easier to arrange than a focus group.

Data Analysis Methods

The qualitative data set for phase 1 includes over 108 discussion workshop transcripts and over 400 digital documentaries (collections of artefacts) and composite narratives created by student co-researchers. The data set for phase 2 includes 11 interview recordings and transcripts and 3 focus group transcripts. In addition, we have drawn upon key documents such as teaching and learning strategies, induction and technology support policies, and web pages to supplement our data.

Data analysis was first conducted inductively, multimodally and theoretically. A rigorous, systematic thematic and multimodal analysis of all data types was first conducted, resulting in a total of over 60 themes (with a large number of sub-themes) (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Thematic analyses were further interrogated collaboratively through whole team sessions including one with student co-researchers in April 2018. These sessions allowed the team to explore the data multidimensionally and in relation to theoretical constructs to produce deeper insights and multi-layered interpretations of the accounts, drawings and digital artefacts (Pink, 2013).

Publishing and Dissemination Activities

Co-researchers subsequently participated in preliminary data analysis workshops held in April 2018, which included discussions on findings so far, presentations and networking between the students from the three universities.

As a result of these discussions, co-researchers initiated and wrote a publication aimed at school students in the rural areas from which they come, called 'Going to university: stories from rural students' (see <http://sarihe.org.za/going-to-university/>). This has now been translated into the 11 official languages. We held an official launch on 7th March 2019, at University of Johannesburg. The publication has since been disseminated into rural communities through the co-researchers, through university networks and contacts in basic education and rural development. Student co-researchers have also contributed blog posts on the website and been involved in media broadcasts about the booklets.

Reflections on the Methodology and Activities

While conducting research across multiple sites results in rich and interesting findings, one of the challenges facing the research team on the SARiHE project related to the complexity of doing research in very diverse institutions. The detailed data collection handbook developed for each of the data collection phases was essential in ensuring some consistency in the process of data collection. Research, however, is contextual and reflections by academic researchers on the first phase of data collection attest to the importance of context.

The different social and material conditions at the three university settings where data were collected added to the complexity but also enriched the data collection process. Urban is a 'comprehensive' university with a balanced focus on research, teaching and technology, Town is research-intense and 'previously advantaged'

university and Local is a rural, teaching-led, 'previously disadvantaged' university. Furthermore, the social and educational background of the researchers on the SARiHE project differs, and this informed the positions taken when implementing the collectively designed research methods and in interpreting the data. For example, at Town, students participated actively in the #Feesmustfall protests. The unique characteristic of Town shaped the way data were generated. As an institutional teaching and learning culture across faculties, the nexus between research, teaching and community engagement permeates the academic project. It is for this reason at Town they began the project by discussing the proposal with co-researchers. The proposal was circulated in hard copies. Prior reading of the proposal enriched engagements with the purpose of the project in the first meeting. All of the 7 sessions were then deliberated upon against the background of this critical and informed engagement with the proposal.

This resulted in both student and academic researchers taking a more political stance during the data collection sessions. Similarly, researchers at Local adopted an activist stance in recruiting student co-researchers. At Urban where there had been less student activism, there was not a strongly political slant. There were also differences in facilitation style. The facilitators at Urban and Town were somewhat more conscious that co-researchers should not construct homogeneous accounts of rural experience. At Local, the co-investigator leading the project indicated that she was interested in hearing from those who, like herself, were from "ezilaleni" (villages) so that success stories and challenges could be shared.

There were challenges relating to the use of technology and availability of Wi-Fi at all three sites. Such challenges, in combination with other institutional factors, resulted in several difficulties at Local, necessitating adjustments. For example, university staff took industrial action when data collection was scheduled to begin, delaying the process. The lack of Wi-Fi meant that configuring the iPads and downloading Evernote was extremely problematic. Such persistent technological challenges meant that PowerPoint, where participants combined text, audio and video clips, had to be used.

Conclusions

Participatory methodologies using decolonising methods, such as those attempted in this study, are seen to be reducing the influence and current flow of research from domination by the north, as well as what Radcliffe (2017, p. 8) refers to as the influence of the 'white and neoliberal universities' on the 'prevailing political economy of knowledge production'. Accordingly, 'participatory methodologies' involve the

inclusion of the 'researched' as 'researchers', or co-researchers in the context of this study. This is giving them a voice. Further, 'participatory methodologies' ensure that the research is a '[c]ollaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous stakeholders' and meets both 'scientific and cultural' rigour (Esgin, Hersh, Rowley, Gilroy, & Newton, 2018, p. 4). The Indigenous research methodologies which are 'decolonising' in nature are flexible and based on the views and stories told or retold by Indigenous people themselves.

However, whilst participatory methodologies using decolonising methods have played a central role in our research, they are not pre-determined. On the contrary, they operate on a continuum from partial to full participation. We therefore acknowledge that, whilst we involved co-researchers as much as possible, there were practical limitations on involvement in data analysis, including time constraints and ethical issues. Furthermore, even though we aimed for the co-researchers to have a strong stake in the research, we do not dismiss the power differentials that continue to play out in funded research and acknowledge the limitations for co-researchers in shaping all aspects of the research. We also realise that whilst verbal and written feedback demonstrated individual benefits for the communities from which they come, we acknowledge that we are working towards decolonising research methodologies, and that more must be done to develop co-productive partnerships which work towards a greater role for those who are simultaneously co-researchers and the subjects of the inquiry in all aspects of research, including shaping its direction and interpretation.

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