RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER REVIEWED)

Participatory ESOL as Process and Product: Community-Based Participatory Research with Refugee English Learners

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Abstract

Adult English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) courses are crucial for the social and economic integration of immigrant and refugee families. These programs need to be customised to learners' diverse educational backgrounds, needs and objectives. However, adult ESOL programs consistently face demand that surpasses capacity, and neoliberal funding requirements prioritise workforce integration. This paper results from a community-based participatory research (CBPR) partnership established to address these intersecting challenges through ESOL instruction shaped by the needs and priorities of refugee adults. Participatory approaches have been used widely to engage adult learners in research, from needs analysis to curriculum development and program evaluation. However, in this paper we argue that CBPR is both process and product, an effective method for facilitating learning and knowledge production. Through vignettes recreated from field notes, a learner-authored story and a participatory evaluation of the course, we examine the process we have undergone simultaneously as adult education and research about adult education. By examining the data for instances of *vivencia*, *praxis*, and *conscientisation*, we confirmed that critical adult education *is* participatory research. Community concerns sparked the project, and the expertise of those closest to the issue informed the solution, resulting in individual conscientisation and action toward broader social change. By centring learners' own words in the paper, we aim to trouble the presumed divisions between community and university, researcher and participant, and education and research. We encourage fellow community-engaged scholars to

reconnect with the roots of this powerful approach and recognise the importance of living out their onto-epistemological commitments in both the process and the product of participatory inquiry.

Keywords

Community-Based Participatory Research; University-Community Partnership; Participation; Critical Pedagogy; Adult ESOL

Introduction

VIGNETTE 1: WELCOME HOUSE

On a sunny day in October 2022, Melissa stepped into the large, open lobby of Welcome House. A newly arrived family from the Democratic Republic of the Congo sat at a table with the school liaison, who was walking them through public school enrolment forms for their two young children. A woman selected a coat for her son and shampoo and laundry detergent from the basic needs closet while her husband, who worked as an interpreter for the United States military in Afghanistan, met with the professional development specialist to draft a resume. A care coordinator ushered a young man from Myanmar into her office with a friendly smile, checking that he brought the necessary paperwork to apply for permanent residency. An elderly volunteer greeted Melissa, directing her to the conference room upstairs for her meeting with Candace, the director of education and a former public elementary school teacher. The two had first met a month or so earlier when Melissa, a newly hired assistant professor of qualitative inquiry at the nearby university, had volunteered at a Welcome House fundraiser and mentioned her background in teaching adult literacy and English for speakers of other languages. Knowing that the local Refugee Advisory Council had identified adult English classes as a top priority, Candace set up a meeting with Melissa to discuss the possibility of starting a class at Welcome House.

Adult English for Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) courses are crucial for the social and economic integration of immigrant and refugee families (Hofstetter & McHugh 2023). These programs need to be customised to learners' diverse educational backgrounds, needs and objectives. However, adult ESOL programs consistently face demand that surpasses capacity, and neoliberal funding requirements prioritise certain groups, often those pursuing high school equivalency, citizenship or workforce credentials (Cacicio, Cote & Bigger 2023; Hofstetter & McHugh 2023). Furthermore, due to funding constraints, ESOL and literacy instructors face difficulties obtaining evidence-based teaching materials and professional development opportunities, as they are often overburdened and underpaid (Barbara Bush Foundation 2021; Cacicio, Cote & Bigger 2023). This paper results from a community-based participatory research (CBPR) partnership designed to address these intersecting challenges through ESOL instruction shaped by the needs and priorities of refugee adults.

Participatory approaches have been used widely to engage adult learners in research, from needs analysis to curriculum development and program evaluation (Guo et al. 2024; Hanson 2014; Kastner & Motschilnig 2022). However, in this paper we argue that CBPR is both process and product, an effective method for facilitating learning and knowledge production (see also Call-Cummings & Hauber-Özer 2020). Through vignettes recreated from field notes, a learner-authored story and a participatory evaluation of the course, we examine the process we have undergone simultaneously as adult education and research about adult education. We aim to disrupt the presumed divisions between community and university, researcher and participant, and education and research. This manuscript is effort in 'radical recognition' (Malone 2023, p. 190) of the contributions and perspectives of our community-based researcher-learners and an act of resistance and refusal toward an exclusionary, detached research paradigm.

Community-based participatory research

CPPR is part of a family of change-oriented approaches to inquiry which are driven by community concerns and privilege the expertise of those closest to a problem in developing solutions (Fals-Borda & Rahman 1991; Wood & McAteer 2017). These approaches aim to democratise the knowledge production process by equalising the relationship between researcher and participants (Call-Cummings, Dazzo & Hauber-Özer 2023; Glassman & Erdem 2014). In the participatory paradigm, community members take an active role in determining and carrying out the research agenda and developing and sharing findings while university-based researchers facilitate the process (Janzen & Ochocka 2020). Participation often fluctuates and takes different forms throughout a project based on differing interests, priorities, and responsibilities, but building trusting relationships and sharing ownership along the way are crucial (Call-Cummings, Dazzo & Hauber-Özer 2023). Rather than simply documenting the status quo or implementing top-down interventions, the goals are to foster emancipation at the individual level (Fals-Borda 1987; Freire 1972) and to provoke social change at the community level and beyond (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005).

Moreover, participatory approaches represent an onto-epistemological orientation to inquiry that rejects the conventional positivist research paradigm defined by a linear, systematic process and detachment from research subjects (Call-Cummings & Hauber-Özer 2018). The CBPR process often follows the action research cycle developed by Kurt Lewin (1948, 1951) to reduce intergroup conflict in the post-World War II United States (US), which comprises flexible, responsive phases of planning, acting, observing and reflecting on outcomes (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005). However, the distinct participatory strand of action research developed as part of a grassroots movement against colonial oppression across the Global South in the 1960s and 1970s (Glassman & Erdem 2014).

As a result, participatory inquiry is inherently revolutionary and designed for transformative rather than palliative goals (Glassman & Erdem 2014). It is guided by three interrelated concepts: *vivencia*, *praxis*, and *conscientisation* (Fals-Borda & Rahman 1991). *Vivencia*, coined by a Colombian leader of the participatory movement, Orlando Fals-Borda (1987), describes deep understanding through participation in another's lived experience and possibilities. This engagement spurs *praxis*, a process of critical reflection and action in the pursuit of liberation (Freire 1972). Through this dynamic process, individuals develop *conscientisation*, critical awareness of both the sociocultural forces shaping their lives and their power to enact change (Freire 1972), thus prompting further action.

CRITICAL ADULT EDUCATION AS CBPR

CBPR onto-epistemology aligns closely with the critical approach to adult education, which demands that educational programs, content and methods address learners' specific needs and challenges, while promoting greater social justice (Glassman & Erdem 2014; Wood & McAteer 2017). In traditional, hierarchical pedagogy, which Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire (1972) called the 'banking' model of education, the teacher determines what knowledge is valuable and delivers it to students. In contrast, Freire's critical pedagogy is a dialogic, problem-posing *praxis* that centres marginalised individuals as experts of their own lives and experiences (Kincheloe 2005; Lucio-Villegas 2018). Learners actively participate in creating the curriculum and gain critical consciousness (*conscientisation*) of possibilities for their lives and their ability to pursue them, which enables them to take action on the real-world challenges they face (Freire 1972). In fact, several leaders of the participatory research movement saw it as one and the same as adult education. This perspective diverges significantly from the neoliberal lifelong learning model, which primarily aims to prepare individuals for the labour market. Instead of reinforcing existing power structures, critical adult education seeks to foster learners' autonomy (Glassman & Erdem 2014; Wood & McAteer 2017) as well as to challenge and transform dominant ideologies, social systems and structures (Lucio-Villegas 2018).

SHARING COMMUNITY-BASED KNOWLEDGE

Community-based approaches are increasingly used and recognised as promising for solving urgent social, political and ecological challenges (Janzen & Ochocka 2020; Malone 2023). However, the increased uptake of community-engaged, collaborative and interdisciplinary scholarship has not translated to a corresponding change in publishing expectations and conventions at the institutional level. Gap filling and generalisability remain the dominant approaches to establish the importance of a research topic rather than bringing the situated and relational knowledges of an underrepresented group to light (Malone 2023). At the same time, the unrelenting pressure on early career researchers to 'publish or perish' requires increasing numbers of publications in closed-access, high-impact journals and prioritising sole or lead authorship to prove independence and expertise in the field. Peer review practices also reinforce the formal writing style and standardised structure of a research article (Malone 2023). For qualitative research, this typically means following standard coding procedures which break data down into digestible, decontextualised chunks and establish patterns across participants. In addition, institutional ethics boards typically demand that participants' identities be anonymised. As a result, community-based researchers remain largely absent from authorship roles in peer-reviewed literature (Malone 2023). These practices are entirely at odds with CBPR onto-epistemology, which values collaboration, co-construction of knowledge and shared ownership of research products (Call-Cummings & Hauber-Özer 2018; Janzen & Ochocka 2020). In participatory research, data generation and analysis are often blurred processes of meaning-making rather than distinct phases (Call-Cummings, Dazzo & Hauber-Özer 2023). Furthermore, consensus among co-researchers and transferable results are not necessarily the goals; rather, the research collective works to reach mutual understanding and transmit members' diverse and sometimes divergent viewpoints holistically and with relevant context (Call-Cummings, Dazzo & Hauber-Özer 2023).

Malone (2023) asserts that research articles have potential 'as intentional drivers of institutional change' (Malone 2023, p. 3) and offers guiding principles for realigning the research article with CBPR values. Such writing, she asserts, should represent diverse ways of knowing, present both 'theoretical and practical justification' (Malone 2023, p. 196) for the research, reflect the dynamic and evolving nature of the collaboration, challenge conventional structures, meaningfully involve and acknowledge all contributors, and be judged by appropriate quality markers and peer review processes (Malone 2023). We take up these guiding principles for CBPR writing, centring learner voices and ways of knowing in the paper and structuring it to reflect the collaborative, messy, change-oriented process. Moreover, we resist the demands of exclusivity and distance by choosing an open-access outlet and writing in a straightforward style to ensure that the results of our work are accessible and relevant to our organisational partners. Below, we tell the story of our evolving partnership, guided by the question: What do *vivencia*, *praxis*, and *conscientisation* look like in a participatory ESOL class?

Establishing the partnership: Year one

Truman, a college town of about 130 000 in the mid-western US, hosts a small but growing population of refugees who speak a variety of languages and have a range of prior educational experiences and literacy skills. Launched by a group of community members in 2010, Welcome House provides post-resettlement support in basic needs, education and professional development. The non-profit organisation has expanded rapidly in response to the increasing number of refugees settled in the area and moved to a larger building in the fall of 2022 to accommodate new staff and programs, which are supported by dozens of dedicated volunteers and several interns from the local university each semester.

In recent years, the adult ESOL program run by the public school district has not been able to keep pace with the increase in multilingual residents, resulting in long waiting lists. In January 2023, Candace and Melissa recruited two retired teachers who were volunteering with the organisation in other capacities to

form an adult education team (current team members opted to use their real first names in the paper). Carla had taught Spanish and ESOL in the local public schools and then helped launch a sheltered middle school ESOL program for newcomers (newly arrived refugee and immigrant children), while Barbara (pseudonym) had taught special education and adult literacy. As a team, we began to plan for a class based on what we knew of potential learners' needs and gaps in existing services. Knowing that transportation and childcare were common barriers to education for refugee adults, particularly women, Melissa insisted on providing both for the classes, which required additional volunteers. When Candace shared the intake testing scores of the Welcome House clients who had been waiting months for placements in public ESOL classes, Melissa noticed that most were Afghans who tested at the pre-literacy beginner level, indicating a gap in services for those who were new to both English and print literacy in any language and recommended targeting this group. When we were ready to begin offering two-hour classes two mornings each week in early March, Welcome House staff invited the learners from the waiting list, and the word spread.

VIGNETTE 2: FIRST CLASS

New learners trickled hesitantly into the classroom, several carrying infants or leading toddlers by the hand. Since they had not yet found a volunteer driver, Candace had picked some up in the Welcome House van, while others had arrived in their own vehicles. The education team and two volunteer classroom aides, both retired women with some experience tutoring English learners, encouraged the learners to choose seats at the three round folding tables set up around a portable whiteboard. An additional volunteer invited the children to join her in a play area on the other side of the classroom. The team had planned to use a simple registration form and practise greetings and introductions in order to informally assess the learners' written and oral proficiency levels. It quickly became clear that there were at least two distinct levels represented in the group, with some requiring assistance to write their names and others easily filling out the form and conversing about personal information. This required impromptu adjustments to group learners homogeneously and find materials for the more advanced group.

While debriefing after this first class, the team decided to split the group into two classes – Carla and Melissa would co-teach the beginner group, and Barbara would teach the intermediate learners. Approximately eight learners, all women from Afghanistan and Myanmar with varied educational and migration backgrounds, regularly attended the beginner class during that initial six-week session, which focused on exchanging greetings and personal information and establishing print literacy, which was a new skill for many of the learners. The intermediate class served on average six to eight learners from Myanmar, Afghanistan, Libya, and Russia and focused mainly on more advanced literacy skills. As Welcome House was unable to accommodate additional children while K–12 schools were closed, our classes paused for the summer break.

Formalising the partnership: Year two

For the 2023–2024 academic year, Melissa secured a small grant targeting short-term, community-engaged research on adult literacy and obtained approval for the project from her institutional review board (IRB). This funding enabled the team to pay teachers a modest stipend, hire an aide for the beginner class who spoke Pashto and Dari, purchase curriculum materials, and offer participation incentives to learners. Joe, a PhD student and graduate research assistant working with Melissa that year, joined the team in the fall of 2023 to observe the intermediate class. Joe had experience in adult education, lived in Myanmar for 10 years, and is married to a Burmese woman. Beginning in late August, classes were reduced to 1.5 hours each day due to space and childcare constraints.

DATA GENERATION AND ANALYSIS

Throughout this year of the partnership, Joe recorded instructional activities and resources in a Google document shared with learners, collected classroom artifacts and kept detailed field notes, in which he captured reflections and curiosities. Similarly, Melissa kept a record of instructional activities and field notes for the beginner-level class, supplemented by Carla's notes for the days when Melissa could not be present. Melissa and Joe met weekly to debrief and brainstorm, recording several of these analytical conversations as well. To develop this manuscript, we reviewed the data pertaining to the intermediate class, met several times to identify the focus and designate tasks, and drafted the paper collaboratively in a Google document during the spring and summer of 2024. This was an ongoing and iterative process, incorporating reviewer feedback and our developing understandings.

Given the constantly evolving nature of participatory research and our crystallising perceptions of what occurred in the classroom, the resulting paper takes an entirely different form than we first conceptualised. Ultimately, we decided to focus on the ways that *vivencia*, *praxis* and *conscientisation* materialised in the classroom. To communicate these embedded processes of collaborative meaning-making as valid and valuable knowledge production and resist conventions demanding detached 'expert' analysis by university-based researchers, our findings comprise descriptions of Joe's efforts to enact problem-posing critical pedagogy ([Kincheloe 2005](#)) paired with dialogic vignettes recreated from field notes and a learner-authored story. From the large corpus of data, we selected instances that relate to issues that learners identified as most important in initial topic generation and an end-of-course participatory evaluation.

LEARNERS

Since our IRB's requirements precluded officially recognising learners as co- researchers, they were positioned by the university as participants and had to provide informed consent. Joe requested consent using explanations in conversational English with supplementary explanations in Burmese for those who speak the language. Nine learners consented and appear in the narrative; Joe selected pseudonyms to reflect their cultural identities. Due to their unpredictable schedules, having all learners in the class at the same time was rare. They spoke five different languages, lived in various parts of the city, and worked at different locations. Tuyana, from the Republic of Buryatia in Russia, came to class most regularly. She was fluent in Russian, but her mother tongue was Buryat. When she first joined the class, Tuyana had been in the US for less than a year. Yousef came from Afghanistan and was the most recent arrival to the US in the class. His first language was Pashto, but he spoke Dari fluently as well. Ahmad also came from Afghanistan but had been in the US already for a couple of years. His first language was Dari, but he also spoke Pashto. The four other regular learners, Thiri, Thaw Thaw, Mary and Thet came from Myanmar originally and had all been in the US for around 10 years. Also from Myanmar, Bo Phyu and San attended less regularly. Though they all spoke Burmese as a lingua franca, each came from a different ethnic region and had a different mother tongue. The classroom was incredibly linguistically diverse, including widely varying levels of English.

VIGNETTE 3: TRADITIONAL PEDAGOGY

The first class about how to write the beginning of a letter had been a long lecture with very little input from learners for almost the entire two hours. The second class started much like the first, with a 30-minute lecture and little participation from the learners. Barbara was discussing the difference between Ms, Mrs and Miss. She had written the titles on the board and discussed how Ms is pronounced with a 'z' sound on the end and Miss is pronounced with an 's' sound on the end. She had the learners recite the pronunciations. It was unclear whether the learners understood what Barbara was saying as she did not check for understanding. When the teacher asked the learners what their last names were, Joe took the opportunity

to interject, explaining that most people in Myanmar don't have last names and there aren't exactly first names either. The names come as a set; in instances where people do have family or titular names, these names often come first in the order. This led to a conversation about names and naming with all the learners present that day, who were from Myanmar and Russia. Each learner talked about the meaning of their name and where it came from. Some had multiple names, for instance, a Karen name, a Burmese name, and an English name. The learners translated what their names meant into English for their classmates, and the conversation lasted until the end of class. This distinct increase in learner participation clearly seemed to be ignited by the connection Joe made to their cultural and personal identities.

After two weeks of observations, Barbara shared that she was trying to find a replacement, and Joe volunteered to teach the course. This decision was mainly driven by his observation that teacher-talk and de-contextualised learning dominated the classes. This traditional approach did not seem to be particularly engaging or relevant to learners' lives.

Vivencia

When Joe began teaching the course, he aimed to develop a participatory curriculum shaped by learners' real-world experiences and concerns. To do so, he relied on his previous 10 years in adult education as a subject and English language teacher, inspired by Paulo Freire's (1972) critical pedagogy. First, he engaged in what Freire (1972) described as a radical 'ethnographic phase' in participatory research where the literacy educator 'needed to immerse themselves for a period of time in the daily lives of the students' communities and identify critical social issues' (Bryers, Winstanley & Cooke 2014, p. 12). While time-consuming and challenging due to the diversity among language learners, the ethnographic phase is a crucial component of participation, facilitating genuine relationship building and equitable dialogue. In addition, the issues that learners identify, which Freire termed 'generative themes', direct further instruction.

VIGNETTE 4: GENERATING THEMES

In order to generate themes, Joe asked the learners about situations where they would like to practise English speaking, maybe interactions in which they had encountered confusion or difficulty.

Thiri immediately said: Doctor.

The rest of the learners nodded in agreement.

Thaw Thaw: Getting medicine.

Joe: Okay, 'Doctor' and 'Going to the Pharmacist'. What else?

Ahmad, who had recently dealt with car problems, suggested: Mechanics.

Thiri: Going to the market.

Joe: Tuyana, is there was anything you'd like to practise?

Tuyana: Everywhere!

Mary: Teacher meeting.

Thet joined in, proposing: Playing sports.

Finally, San suggested: Cooking.

This discussion resulted in some pragmatic topics to guide dialogic exploration in the classroom and stimulate learning of vocabulary and grammar needed to communicate about them. Based on these

generative themes, Joe developed an initial praxis-based curriculum that integrated action (role-playing and situated English practice) with critical reflection (cross-cultural analysis and discussion).

Praxis

Since many of the learners discussed confusion regarding going to the doctor and the American medical system, Joe designed a unit on healthcare, first going over vocabulary and phrases one might use at the doctor's office and showing videos depicting doctor–patient interactions. Once learners had gained some confidence using related language, he scaffolded a role-play activity where learners had to navigate an interaction with the doctor. While not a full expression of the method, these role-plays were inspired by Boal's (1985) Forum Theatre technique, which involves role-play of a series of oppressive actions, against which spectators are encouraged to take action in subsequent replays of the role-play. For instance, Joe acted simultaneously as the doctor, the one who held power in the situation, and the joker, enticing other learners to come up with creative solutions to misunderstandings between the doctor and the patient. In our role-plays, interactions involved the tension of the 'communicative burden' (Lippi-Green 2012) between the native English speaker who held the power in the situation and the learner-actor trying to communicate a need, be it regarding a medical symptom, a prescription for medicine, or a problem with their car. In this way, Joe aimed to foster the learners' skills and confidence in responding to power-laden situations they might encounter in the real world, through which he also gained a deeper understanding of their experiences and perspectives.

In the following vignette, even though Joe understood Thiri's English, he pretended not to because Thiri repeated the pronunciation in a manner other than Standard American English. This choice was informed by his awareness that individuals from Myanmar faced increased difficulty being understood by monolingual English speakers. After providing sample dialogues of a patient going to the doctor, Joe asked for a volunteer to model the interaction with. Thiri volunteered – Joe would be the doctor, and Thiri would be the patient.

VIGNETTE 5: ROLE-PLAYING

Joe: What brings you here, Thiri?

Thiri: I have a fever.

Joe: Anything else?

Thiri: I have a stomachache.

Joe: I'm sorry I don't understand. Could you repeat that?

Thiri: I have a stomachache.

Joe: Ah, I see. Let me check a few things.

Joe mimed checking a few things and then continued: Alright, I think you have a virus. It's very common these days. It's going around.

Thiri: I have a runny nose. That makes sense.

Joe: Okay, I'll write you a prescription for some medicine that will make you feel better. How does that sound?

Thiri: Good.

After the role-play, the learners reflected on the interactions in small groups, critiquing and comparing the American situation to that of the learner's home country. In the case of going to the doctor, many learners expressed frustration with the American medical system and explained how the system in their own country was better in many ways. Joe noticed that participation and conversation were liveliest during these small groups and that learners' fresh perspectives on the US facilitated critical analysis and earnest discussions about the country's advantages and disadvantages. The following vignette demonstrates one such instance.

VIGNETTE 6: CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Joe: How is going to the doctor different from other countries you've lived in?

Ahmad: You don't need to make an appointment. You can just go directly to the doctor. You don't need a prescription for medicine. The doctor will just give you the medicine the same day.

Thet: If you have a toothache, you go to the doctor. If you have shoulder pain, you go to the doctor. One doctor does everything. Cheaper.

Thiri: You don't have to worry about insurance.

The class responded with a collective groan.

Joe: You don't have insurance in your countries?

All the learners shook their heads.

Taken together, these two vignettes illustrate the nature of praxis in a participatory ESOL classroom – (inter)action and critical reflection are natural components of adult language learning. The role of the critical educator is to create conditions for this to occur. However, the vignettes also point to an ever-present tension in adult education between centring learners' ways of knowing and experiences and equipping them to function within US culture, dominant ideology and structural inequities. The following section explores how Joe sought to navigate this tension by centring learners' lives as curriculum (Weinstein 1999).

Conscientisation

As learners began to feel more comfortable sharing about their personal experiences and challenges as immigrants in the US, Joe designed lessons around this generative theme. He introduced *How I Learned English* by Paula Massadas Pereira (2015), a pedagogical picture book that depicts a Mexican girl's experience migrating to the US and acquiring the dominant language. As they read the story and noted points of comparison or divergent experiences, one of the most pressing social issues that learners identified during this dialogic unit was a sense of alienation from one another and from the dominant society. The learners' countries of origin faced many social and political challenges – life-threatening problems, in fact, that forced them to flee their homes – but alienation was rarely one of them. In many cases, extended families and close-knit communities had been dispersed by violence or persecution. Promoted by these conversations, Joe designed a unit on friendship because learners shared that they hoped to gain new friendships in the class. He also wanted to learn more about the learners' *vivencia* as part of his ongoing ethnographic investigation as a critical literacy educator.

VIGNETTE 7: FRIENDSHIP

Joe introduced the learners to the new unit on friendship. They initiated their exploration of the generative theme with a few discussion questions: Who is your best friend? What makes a good friend? Who is a new

friend you've made? The learners discussed in pairs and then shared what they talked about with the class. Bo Phyu shared that classmate Thiri is a friend that she has now, maybe her best friend. Ahmad said, 'My first friends are my classmates.' San shared a story about a friend she made in Seattle, another refugee, who she became so close to that when San moved to Truman, this friend and her family followed her there. They eat meals in each other's houses almost every day.

As the learners continued to form bonds and share their personal stories, Joe recognised an opportunity for them to author the curriculum. This pedagogical approach resembled established methods using learner-generated stories to scaffold reading and writing instruction, incorporate relevant grammar and vocabulary, and build community ([Freire 1972](); [Nicholas, Rossiter & Abbott 2011]()). In addition to focusing on learners' experiences and ideas, Joe believed that this would help him better understand and address each learner's reality (that is, *viviencia*) and unique language needs. When he proposed structuring the course around storytelling, the learners showed interest but were concerned about the time required for writing. Joe reassured them that writing stories was optional and could be as brief as a few sentences. The learners then agreed to try this approach, and Joe designed a storytelling unit that included *Our stories carried us here* ([Vang, Rozman & Kaczynski 2021]()), a graphic novel featuring 11 immigrant and refugee stories, along with YouTube videos selected by the learners depicting traditional stories from their cultures. The unit also incorporated vocabulary, basic storytelling concepts, and exercises such as collaborative story creation and generating stories from AI images. Throughout the unit, Joe continued to introduce grammar topics within storytelling lessons, tailoring his instruction to the learners' writing and speaking. Each class allowed ample time to discuss learners' stories, which ranged in topic from car problems and work experiences to immigration and dreams for the future. Tuyana was one of the first to bring a story to class.

STORY: 'RUSSIA' BY TUYANA

I want to tell you about Russia. It ranks first in the world in terms of area. Over 190 nationalities live in Russia, with a population of 147 182 123 people. It borders on 18 countries of the world (16 by land and two by sea).

It is rich in many mineral resources – jade, diamond, uranium, gold, silver, oil, gas, coal, nickel, and much more.

Russia is a cold country, 65 per cent of the territory is covered with permafrost. The capital of Russia is Moscow. In Moscow live 13 104 177 people. Of the 190 nationalities, culture, language, traditions are forgotten and destroyed, so 99.4 per cent of the population speak Russian.

End.

Tuyana's story presents a factual description indicating pride in the size, diversity and resources of the country she was forced to flee. However, she closes with a critique of the epistemicide of minority cultures and languages – including, presumably, her own – by the dominant Russian ethnic group. In this tension between pride and critique, Tuyana's story demonstrates critical consciousness about her home country.

Discussion

To critically reflect on the second year of the partnership and determine directions for the future, Joe facilitated a participatory evaluation of the course at the end of the spring 2024 session. Consistent with our onto-epistemology, this critical reflection functioned as blended data generation and analysis ([Call-Cummings, Dazzo & Hauber-Özer 2023]()) and informed future stages of our project. We constructed this final vignette directly from a recording of the discussion, lightly editing it for length and interspersing

our interpretations. In this conversation, learners' roles as co-researchers became more prominent as Joe explicitly invited them to inform the research findings and project planning.

Welcoming learners into the classroom, Joe explained that he would ask them to share their ideas about the class and suggestions for improving it in the future:

VIGNETTE 8: EVALUATION

Joe: It's kind of hard to answer this honestly with me in the room, probably. But what did you like about this class? You all have been taking it since the fall.

Ahmad: Everything. Everything is very interesting.

Joe: Is there anything that you really, really liked? Because we want to take this research and tell other teachers in other cities. Your advice is helpful for making new English classes.

Thiri: Uh, write a story.

Joe: What did you like about writing a story?

Thiri: Um, I read Tuyana's writing. So we know how different our country culture.

Ahmad: Yeah. And we learned about Moscow. Yeah. How many people are there. What they have for the people, that they have a good public transportation. And also they have a lot of aluminum.

Joe: You have a good memory! Yousef, what did you like about this class?

Yousef: I would like to thank you teacher for helping us for speaking English. Plus, we was so happy. I'm so proud to be here. I like more things in the class, communication in the classes. And we gave the information about the different society. And culture, we can see difference in country classmates. It's a very good for me. I liked it to know about another society and another culture. This is very good for me.

Joe: Awesome. Those are some of the things I like most too. You're very kind, smart people, so it's nice to talk with you. And then I like learning about your experiences and about the countries where you've come from and I really like learning about what you think about America too, you know? Because I think your perspective is very fresh. You can see the differences very clearly.

The learners' positive evaluation of the class, albeit possibly coloured by the presence of the teacher, indicates that they found the participatory ESOL approach motivating and effective. While still imperfect, the class had moved closer to the goal of democratising adult learning, prioritising learners' needs, motivations, and goals in the selection of topics ([Freire 1972](#); [Knowles, Holton & Swanson 2005](#)). Joe was a fellow learner gleaning generative themes, selecting and developing meaningful materials rooted in learners' lives, and facilitating co-construction of new knowledge ([Knowles, Holton & Swanson 2005](#)). Compared to the initial discussion about class topics (Vignette 4), learners spoke more confidently and extensively about their learning goals. They referenced dialogues, role-plays and classmates' stories from earlier classes as meaningful in their learning, highlighting the collective nature of this process and the importance of community building. Though she had shared it several weeks earlier, Tuyana's story about Russia proved memorable to her fellow learners as a way to engage in *vivencia* and understand differences in their lived experiences.

When Joe encouraged Thiri to add her comments, she identified pronunciation as the most important thing she learned, explaining, 'When I speak, I think that word but when she don't understand me.' This echoed the role-play from the fall session in which the 'doctor' could not understand her accent. Ahmad extended the class's critique of the US healthcare system with a recent example:

Ahmad: Yeah, a lot of things about the America. My friend's wife, she has a hearing aid. Yesterday, he went to doctor. He gave some medicine. They make an appointment for after two months. Now she have too much pain. They make appointment for after two months. I don't like this in America.

Joe: Yeah, healthcare in our country is a problem.

Yousef: In our country, the second we go to the doctor, maybe after one hour, we can get the appointment to the doctor.

Ahmad: Some place don't need appointment.

Joe: Yeah, you just walk in. Yeah. Yeah. It's the same in Myanmar. Yeah, stuff like that I love learning about.

Ahmad: Also cheaper in my country.

Yousef: This little expensive for healthcare. The system is very different, expensive.

Learners openly critiqued US society, namely the healthcare system, and made positive comparisons with their home societies. These comments indicate critical consciousness ([Freire 1972](#)) about their new country.

Joe then moved to the second question:

Joe: What did you learn about yourself? And what did you learn about your community here?

Ahmad: About myself … I can speak a little bit English, reading, writing. The community. We are very happy about my community. I know each other. And so we know about study some countries.

Joe: Yeah, cool. Tuyana, anything to add?

Tuyana: It's good that Welcome House gives you give the opportunity to learn English and more, for example, artisan classes, sewing classes, crochet classes. For me, just English classes.

Ahmad: Also they help everyone, every time. And also sometimes we need some things. We have good community.

These responses indicate that learners gained confidence in their English proficiency, a sense of community within the class, and awareness of social and material support available through Welcome House. These socio-emotional outcomes are arguably just as important as increased language proficiency.

Lastly, Joe elicited learners' suggestions for the next year of the program:

Joe: Okay, what would you like us to do differently next time? And what other topics or skills would you like to work on?

Yousef: I think the next time I like we have more time for the grammar, for the reading.

Tuyana: Writing.

Yousef: Okay, writing, yeah.

Thiri: And reading [chuckles].

Yousef: Because I know everyone, every people, the first time come to the USA, they have the more problem in the language. I think we need to spend more time in the English language. And we learn the English little seriously. For example, you give the more time for the academic things, grammars. I know we learn in this class tense, okay. I think we need the more time for the grammar. We learn the active, passive, and another kind of language. For example, noun, adjective. Maybe in the little things, we learned read advanced things in the useful to improve another skills because grammar is very important in us. When we learn know about the grammar, we can make the reading, writing. I think the next time I hope we

have these things in our education system. And little more time, for example, two hours, three times in the week, six hours. Are you agree with me?

Ahmad: No, is okay.

Yousef: He say no, two days is better.

Ahmad: Two days for the week and also without the stop, like summer, winter, no stop.

Joe: Oh, I see, without breaks between the sessions.

Yousef: This is our suggestion; we don't know.

Joe: Yeah. No, it's good for Welcome House to think about this.

Because of the democratic environment of the class, learners were able to advocate for their needs and provide constructive suggestions for the focus and format of the class, such as including more grammar instruction and increasing the hours of class each week or reducing breaks.

Joe acknowledged this critique and the limitations of the program:

Joe: Yeah, I mean. It's hard. This is different from full time school, you know? Just 'cause everyone's working; many people are busy. Have to do what we can, but it's so good to know.

Ahmad: Sometimes we need more volunteers because we talking with American people. We can learn what he say, what she say. With American people, conversation and everything is broken.

Yousef: I don't know. It's a very different. When I talk with another people in some place, I don't know what he said. When I talking with you, with another volunteers, I know. But I don't know in the outside.

Ahmad: American people also sometimes I talk with him, the person sometime, I see him. I am, 'Sorry, I don't understand.' The American people is not good.

Here, Ahmad and Yousef introduced an additional critique providing further justification for their requests based on challenges they continued to face. They suggested that involving more volunteers would prepare them to speak with local residents who may have very little exposure to English learners, unlike the sympathetic interlocutors they interacted with regularly at Welcome House.

Expanding the partnership: Year three and beyond

The team has implemented the learners' suggestions as much as possible by expanding the partnership to include a nearby Excel Center adult high school, funded by Goodwill Industries, for the third year of the program. Moving the classes to the Excel Center campus facilitates more frequent interactions with local residents in a supportive environment. It also enables us to offer year-round classes in more suitable classrooms with greater childcare capacity, a generous curriculum budget and sustainable teacher pay. Although Joe transitioned to a different research project, Welcome House teacher Carla currently instructs both levels, and whole-group classes are supplemented by self-paced computer modules and applied English practice through cooking and craft classes. Excel administrators are eager to scale the ESOL program up to their other five locations in the state. While we are optimistic about the potential of this expansion, staying true to the highly contextualised, praxis-based model will require critical educators and thoughtful adaption to a different learner population and local context.

Closing thoughts

In this paper, we sought to illuminate the pursuit of *vivencia*, enactment of *praxis*, and expression of *conscientisation* that occurred in a participatory ESOL classroom. In keeping with our epistemological

commitment to shared ownership, we sought to honour the learners' expertise in our analysis and reporting of findings (Malone 2023). The structure of the paper reflects this commitment, centring learners' worlds through their words. By incorporating dialogic vignettes and a learner-authored story as findings, we offer an alternative to positivist conventions of filtering community-based researchers' ideas through 'expert' analysis. Adult learners are the experts on their experiences, and the findings we present are the results of their analysis. We close with pedagogical and methodological implications of our work.

Although critical pedagogy-inspired participatory ESOL is not new, our exploration contributes an example of the infusion of such pedagogy into CPBR. The partnership with Welcome House and the expansion to include the Excel Center allowed us to address persistent challenges in adult education (Barbara Bush Foundation 2021; Cacicio, Cote & Bigger 2023) by circumventing neoliberal funding restrictions and developing a customised curriculum around learners' lives and priorities. In this effort, we worked to enact participatory ESOL pedagogy (Bryers, Winstanley & Cooke 2014; Cooke et al. 2023), positioning the instructor as a facilitator of learning and centring learners' experiences and perspectives. Based on learner feedback and our observations, our findings indicate that a pedagogical model combining participatory approaches (for example, role-playing, storytelling and critical discussion) and traditional grammar and vocabulary instruction was effective for language learning (Bryers, Winstanley & Cooke 2014; Cooke et al. 2023).

More importantly, the democratic classroom environment made it possible for learners to actively participate in their own learning and advocate for the structure and content that they wanted going forward. In his field notes and our weekly debriefing meetings, Joe frequently questioned what 'counted' as *conscientisation*, wrestling with the tension between centring learners' experiences and preparing them to function in the dominant language and culture. However, when we revisited the data and constructed the vignettes, we found clear evidence of learners' critical consciousness about both their home and host countries as well as the course content and structure. Joe's engagement in their *vivencia* to design learner-centred curriculum and enactment of *praxis,* pairing action and critical reflection, seemed to facilitate their expression of this awareness.

Similarly, Melissa often wondered whether the project 'counted' as participatory inquiry. After all, IRB requirements and traditional teacher-student relationships positioned learners as research subjects and recipients of instruction rather than co-researchers and co-creators of knowledge. As is common in CBPR, participation has taken different forms and involved various members of the partnership at different times (Call-Cummings, Dazzo & Hauber-Özer 2023). The Refugee Advisory Council provided the impetus for the project by identifying a community concern – a lack of adult English classes. *Praxis* occurred through a series of actions and reflective discussions to develop a solution (Freire 1972), first between Melissa and Candace, then among the newly formed adult education team, and then between Joe and the learners and Melissa and Joe. The learners' assessments indicated that they experienced meaningful change, and their suggestions prompted further action to expand the program's capacity and impact.

By examining the data for these three concepts – *vivencia*, *praxis* and *conscientisation* – we confirmed that critical adult education *is* participatory research (Glassman & Erdem 2014). Community concerns sparked the project, and the expertise of those closest to the issue informed the solution (Fals-Borda & Rahman 1991), resulting in individual conscientisation and action toward broader social change (Fals-Borda 1987; Kemmis & McTaggart 2005). We encourage fellow community-engaged scholars to reconnect with the roots of this powerful approach and recognise the importance of living out their onto-epistemological commitments in both the process and the product of participatory inquiry.

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