

**Enhancing postgraduate learning and development: a participatory action learning and action research approach through conferences**

**Author**

Wood, L, Louw, I, Zuber-Skerritt, O

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## Enhancing postgraduate learning and development: a participatory action learning and action research approach through conferences

### Introduction

Conference presentation and subsequent publication in scientific journals and books can be difficult or uncomfortable experiences for postgraduate students. Yet publicly disseminating their work, orally and in writing, is vital if their research is to have any influence on policy or practice. Indeed, it can be vital for the learning and development of postgraduates, as emergent researchers, to gain positive experience through all opportunities that conferences can offer – to become part of a learning and research community, share one's own and others' research and ideas, learn from and with others, network, develop possibilities for collaboration and publication, and generally progress towards a well-developed identity as a researcher.

As supervisors of postgraduate students leading action learning and action research projects, we aim to develop their ability to practise action learning and critically reflect on their own learning needs, and to conduct rigorous and authentic action research. We are action researchers, so we believe in and advocate the transformational potential (Author 1, 2010) of research: for research to have value, it must not only generate knowledge on a theoretical level, but also have practical and emancipatory outcomes. As researchers and research participants collaborate to generate theory and address mutually identified concerns, outcomes should include not just discernible improvement in the quality of their lives, but also epistemological and ontological shifts that lead to sustainable change in how they live and in their capacity to respond to future challenges. In other words, as postgraduate supervisors, we see ourselves as being in the business of developing lifelong learners who strive to embody the values and principles of participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) in their professional and personal lives.

We therefore adopt a capability approach to our postgraduate supervision. Developing people's capability, according to Sen (1999), enables them to broaden what they recognise as their choices about how they wish to be and what they wish to do. Developing postgraduate students' capability through PALAR as our preferred genre of action research helps to ensure that their research experience is not only a means to an end for themselves through attaining a degree and developing holistically through coming to understand that their learning and research can have a lasting and beneficial impact on their own lives. It also enables them to help develop the capability of people participating in their research projects. We want the students we supervise to go back to their respective spheres of influence and be able to cascade their learning as they interact with others, in their professional or personal capacities. We want the supervision process to help students expand their capacity to make both meaningful life choices and contributions to knowledge and sustainable community wellbeing. That's why we need to ensure that we create space for them to grow and develop as people and as professionals

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3 beyond the narrow aim of graduation. We believe the most efficacious way to do so is  
4 through the principles and practices of PALAR.  
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7 We recognise conferences to be a valuable and mostly under-appreciated space for this  
8 growth and development, personally and professionally, through PALAR. Yet we have  
9 found, and literature confirms (Haley, Wiesner and Robinson 2009; Nel and de Beer  
10 2004), that most conferences do not present an optimal learning and development  
11 environment for postgraduates as emerging researchers. Postgraduate students tend to  
12 be overawed by 'expert' researchers (who often simply present their students' work),  
13 making these students too nervous to engage in deep learning as they wait anxiously for  
14 their turn to present, 'to get it over and done with'. Allocated time for presentations,  
15 questioning and other aspects of conference also works against students maximising  
16 learning opportunities. Most conferences allow only 20 minutes for a presentation, with  
17 three to four consecutive presentations and only ten minutes for questioning of all  
18 presenters at the end, which works against balanced discussion time for each paper.  
19 Student presenters waiting to be questioned are often preoccupied with anxiety about  
20 what audience members may ask them, which also diminishes their chance to learn  
21 through the discussions.  
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26  
27 Recognising the valuable learning and development opportunities through conferences  
28 that postgraduates may be unable to use or maximise, we designed and facilitated a  
29 structured support program to help students turn any conference into what we call here  
30 a *learning conference*. The learning conference, conceptualised initially by Ravn (2007), is  
31 a conference where scheduling deliberately builds in time for active interaction,  
32 engagement and reflection between and among delegates, rather than one-sided  
33 presentations with a few questions from the audience at the end. Whereas Ravn (2007)  
34 explains what a learning conference is, (and Authors 3 & 2, 2011 further develop this  
35 concept and its utility), in this paper we are concerned with the place of postgraduates in  
36 a learning conference. We explore how postgraduates can use and help create  
37 opportunities most effectively so that conferences are truly spaces for their rich learning  
38 and professional development – through PALAR.  
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43 Here we share how we put into practice the principles of PALAR to foster the  
44 development of capability in postgraduate students through conferences. Our approach  
45 offers them structured support to prepare for, fully participate in, and reflect on, the  
46 experience of attending a conference to maximise its potential as a learning conference.  
47 We begin by explaining the theoretical paradigm of PALAR that underpins our supervisory  
48 actions and the approaches we promote among our students, and then explain the  
49 methods we used to generate and analyse the data we discuss. We then explain how we  
50 conceptualised and put these methods into practice for the workshops, presenting a brief  
51 overview of the structured support program we designed for students' pre- and post-  
52 conference learning, before discussing the themes that emerged in response to our  
53 research question: "How does a participatory action learning and action research  
54 approach to the preparation of postgraduate students for a conference influence their  
55 learning and development during the conference and beyond?". We conclude with  
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3 critical reflection on our own learning from this program, which may be helpful to others  
4 who wish to incorporate PALAR principles into their supervisory practices, including for  
5 conferences.  
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### 8 **PALAR as a paradigm to guide the development of postgraduate students**

9  
10 We do not claim that participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) is  
11 necessarily a new approach to learning and development. Rather, it is a synthesis of  
12 different genres of action learning and action research seeking to ensure that their  
13 common component of iterative, critical reflection on learning is strengthened by  
14 participatory, democratic and mutually supportive learning relationships, all working  
15 towards the common goal of generating knowledge that is publicly disseminated to  
16 contribute to positive social and educational change. PALAR integrates the principles and  
17 intents of participatory action research (PAR) – research and learning through inclusion,  
18 social justice, self-determination and democratic participation (see, e.g., Fals Borda 1998;  
19 Brydon-Miller and Maguire 2009; Reason and Bradbury 2013) – with those of lifelong  
20 action learning (LAL). For Author 2 (2013), LAL integrates action learning and lifelong  
21 learning to create an approach to learning that is voluntary, self-motivated and ultimately  
22 permeates all our daily interactions to become an integral part of our life. This PAR/LAL  
23 synergy results in the powerful process of PALAR, rooted in life-enhancing principles that  
24 Author 2 (2011) has conveniently clustered as the 7 Cs of PALAR operationalised by the  
25 3Rs, as outlined in Table 1.  
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31 PLS INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

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33 Table 1: The 7Cs and 3Rs of PALAR  
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37 PALAR is thus more than just a methodology. It is a paradigm that transforms and  
38 continually informs people's ontological, axiological and epistemological understanding  
39 of themselves and the world.  
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42 In terms of postgraduate supervision, we see that the capability theory of Sen (1999),  
43 which links human development, quality of life and freedom (Walker 2005), aligns with  
44 the principles and processes of PALAR, which work towards helping people to: i)  
45 determine what is best for them in line with their values, and ii) draw on the resources  
46 and input of a supportive group to develop the knowledge and skills to be able to pursue  
47 their goals. We do not supervise only to develop competence in research methodology  
48 and reporting, but rather with a view to developing the postgraduate student holistically,  
49 so that they emerge from the supervisory process with a clearer understanding of self,  
50 others and the systems that influence their lives. By modelling the 7Cs and 3Rs in our  
51 interaction with students, and helping students to embed these into their respective  
52 projects, we hope to facilitate gradual and sustainable growth on cognitive, emotional,  
53 social and spiritual levels so students are better able to set and attain goals they believe  
54 will add value to their lives and indirectly to the lives of others. Fletcher (2015, pp.68-69)  
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3 explains how PALAR embodies the principles of neuroscience that sees learning as a  
4 process that is not only cognitive, but also dependent on social and emotional factors.  
5 Thus our approach to group supervision is to create a positive and supportive learning  
6 ecology that minimises barriers to learning and opens all participants to full participation  
7 and engagement. This approach is confirmed and explained in detail by Author 2 (2014)  
8 who concludes:  
9  
10

11       The importance of group support in boosting students' morale, self-confidence and  
12 learning has not drawn the attention it deserves as a means of reducing high  
13 attrition and low or late completion rates among postgraduate students. Through  
14 participating in collaborative supervisor–candidate sets and contributing to the  
15 workshop program, supervisors can create a more co-operative and open  
16 environment for learning and research that is appropriate for the purpose of action  
17 research, with intellectual enrichment for supervisor as well as student. (p. 741)  
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### 21 **Overview of structured support workshop program and method of evaluation**

22  
23 Our combined expertise lies in action research and action learning, publication and  
24 supervision, as well as academic support for postgraduate students and academic staff  
25 members. We designed and facilitated a support program as a workshop for  
26 postgraduates to maximise their understanding and experience of and contribution to a  
27 'learning conference culture' (Authors 2015, pp.173-188). We were assisted in the pre-  
28 conference workshop by an academic writing practitioner.  
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32 The participants of the structured learning conference program were six PhD and five  
33 MEd students who had all been working together in a larger PALAR community  
34 engagement project supported by a South African National Research Foundation (NRF)  
35 grant, eight of them for the last three years and three for at least one year. Each student  
36 had a specific project of their own within this PALAR project, and they had all been  
37 meeting monthly as an action learning set to share their learning with each other. Almost  
38 all were working fulltime in education. Three were full-time university academics, two  
39 were aspiring to attain employment as academics, one held an administrative post at a  
40 university, one was a Human Resource Manager at a college, three were practising school  
41 teachers, and one was a full-time student. All were proficient in spoken English, but only  
42 one considered English as her mother-tongue; the others were native speakers of  
43 Afrikaans or setswana<sup>1</sup>. The first author of this article was supervisor of all bar two of the  
44 students. Those two were supervised by other colleagues who collaborated with her on  
45 the NRF community engagement project, so she had interacted with both of them closely  
46 in the learning set over the duration of the project. All bar one student, who had enrolled  
47 in the previous year, had attended at least one postgraduate workshop with the third  
48 author. The second author was not known to the students before the workshop, but  
49 feedback indicated that they quickly felt at home with her.  
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55 All the students were attending the World Congress of ALARA (Action Learning and Action  
56 Research Association) in Pretoria (4–7 November 2015) in the week following the pre-  
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3 conference workshop. All were presenting a paper. The workshop's aim as a support  
4 program was thus to enable participants to develop the competence and confidence to  
5 engage fully in the learning experience afforded by the conference and to benefit from  
6 opportunities the World Congress presented as a space for rich learning and  
7 development, especially since it had been designed expressly as a learning conference.  
8 We wanted to help these students to be able to use PALAR principles to identify their  
9 learning and how they can apply it to enhance their future studies, publication of their  
10 work and their respective career trajectories, alongside the contributions of their  
11 learning/research to broader community development. Table 2 outlines the support  
12 program's activities and their purposes. Although we had developed a rough outline for  
13 both of these workshops (pre- and post-conference), at the start of each we negotiated  
14 with the participants around their learning needs to prioritise certain activities over  
15 others. Similarly, at the end of each day we read their written reflections and adjusted  
16 the program as we thought helpful or necessary. The post-conference workshop was  
17 based on our learning about the students' needs, based on their reflections.

22  
23 PLEASE INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

24  
25 Table 2: Activities and aims of pre- and post-conference workshops

26  
27 We positioned the pre- and post-conference sessions as action learning set meetings with  
28 the following stated aims:

29  
30 In this informal and interactive workshop we come together as an action  
31 learning set, particularly to work on participants' academic writing needs. Our  
32 approach is hands-on ... revising written samples, editing, questioning, thinking  
33 aloud and on paper, suggesting, discussing and any other activities that inspire  
34 our learning. So please bring your ideas, questions, and wonderings to enrich  
35 your and our learning experiences (Preamble to program invitation).

36  
37 We did this in keeping with and as demonstration of PALAR principles: to indicate we  
38 recognise student participants as fellow learners with us, to try to even out the power  
39 differentials inherent in our relationships, and show that we value their inputs to enhance  
40 the learning of all present. We were aware that some students might perceive us as  
41 'expert' practitioners and researchers, and so might not feel as comfortable contributing  
42 as they would in their usual supervisory groups. We wanted to create 'a spirit of  
43 mutuality between teachers and students as joint inquirers' (Merriam, Caffarella and  
44 Baumgartner 2012, p. 85), in line with our PALAR commitment to valuing the input and  
45 participation of all. We endeavoured to keep the atmosphere as mutually supportive and  
46 friendly as possible, while still encouraging deep engagement with the work.

47  
48 We generated data through written and oral reflections by both students and facilitators  
49 on each of the pre-and post-conference workshops and through student written  
50 reflections on each day of the conference. We individually analysed this data for themes  
51 that would help us to answer our research question, before we shared our analyses with  
52 each other to reach consensus on the final themes. This helped to increase the

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3 trustworthiness of the findings, as did sharing the final discussion with the participants  
4 for their validation (Creswell 2005). Students signed consent forms, allowing us to use  
5 their feedback for research purposes. The larger NRF project had already received ethical  
6 clearance from the university in question.  
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### 9 **How does PALAR enhance postgraduate learning and development?**

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11 Two themes emerged from our analysis of the participants' written and oral reflections to  
12 help answer our research question: "How does a participatory action learning and action  
13 research approach to the preparation of postgraduate students for a conference  
14 influence their learning and development during the conference and beyond?"  
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17 The two themes are:

- 18 1. The focus on relationship-enhanced learning; and
- 19 2. Preparation for conference, which enabled the postgraduate students to  
20 maximise their learning experience during and beyond the conference  
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24 We discuss each theme in relation to verbatim quotations from the data, as well as in  
25 relation to relevant literature, and our theoretical frameworks. The participants are  
26 identified as researchers by (Rn).  
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#### 28 ***Theme 1: The focus on relationship enhanced learning***

29 All participants mentioned, either pre- or post-conference, that they perceived the  
30 learning climate of the workshops as positive:  
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33 I appreciated the relaxed atmosphere that prevailed at the session (R2)

34 It was a day well spent – thank you! Thank you for caring and showing and living  
35 out your values of sharing (R8)  
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38 Being able to voice my insecurities in a safe and nurturing space was invaluable  
39 (R7)  
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42 Participants valued inputs from their fellow students as much as from facilitators.

43 The fact that we know each other helped and over lunch we could 'feed off' other  
44 inputs and new understandings (R6)  
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47 The pre-conference workshops, refining our power point presentations, getting  
48 feedback and having group discussions all contributed to establishing a sense of trust  
49 and belonging before the congress (R10).  
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52 Others mentioned the feelings of comradeship in the group (R7); the encouragement  
53 from the learning set (R4); and how 'the pleasant academic space created an atmosphere  
54 of *Gemütlichkeit* [cordiality, friendliness]' (R10). However, cultural differences were also  
55 at work. One student felt that 'respect for elders, which is part of my culture' (R8)  
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3 hampered her engagement, in that she was too timid to say what she felt at one point,  
4 and she spent so much time worrying about her inability to voice her true opinion that  
5 she missed out on some of the discussion and learning. This alerted us to the need to  
6 check how each person in the group is feeling, rather than assuming the majority voice  
7 speaks for all participants. At a later supervision session with the student, the supervisor  
8 was able to discuss this response and help her understand how emotions can hamper or  
9 enhance learning, and how she could devise strategies to cope with this in future in her  
10 own life and in her practice as a teacher. The importance of individual *critical reflection*  
11 was once again highlighted, as we would not have realised that one student was  
12 struggling within the larger group of positive participants unless we had read the  
13 reflections immediately after the workshop.  
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18 Deepening of peer relationships at the pre-conference workshop seemed to increase the  
19 students' desire to support each other at the Congress, as many of them mentioned the  
20 help from others before, during and after their presentations in terms of technical  
21 assistance, moral support and gentle constructive *coaching*. It is well documented in the  
22 literature that a positive learning climate not only deepens emotional engagement in the  
23 particular learning experience, but also leads to a positive attitude towards *collaboration*,  
24 which in turn leads to more lasting success in life outside the classroom (Hoffman 2009;  
25 Ukpokodu 2010). Self-esteem, belief in self-efficacy and interpersonal skills are all more  
26 easily fostered in such a collaborative climate, leading to the probability that learners will  
27 seek rather than avoid learning later in life, thus becoming the lifelong learners necessary  
28 in our fast changing, diverse and turbulent world (Author 2 2012). In a PALAR process,  
29 fostering positive, caring relationships is paramount for ongoing growth and development  
30 of people involved, yet supervision by means of such dialogical groups is still relatively  
31 uncommon in South African higher education, at least until recently. All students in this  
32 study were familiar with hierarchical, one-to-one relationships that postgraduate  
33 students generally have with their 'Prof's' and valued and appreciated this more dialogical  
34 approach since it helped them to feel that their input was valuable. The PALAR  
35 experience in supervision had offered them the support they needed to feel competent,  
36 not only at a technical level, but as emerging academic researchers.  
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43 I am still positive about doing action research and Prof has been an absolute  
44 amazing role model for me to learn from. She is now helping me to write my  
45 first article and she is guiding me through the painful sharpening of becoming an  
46 academic, without making me feel unimportant (R3).  
47

48 I have started to trust myself enough to demonstrate my research findings with  
49 emotional videos knowing that it may solicit questions of ethics. However, I am  
50 now confident enough to answer them irrespective of who is in the audience so  
51 there has been growth and development. I also had a look at the video clips  
52 captured where I am presenting at all three conferences and it appears that I am  
53 more relaxed in Pretoria than anywhere else and I see this as another indicator  
54 of the excellent work Prof is doing in developing her students not just in thesis  
55 work but in making public their findings (R6).  
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*Recognition* of successful contributions and learning outcomes is also a key principle of PALAR (Authors 2015). Since this group comprised mainly people who had been socialised within a divisive and unjust Apartheid society whose legacy continues today, learning to respect and *communicate* as equals with people from different linguistic, cultural, race, religious and economic backgrounds is especially valuable for future personal and professional interaction (Author 1 2014). In addition to enhancing supportive peer relationships, participants especially appreciated the facilitators' individual *coaching* sessions:

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It was only at the conference that I truly realised the value of the coaching that we received before the conference. (R4).

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Coaching from Z at the pre-conference session has put me on my PhD journey (R9)

Mentoring sessions and practical advice from Y was great, as well as her personal examples of how to overcome crises (R5).

One-to-one coaching allowed individual students to talk about specific aspects of their studies and lives that they needed help with, and they valued it as an alternative to the group sessions. It not only helped them personally, but also gave them insight into how they can work effectively with participants in their research projects in future, so all can have a more 'humanising experience' (R6) through their participation in the project. They also mentioned that the specialised focus of each coach was useful – one for helping with improving presentations, one for language/writing issues and one for a more general coaching session on personal and project-related issues.

The evidence presented in this theme adds weight to the claim that the affective-socio-cognitive approach of PALAR (Fletcher 2015, pp. 67-68) that we embodied in our design of and interaction within this program contributed to improving student capabilities as both academic and social beings. *Critical reflection* on the pre- and post-workshop process and on their role within it helped them to realise the value of developing supportive *relationships* and being open to learning from all experiences. The supportive relationships helped to increase their *commitment* towards the group to make a 'success' of the conference; and the respectful, synergistic *communication* helped them to recognise their peers' strengths and resources, which they shared freely to support each other during the conference.

### ***Theme 2: Preparation for the conference enabled them to maximise the learning experience***

Our aim in the pre-conference workshop in particular was to build confidence, and ultimately *competence*, of these postgraduate students in presenting and discussing their research at an international forum. Although their learning expectations at both pre- and post-conference workshops were very 'technical' (e.g., how to construct a sentence;

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3 abstract composition; 'dos and don'ts' of presentation), their reflections revealed that  
4 they learnt much more than how to produce a good PowerPoint presentation:  
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7 Another good day. A large majority of the presenters I listened to said that  
8 they were new to action research and probably couldn't answer difficult  
9 questions. They added that they would like to ask questions of the experts in  
10 the audience. While I understand their fears, I think that a conference is an  
11 opportunity to share your personal experiences without fear of not being  
12 "enough". Not knowing enough or having done enough action research –  
13 that's nonsense. We are all here to learn. Even sharing challenges and failures  
14 is valid data for others to consider and react to. The success of my own study  
15 was aided by avoiding the pitfalls highlighted by the other members of our  
16 action learning set (R8).  
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20 This student seems to have grasped the value of a conference to deepen learning, and  
21 the experience of being part of a PALAR group has taught her that "not knowing" is not  
22 something to be ashamed of but rather a place from which to start or further develop  
23 learning; the point is to learn at every opportunity. PALAR highlights *recognition* of  
24 different kinds of knowledge and ability. The questions that stem from such knowledge,  
25 and understanding of why those particular questions were asked, are seen to be as  
26 valuable to collective learning as the answers provided. Learning in the PALAR sense  
27 derives from *coaching* and asking 'fresh questions' (Revans 1991), and not from direct  
28 instruction or provision of what are presented as definitive answers. Coaching implies  
29 that everyone has potential to learn and act to contribute to knowledge creation and  
30 learning; they just need help in unearthing such potential. As R4 testified: 'It was at the  
31 conference that I truly realised the value of the coaching that we received before the  
32 conference. The calibre of support was highlighted by the central role our facilitators  
33 played in the conference.' This participant also learnt 'not to be intimidated by academic  
34 talk' and said the group critique enabled him to be more open and to listen to the input  
35 of others. Other participants (R6, R3, R9 and R10) voiced similar learning.  
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41 Postgraduate students in South Africa face many challenges, some similar to students in  
42 the rest of the world and some related to the persisting destructive legacy of Apartheid  
43 under-education (Pupwe 2015). The Christian Nationalist education curriculum of the  
44 Apartheid era actively discouraged critical thinking. It was based on a rigid racial ideology  
45 that through inferior education opportunities disadvantaged Black students – and, by  
46 implication, the communities in which they lived (Bozalek and Boughey 2012). This  
47 curriculum still has lasting negative impact on perceptions of students' ability – by  
48 students themselves, and within the Higher Education system in general. As one  
49 participant in our program indicated:  
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53 When we arrived at the conference centre I felt a bit nervous because I did not  
54 know what was actually expected of me. What made my condition worse was  
55 when I saw that the conference was dominated by Whites because when we  
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grew up we were told that “*lekgowa ke sehlare sa Mosotho*” figuratively meaning that “White people know everything” (R10).

Many postgraduate students have to study in a second or even third language, as was the case with members of this group. They are often mature students who are not familiar with current qualitative research approaches, and in many cases their undergraduate or Masters degree was not sufficiently rigorous to prepare them for postgraduate study (Cloete, Mouton and Sheppard 2015).

However, the pre-conference preparation seemed to help debunk such myths and to help students recognise the intrinsic value of their own input. In using PALAR principles, the pre-conference sessions helped to ‘set the tone for the conference’ (R4), and enabled participants to embrace learning at the conference and to enter the space prepared to share: ‘As an academic I felt valued and I could share my learning in this space’ (R3).

After the conference, critical reflection on their role and learning during the conference enabled them to deepen their knowledge about themselves as researchers, how to network, and how to make the best of academic learning experiences.

What I did learn about my own research and that of my colleagues in the NRF project is that if we thought we had problems, we should see what some others had experienced. I really felt for them as they presented. When I reflect on how I had empathy for them it was reaffirming my own ontology of caring that I have for the voiceless, suffering fellow colleagues. I will always stand with and for the marginalised, oppressed, the down trodden as that is my position from the time of engaging in liberation theology. When I heard of the plight across the world of those who suffer, I can be so glad that we have a methodology that can bring about healing and contribute to a more just world (R6).

Being an action researcher is an internal and ongoing process and I must never underestimate the power of learning experiences (R3).

Participant 4 said he went from thinking ‘I am a novice researcher ... and I will never be good’ to ‘I will learn more, I will get better, I just have to never stop trying’ (R4). They also learnt how to deal with tension in the group, how to be humble and not expect everything to be 100% (R1); that they should be more process-oriented and recognise the journey to be more important than the destination (R10); to view their work as valuable (R7); and to take control of their research journey, rather than feel a victim of circumstances (R5).

These reflections reveal that workshop participants’ learning went deeper than just presenting a paper confidently at this conference. Participants learnt that they have the ability to stand their ground within an academic environment and have the freedom to control their own research trajectories. This understanding of freedom is a fundamental concept in the capability approach (Orton 2011) and it develops when people recognise they can make choices to remove social and structural barriers to goal attainment

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3 (Burchardt 2004). Participants in this study – all of them postgraduate students – were  
4 able to overcome feelings of academic inferiority because the pre-conference workshops  
5 and the PALAR experience in supervision had offered them the support they needed to  
6 feel competent, not only at a technical level, but also as emerging academic researchers:  
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10       Networking during the conference will help me to gain new knowledge from other  
11       scholars that will contribute to my study (R11).

12  
13       I can feel proud about my own knowledge I have and how I am applying it.  
14       *Competency* only improves when we *commit* to practise the work and not be afraid  
15       to make mistakes (R4).  
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18 The development is perhaps best summed up by the gradual increase in confidence of  
19 the participant (R10) quoted above who came to the workshop thinking her knowledge  
20 was inferior to that of ‘White people’, as indicated by some excerpts from her reflections  
21 on the conference:  
22

23       [the book launch] was the most inspiring moment hence I even gate crashed to  
24       take photos with ALARA members. I began to visualise myself launching my own  
25       book one day, with so many people from different countries across the globe. I did  
26       not sleep that night, cracking my head about the title for my first article ...  
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28

29       During the plenary session I was fascinated by the reflections made by ALARA  
30       members. I began to realise that this journey needs passion and commitment to  
31       one’s work. During the discussions, I wanted to talk but still feeling inferior, so I  
32       thought people would devalue my contribution ...  
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34

35       During the reflection session, I was happy and motivated hence I also stood up  
36       during the Skype connection and spoke my mind.  
37

38  
39 Participants thus seemed to develop as participatory action learners and action  
40 researchers as they felt more *competent*, were better able to *critically reflect*, and to  
41 *communicate* with and learn from others. They were able to *compromise* their  
42 expectations and be open to *coaching*, as well as begin to coach and support others.  
43

#### 44 **Critical reflection on our own learning**

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46 Critical reflection on the participants’ data discussed above has highlighted some  
47 important lessons that we can use to improve our practice as supervisors and coaches of  
48 postgraduate students. We realise that working in a collaborative team with a mix of  
49 personalities and expertise enabled us to give individual attention to students on specific  
50 areas. Students also had more choice of who to go to for coaching, enabling them to  
51 approach the person they felt they would most like to learn from. Individual coaching was  
52 highly valued by all participants, particularly those who perceived themselves as being  
53 less competent, therefore in future we will ensure that we build in more time for this  
54 coaching. We intended to do this during the conference, but both we and the students  
55 became so involved in other activities that our ‘coaching’ intentions did not materialise.  
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3 Reflecting on the post-conference data, we learn that it is important to schedule the  
4 post-conference workshop as soon after the conference as possible – even the next day.  
5 For logistical reasons, we could not arrange this second workshop for two months, and  
6 then only about half of the students could attend. In our case, this was not such a disaster  
7 since the lead author has an ongoing supervisory relationship with each student and  
8 could follow up in “normal” group supervision sessions to support the students in writing  
9 up their conference papers for possible publication. However, those who did not  
10 participate post-conference missed out on the varied input as explained above. Another  
11 advantage of adding a day to the main conference for a post-conference workshop would  
12 have been to give we three authors the opportunity for face-to-face discussion, critical  
13 reflection and meta-reflection, which are always more effective and deeper in person  
14 than by email correspondence later.  
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### 19 **Conclusion**

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21 In this article, our aim has been to share how to foster the development of capability in  
22 postgraduate students through structured support, to prepare for and reflect on the  
23 experience of attending a learning conference. We wanted to provide evidence of how a  
24 PALAR approach to supervision, which has a broader and more holistic focus on learning  
25 and development than traditional degree-oriented methods, can help postgraduate  
26 students to develop capabilities that will enhance their daily lives on both professional  
27 and personal levels. We presented evidence that suggested participants in the pre- and  
28 post-conference workshops we facilitated for our support program had replaced their  
29 feelings of inferiority, intimidation and incompetence with perceptions of their value as  
30 people and as researchers who have something worthwhile to contribute, and can so do  
31 competently. Of course, this transformation did not come about only as a result of this  
32 one support program. The PALAR supervision group had evolved over a period of almost  
33 three years for most of the students, and this program was thus a culmination of their  
34 learning and development. However, the structured pre- and post-conference workshops  
35 did support them to make this learning public, to move with confidence out of the safe  
36 space of the PALAR group into an international research arena. The collaboration and  
37 support from their peers during the conference enabled them to cement their improved  
38 self-perceptions, which in turn enabled them to be open to more learning.  
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45 We have explained how action learning as an intricate component of postgraduate  
46 supervision can help even the most timid and self-denigrating students to rethink  
47 themselves as competent and confident researchers. This gives us in turn the boldness to  
48 suggest that a PALAR approach to postgraduate learning and development can better  
49 prepare professionals who have not only the skills and know-how to do their jobs, but  
50 also the capabilities to make decisions that will enhance not only their own lives, but also  
51 the lives of those within their spheres of influence. We end with an excerpt from the  
52 post-conference reflections of a workshop participant who had previously expressed  
53 feelings of inferiority due to her race:  
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3 I am so glad we have the contacts of all people who attended the conference  
4 because where I hit the rock, I will communicate with the relevant people. I want  
5 to thank my promoter for allowing me to explore my potential in a World  
6 Congress because through it I have developed faith and self-confidence and I  
7 don't even perceive myself as a novice researcher anymore. I feel like I have a lot  
8 of experience to share with people (R10).  
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11 For us, this level of transformation deepens our conviction that (1) action learning has  
12 to be at the heart of all learning and development; (2) group postgraduate supervision  
13 using PALAR fosters relationship-building, trust, a supportive environment,  
14 collaboration, communication and so forth (see Table 1); and (3) conferences can be  
15 made into learning conferences through a support program consisting of pre- and  
16 post-conference workshops using PALAR principles, as demonstrated in this article, to  
17 make them a space for maximising postgraduate learning and development.  
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27

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31 language tuition.  
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<sup>i</sup> setSwana is one of the 11 official languages of South Africa and is spoken by approximately 3.6 million  
18 people in South Africa.  
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The 7 Cs of PALAR for character building	Characteristics and principles of PALAR
Communication	<i>Communication is dialogical, symmetrical and respectful rather than directive and one-sided</i>
Commitment	<i>Commitment to the process achieves the negotiated programme outcomes as well as participants' own learning and development goals and contributes to the learning and development of others in the group</i>
Competence	<i>Competence is gained for self-directed learning through recognition of learning needs and setting of own personal learning goals</i>
Compromise	<i>Participants must be flexible and able to compromise personal standpoints in order to enable progress towards negotiated mutual outcomes</i>
Critical reflection	<i>On-going critical reflection must be facilitated at all stages of the process with self-reflection being the starting point</i>
Collaboration	<i>Collaboration means active participation by all in a democratic decision-making process throughout</i>
Coaching	<i>Learning is shared, not only between facilitators and participants, but also among participants as all give freely of their insights and experience for the benefit of others</i>
<b>3 Rs</b>	<b>The above characteristics of PALAR are operationalized as follows:</b>
Reflection	<i>Reflection must be continual, iterative, critical and self-critical in a collaborative, supportive learning environment</i>
Relationship	<i>Development of democratic, authentic, supportive and committed relationships leads to participants' ability to communicate in a respectful way and to reach compromise when needed</i>
Recognition	<i>Recognition and reward encourage growth and development of participants' increasing competence as researchers, practitioners, professionals and human beings</i>

Table 1: The 7Cs and 3Rs of PALAR

Table 2: Activities and aims of pre- and post-conference workshops

Day 1 – Pre-conference (two days)	
Item on programme	Learning objective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductions</li> <li>• Participants' expectations and needs</li> <li>• <b>Relationship building</b></li> </ul>	<p>To list all the expectations in order to adapt the proposed programme as needed.</p> <p>To create trust for effective collaboration and communication</p>
<p><b>Action writing and editing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Useful tips for clear, coherent academic writing</li> <li>• Useful tips on academic editing (of own and others' work)</li> </ul>	To sensitize participants about appropriate styles and tone of academic writing.
<p><b>Academic writing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frameworks for presenting oral/written papers</li> <li>• Difference between research and writing</li> <li>• Quality criteria</li> <li>• The quality of an action research thesis/article</li> <li>• Structured abstract</li> </ul>	<p>To teach concise writing and getting to the essence of the matter.</p> <p>To emphasise what makes a quality (AR) thesis</p> <p>To structure an abstract.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and discussion of the <b>Learning Conference</b> article to illustrate the PIP process</li> </ul>	<p>To explain a new publication genre</p> <p>To prepare participants for making the most of the 'learning conference'</p>
<p><b>Academic publishing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choosing publisher/journal</li> <li>• Becoming familiar with the journal's approach, language, style, etc.</li> <li>• Getting feedback from 'critical friends'</li> <li>• Following guidelines for authors</li> </ul>	<p>To allow participants to practise critical reflection and to share it with others</p> <p>To create space for cooperative learning</p> <p>To understand journal requirements</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflection Diary structure</li> <li>• Reflections (individual and as a group), discussion and planning tomorrow's agenda</li> </ul>	To teach participants how to keep a reflective diary that they can revisit and use as one source of data amongst others
Day 2 – Preconference	
<p><b>Reflections</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual and group reflections on Day 1, following the structure of the Reflection Diary</li> <li>• Any new issues?</li> </ul>	To "debrief" participants and provide opportunity to add items to the programme in a non-threatening environment.
<p><b>Discussion of participants' submitted abstracts and</b></p>	To polish participants' presentations

powerPoint presentations	
Item on programme	Learning objective
<p><b>Coaching</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion of participants' needs/queries as they rotate across the three facilitators: (academic perspective), (language, writing, editing perspective) and (specific South African context for publishing in higher education, rules, regulations, suggestions and oral presentations).</li> </ul>	<p>To give participants an individual opportunity to voice their fears and insecurities and to ask any questions they might have</p> <p>To share our expertise, experience and advice as critical friends</p>
Post conference (one day)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Catching up and sharing the three 'Most Important Points' (MIPs) from the conference experience in terms of learning outcomes</li> <li>• Participants' expectations and needs</li> </ul>	<p>To re-align the group after a two month absence.</p> <p>To allow them an opportunity to voice their needs.</p>
<p><b>From first to final draft</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difference between first and final drafts</li> <li>• Explaining the technical "must-haves" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Logical flow</li> <li>• Typical errors</li> <li>• Critical reader</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Writing the main message to the reader in 25 words</li> <li>• Mind mapping</li> </ul>	To practice the skills of focusing on essential contents and arguments before writing full drafts and considering details, language and style
<p><b>Writing an integrated literature review</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to organise notes from reading</li> <li>• A ten step plan to write a literature review</li> <li>• The use of a bibliographic data base, e.g. Endnote</li> </ul>	To assist them to take relevant notes from sources; to organise the notes in a system and coherent argument; to use logical connectors to structure the literature review.
<p><b>Coaching</b></p>	To offer them the opportunity to learn from and with each other.
<p><b>Editing own work for integrity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing an editing matrix to ensure consistency across chapters</li> </ul>	To emphasise the importance of editing, explaining terminology and creating a structure.
<p><b>Reflection on the coaching of the workshop</b></p> <p>Sharing our learning from the coaching (common mistakes, specific issues, huge improvements)</p>	To build their confidence that we all make mistakes, but we should work on improving our work.
<p><b>Evaluation and closure</b></p> <p>Reflection on learning and process</p>	To encourage them to reflect deeply about all aspects of the learning journey and to continue to do so

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