Social gerontology training in South Africa: 
A co-constructed learning environment

Magdel Fivaz  
School for Psychosocial Behavioural Sciences  
North-West University  
Potchefstroom  
South Africa

Alida G. Herbst  
School for Psychosocial Behavioural Sciences  
North-West University  
Potchefstroom  
South Africa

Vera Roos  
School for Psychosocial Behavioural Sciences  
North-West University  
Potchefstroom  
South Africa  
Vera.Roos@nwu.ac.za

Jaco Hoffman  
North-West University, South Africa and Oxford Institute of Population Ageing  
University of Oxford  
United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Few social gerontology training opportunities exist for policy makers and practitioners in South Africa. This article describes the facilitation of a co-constructed learning environment for participants in the focus area of social gerontology by applying principles of participatory action research (PAR) and processes of learning according to the Ripples on a Pond (ROP) model. PAR is based on continuous processes related to interaction, action, interpretation, critical reflection, feedback and evaluation. ROP comprises five interrelated processes that facilitate learning: wanting to learn, needing to learn, learning by doing, feedback, and digesting the information in order to make sense thereof. An informal training programme was implemented and presented by the North-West University in collaboration with the UN International Institute of Ageing (INIA). The participants’ reflections on
the training programme, formal evaluations after the training programme, voluntary and requested feedback, and a group assignment were used as data and thematically analysed. The findings suggest that PAR and ROP provided a basis for developing and implementing a training programme for adult learners in social gerontology where the knowledge that was obtained during the training programme was implemented in practice and retained after a period of time has elapsed.

**Keywords:** caregivers; co-constructed learning environment; older people; ripples on a pond; social gerontology; training programmes

Even though the populations of African countries are considered the youngest in the world, they too are rapidly growing older (Aboderin, 2006). While the proportion of people aged 60 years and older in these countries will remain lower than in other parts of the world (the proportion will rise from 5.4% at present to 10.6% by 2050), the absolute number of older persons will rise fourfold, from 55.4 million to 212.8 million over the same period. This numerical increase will be more rapid than that for any other major region or age group (United Nations, 2007).

The phenomenon of population ageing is also characteristic of the situation in South Africa. The current absolute number of older people in South Africa is estimated at 3.3 million, which is 7.7% of the total population (Statistics South Africa, 2009). It is anticipated that the number of older people will reach 4.24 million by 2015 and 5.23 million by 2025, which will approximate to 10.5% of the estimated total South African population at that stage (Department of Health, 2010; Joubert & Bradshaw, 2006).

A critical prerequisite for devising effective policy responses to ensure the wellbeing of present and future cohorts of older people in Africa, as emphasised by the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA, 2002, 2008) and the African Union Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing (AU Plan (African Union, 2002), is to develop capacity to deal with the ageing population by governments, academia, civil society and relevant professions. To this end, the MIPAA (2002) calls expressly for efforts to support the promotion of “organizations that specifically promote training and capacity-building on ageing in developing countries” (para.119).

The specific need for such efforts in Africa is underscored by the poor progress in the realisation of effective, multifaceted policies on ageing in African countries and the clear demand for capacity building on ageing among key stakeholder groups. Although the South African government signed the Madrid International Plan of Action in 2002 and promulgated an Older Persons Act in June 2006, the fact that the South African Plan of Action is still in draft format points to a lack of coordinated training opportunities for practitioners and policy makers involved in programmes and interventions for older people (Department of Health, 2010).
The problem is exacerbated by the fact that educational opportunities are often offered only to registered students and that such opportunities form part of formal curricula and are inaccessible to non-students (Aboderin, 2005; Apt, 2005; Gachuhi & Kiemo, 2005). An informal training programme that recognises people’s potential as well as their contributions in the field of ageing was devised and implemented in December 2008 for caregivers policy makers and practitioners involved with matters concerning older people. The training programme (“An introduction to social gerontology in South Africa”) was advertised at all institutions linked to the elderly and jointly presented by the North-West University and the United Nations (UN) International Institute on Ageing (INIA). The NWU has an established research interest in older people and was approached by the INIA to present the training in South Africa. The training took place at the South African Human Rights Commission building in Johannesburg.

GOAL OF THE STUDY

This article reflects on the formative and evaluative outcomes of the training programme. The learning environment in which the training programme was presented was constructed by applying the principles of the ROP model as an enabling process for adult learning. “Ripples on a pond” is a metaphor referring to multi-directional learning processes that facilitate learning in adult learners (Race, 2001a, 2001b). Participatory action research (PAR) is used to describe the ROP model. The article also reports on the participants who took part in the training, the content of the training and the facilitation of a co-constructed learning environment – conducted over a 6 day period. The article concludes with a critical examination of the value of the ROP model in adult learning.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROGRAMME CONTENT

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus; ethical principles were applied to the data gathering process. The participants voluntarily registered for the training programme – written permission for their inclusion in the research was obtained from the individual participants by means of signed informed consent forms. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that the data would be treated with confidentiality and that they could withdraw from the research at any time without being penalised in any way.

The participants in the training programme included the nine presenters of the different discussion topics in the programme from the ranks of academia, private practitioners and senior government officials. Fifty-two professionals including social workers and non-governmental organisation representatives, who shared an
interest in and concern about the well-being and quality of life of older people, registered for the training programme. The participants consisted of 20 men and 41 women from diverse professional, ethnic and language backgrounds (see tables 1 and 2) and were involved with older people from different cultures and socioeconomic groups in different institutions and community settings.

**Table 1.** Background information on the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private practitioners</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior government officials</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social workers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-governmental organisation representatives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.** Cultural representation of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural representation</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>61</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), collaboration between different disciplines contributes to the credibility of findings since it provides a diversity of approaches to the topics under discussion. Three facilitators facilitated the training programme. They were responsible for the logistical arrangements and guided the learning during the training programme according to ROP principles.

The programme was presented from 8 to 13 December 2008 and included morning and afternoon sessions, which meant a prolonged engagement with the research context and increased credibility of the findings as the participants became better acquainted with the presenters, while the researchers became more familiar with the research context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The programme content was broadly based on national and international academic and policy discourses and was designed to encourage engagement between the training programme participants (the presenters as well as attendees). The topics included the demographics of global population ageing, the demographic and socioeconomic implications of ageing for South Africa, policy frameworks
on ageing such as the Madrid Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), the African Union Policy Framework and Plan of Action on Ageing (AU Plan) and the recently promulgated Older Persons Act of 2006, poverty in old age, older people and HIV/AIDS, care management for and by older people, and development, programming, implementation and evaluation of programmes related to matters concerning older people.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND EDUCATIONAL MODEL

The ROP model was used to facilitate the learning process during the programme, and the PAR method was subsequently employed to describe the research process. Five overlapping ROP processes were used to facilitate learning in the participants: (1) wanting to learn; (2) taking ownership of the need to learn; (3) learning through doing; (4) receiving and giving feedback, and (5) digesting the information to make sense of it and to apply it in different contexts (Race, 2010). These processes are not viewed as linear or pre-programmed stages of learning but rather as overlapping processes that metaphorically spread ripples to facilitate learning. For example, when learners receive feedback, “the feedback helps them to make sense of their own learning by doing. The feedback helps them to digest the information they have been processing, and turn it into a start towards building their own knowledge from it. The feedback also clarifies the purpose of the information” (Race, 2010, p. 23). The ROP processes underpin effective learning, and individual learning styles are the manner in which individuals best respond to the different processes (Race, 2010).

RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA COLLECTION

PAR recognises the active involvement of participants who act and possess knowledge as equals (Strydom, 2011). In PAR, the boundaries between the participants as a learning community and the research processes merge because “research about and solutions to problems occur simultaneously” (Strydom, 2011, p. 491). In the present research, the responsibility for generating and collating knowledge lay with the participants. In line with PAR, the participants were regarded as equal partners in the learning process, and their own experience was considered central to the learning process (Scheidt & Windley, 2006; Strydom, 2011; Zuber-Skeritt, 2002). The active involvement of the participants and recognition of their contribution were encouraged throughout the training programme (Schurink, 1998; Strydom, 2011). For example, in the first session of the programme entitled “Setting the scene”, the participants were introduced to one another, and specific questions were asked about what each participant could contribute to the learning process.
In PAR, the individual is regarded as an active rather than a passive participant in the process of learning (Strydom, 2011; Zuber-Skeritt, 2002). This implies that, in the present research, the participants drew on their own experiences and knowledge to discover and remember new truths more effectively. Small group interactions helped to facilitate a co-constructed learning environment. The discovery of new knowledge emanated largely from the participants’ interactions with one another (Learning Theories Knowledgebase, 2010a, 2010b). According to PAR, learning takes place in four sequential stages: learning (planning), action, research (observation) and reflection (Scheidt & Windley, 2006; Zuber-Skeritt, 2002) (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1. A visual representation of the integrated PAR and ROP processes](image)

Various kinds of data were collected in different ways throughout the training programme thus contributing to the trustworthiness of the findings through the use of different data resources as described by Ellingson (2009). First – every morning the participants had to reflect on the previous day’s session and answer three questions. The repetitive nature of questions enhances the credibility of findings, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985).

1. What did you learn?
2. How can you apply the knowledge that you have learned to the group assignment?
3. Do you have any questions about the content you were exposed to?
Second – the participants were handed formal evaluations to fill in at the end of the programme. They had to rate each day’s session on a 5-point scale from Excellent to Poor with ‘Good’ and ‘Fair’ in between. The topics specifically contextualised the area of social gerontology and triggered the participants’ interest, which was apparent in their group discussions.

There was also an open-ended section where the participants could comment on the day’s sessions. The open-ended questions included the following:

1. What aspect of the workshop did you find most useful, and why?
2. Which aspects of the workshop could be improved, and how?
3. Which topics were of most interest to you?
4. Which topics were not covered that you would have found helpful?
5. We welcome any additional comments you may have on our speakers, facilitators, workshop materials and any other aspects of the training programme.

Third – as part of the requirements of the programme, the participants had to develop Intervention Initiatives (‘In Ins’) in which their existing knowledge and expertise and newly acquired knowledge were translated into specific action plans. The ‘In In’ assignment was aimed at assisting the participants to organise information throughout the training programme so that they could apply the information in practice. The ‘In Ins’ prompted the involvement of the participants in all of the ROP processes as described by Race (2001a). The following instructions were given to the participants.

You will be exposed to a lot of information from diverse perspectives on older people, and you will have to take note of different policies and frameworks. This assignment aims to assist you to organise the information so that you can apply it practically. It is therefore suggested that you use the following questions to organise the information throughout the different presentations.

1. What did I learn from the presentation that I did not know before?
2. How will this information assist me in my work with older people?
3. What practical applications could be made on the basis of the information?

At the end of the training, you will be required to use all the knowledge that you have gained from the presentations to do, in a group, the following:

Give an example of a specific project in which you illustrate that you have incorporated all the relevant information from the presentations. Your project should include action plans for its planning, implementation and evaluation of an appropriate programme for older people. You have to be specific in your presentation. The following guidelines are suggested.

1. Name of the project
2. Aims of the project
3. Information obtained from the workshop that is included in the planning of the project
a. Refer to specific presentations and illustrate their relevance to the project
b. Indicate what other information is needed for the project that was not discussed at the workshop
c. Indicate methods to access the information and from whom it could be obtained

4. Action plans to implement the project:
   a. Who?
   b. Where?
   c. When?
   d. How?

5. Evaluation of the project
   a. Measures to evaluate the impact of the project.

The assignment was developed in such a way that it promoted interaction among the group members. The aim was to create awareness of the context and the problems by asking questions such as: Who should carry out the intervention and on behalf of whom? What outcomes could be envisaged? How should the intervention be implemented, monitored, and evaluated?

Fourth – three months after the programme, a participant voluntarily mentioned in a letter certain issues related to the training. This letter will constitute part of the thematic content analysis of the study.

Lastly – a year after the training, a participant was asked to give formal feedback on how she and her colleague were using the knowledge they had obtained from the programme. The purpose of the request was to gain insight into the participant’s experience of the programme and included the following open-ended question.

*In retrospect, can you describe your experiences and the processes of the training on social gerontology that you underwent in 2008? Which processes were enabling and which were inhibiting? Please support your statements with examples.*

The open-ended format of the question allowed the particular participant to mention any aspect of the programme. Such feedback, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), constitutes member checking and decreases the possibility of misinterpreting the data.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The data from the research were analysed thematically using the methodology suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis entails the identification of patterns and themes and selecting those that are applicable to the particular research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; De Vos, 2002). The texts were read repeatedly by all the
authors, and themes were identified and grouped according to theme types. The data were reflected on critically and the implications for practice indicated.

INTEGRATED CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The planning of the learning environment was based on the assumption that the participants had limited prior knowledge of some aspects of social gerontology, which is illustrated by the response of one of the participants: “Having worked in the field of providing services to older people for ten years, [I] was interested in gaining an understanding of macro-issues surrounding the provision of services to older people”. However, despite the limited knowledge of the participants, a learning environment was co-constructed by presenting a training programme that inspired the participants’ enthusiasm for learning (wanting), which was demonstrated in the descriptions of the participants regarding the content included in the programme. The participants said that the content was “encouraging”, an “eye-opener” and “fascinating”. One said: “This programme served to inspire me”. The words used to describe each day are listed in Table 3 and reflect the participants’ evaluation of the training programme in terms of their desire (need) to learn:

The completion of the assignment resulted in “an enthusiastic engagement of the whole group throughout the training”.

Table 3. Participant reflections revealing the need to learn throughout the programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 1</th>
<th>Day 2</th>
<th>Day 3</th>
<th>Day 4</th>
<th>Day 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>Encouraging</td>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>Applicable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable</td>
<td>Thought provoking</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Sinvol [Meaningful]</td>
<td>Enlightened</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
<td>Informative</td>
<td>Clarifying</td>
<td>Fascinating</td>
<td>Stimulating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enlightening</td>
<td>Inspiring</td>
<td>Informative</td>
<td>Exciting</td>
<td>Inspirational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>Practical</td>
<td>Insightful</td>
<td>Prakties [Practical]</td>
<td>Realistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful</td>
<td>Stimulating</td>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>Insightful</td>
<td>Practical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learning strategies were applied to facilitate an enabling learning environment where the participants were involved in small groups as active contributors, and critical questions were asked to focus the participants’ attention on the content.

In the learning environment, the participants also demonstrated how they took ownership of the learning process (Race, 2010; Strydom, 2011). This was facilitated by the active involvement of the participants in group work which promoted collaboration and the sharing of knowledge. Learning in small groups is a well-known learning strategy (Race, 2010). According to two participants:
SOCIAL GERONTOLOGY TRAINING IN SOUTH AFRICA: A CO-CONSTRUCTED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

I really enjoyed the group I worked with – we did not really know each other, but we worked well together and shared our experiences.

Breaking the participants into the groups and providing them with the opportunity to engage in discussions while working on the group assignment enabled the content that was presented to be consolidated in the minds of the participants.

The group discussions and group assignments thus contributed to the participants’ awareness of the content that they had to “get their heads around” (Race, 2010, p. 22).

The participants were regarded as contributors to knowledge and not just as recipients of knowledge. They were actively involved in the co-construction of the learning environment, as indicated by one of the participants:

Another helpful approach was the manner in which the participants were engaged in discussions. The participants were not just viewed as recipients of information but were also valued in terms of the experiences that they brought to the discussion.

Learning was facilitated by the continuous processes of verbal and written reflection (feedback), by asking critical questions and by focusing the attention of the participants. The focused attention of the participants on shared goals and key points promoted dialogue in the group and was considered a productive way of integrating abstract content practically. One participant said that “the final presentations of participants illustrated the value of participation in learning activities and also provided new perspectives to all of us”. The participants reported that the group presentations were informative and led to greater insight, which confirmed that interactive learning had taken place. Other comments supported this view:

The completion of the group assignment encouraged teamwork and cooperation and provided the opportunity for the participants to be creative and practical at the same time. It promoted lateral thinking and ensured that the new information that was received was applied to a practical setting in terms of a specific project.

I think it is a good way of seeing what people assimilated in the week.

Interaction between the participants and the learning material was stimulated by various learning strategies, which helped the participants interpret and eventually internalise (digest) the learning material. This resulted in the development of specific intervention initiatives or actions (doing) in their day-to-day practices:

Group presentations were informative and brought insight on different programmes that can be implemented.

[It was] applicable over a large number of different settings and even over various disciplines.

I am sure we will implement some of it in our communities.
We want to take this information to FUNDSA to recommend geriatric and gerontology nursing training to be included both in the basic training and specialised level.

The co-constructed learning environment, based on ROP principles, facilitated the learning processes of the participants. In their responses, the participants said that they wanted (1) to learn new and applicable content about social gerontology and take ownership of their need (2) to learn. Learning was facilitated experientially by applying knowledge – doing (3) – practically. In the learning environment, opportunities for feedback (4) were created, and the participants received verbal feedback in the form of questions that focused their attention on the knowledge they had obtained, which they could apply in the here and now and also in other contexts. In their feedback, the participants demonstrated that learning was constructed “through connections between inner and outer contexts of experience” (Neden & Burnham, 2007, p. 360).

The appropriateness of ROP for adult learners wanting to learn about social gerontology was demonstrated by one of the participants who said that she could recall some of the content after a year had passed:

[I am] amazed that even though it has been more than a year since the course was run, the content is still fresh in [my] mind. It is [my] opinion that this can be attributed to the approach to learning that was used. It provided an opportunity to critically apply one’s mind to the content and use the information in a constructive manner. The opportunities for reflection of the content from the day before helped to reinforce the salient issues.

A visual summary of the research process and the ROP principles is furnished in Figure 1.

CONCLUSION

By applying the learning principles of ROP, learning was facilitated for the adult learners. In terms of PAR principles, the adult learners were regarded as active participants who took ownership of their own learning. Small group work and discussions that focused attention as learning strategies facilitated an enabling learning environment for the adult learners.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Magdel Fivaz is an intern research psychologist who completed her Master’s degree in Research Psychology in 2010, with the title of her research: facilitating a co-
constructed learning environment for caregivers in social gerontology: applying the ‘Ripples on a Pond’ model”. In 2008, Magdel received the SAMRA Achievement of Excellence for Young Researcher’s award. In 2009 she joined Cell C where she is currently involved as a Research Analyst in primary and secondary research projects. She has held various leadership positions at both school and university and is registered with the HPCSA as a student in Psychology.

Alida Herbst is a senior lecturer in Social Work at the North-West University’s Potchefstroom Campus since 2005. She lectures various modules on all undergraduate levels and has a passion for social work management and medical social work. Her research interest is primarily the psycho-social health of individuals, groups and communities. She has a passion for and special skills in issues related to loss, working through trauma and bereavement counselling. She has published a number of peer reviewed papers in national and international journals and has also presented a wide variety of workshops, papers and posters at national and international conferences on topics related to the broader field of social work and social work education.

Vera Roos is a Professor of Psychology at the North-West University’s Potchefstroom Campus since 2004. To date she has published 44 peer reviewed papers in national and international journals and contributed to 18 chapters in textbooks. She has also presented various papers and posters at national and international conferences on topics related to community psychology with a focus on enabling contexts, relational wellbeing and the contributions of older persons in challenged contexts. Vera’s theoretical approach, namely that the broader social environment informs the dynamic processes in complex systems, provided the background for the development of the Mmogo-method™. This method assists social researchers to access the dynamic interactions between people in relation to their communities within a particular context in a culturally sensitive manner. The Mmogo-method™ is regarded as a visual narrative that assists people to recount experiences and to make sense of the context in which they function. Vera is committed to promoting the relational and collective wellbeing of older people and communities in relation to the contextual realities by eliciting strengths and competencies. Vera Roos is an NRF-rated scientist on level C2.
Jaco Hoffman joined the Oxford Institute of Population Ageing, University of Oxford in October 2006 where he, as Senior Research Fellow, is developing the Institute’s focus on ageing in Africa through the conduct of research and co-ordination of the African Research on Ageing Network (AFRAN). His research interests revolve around intergenerational issues in Africa in general, and in particular the configuration and reconfiguration of these relationships in the context of poverty and HIV/AIDS. The African Research on Ageing Network (AFRAN) is a United Nations endorsed programme, hosted by the Oxford Institute of Ageing. This collaborative network brings together African and international institutions and individuals from academia, policy and practice to develop and expand African research and training capacity on ageing. Among others, Jaco’s further professional responsibilities include being: Honorary lecturer at North-West University, South Africa; Associate fellow of the International Longevity Centre (ILC) Africa, University of Cape Town, South Africa; Editorial Board Member of the International Journal of Intergenerational Relationships: programs, policy, and research (Taylor & Francis); Journal of Population Ageing (Springer); Member of various Scientific Programme Committees: International Federation on Ageing (IFA); International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics and past-President of the South African Gerontological Association (SAGA).

REFERENCES


M. FIVAZ, A. G. HERBST, V. ROOS AND J. HOFFMAN
