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Designing Community Engagement: ACL and learning as outcome of co-research

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Abstract: *Community engagement* calls for reflection on the conditions that make participation meaningful and conducive to agency, moving beyond the involvement of stakeholders in expert-designed initiatives towards their active engagement in the co-production of knowledge. This paper explores the potential of *Action Community Learning* (ACL®), an ecological-systemic model integrating research, education, and intervention, developed through more than a decade of participatory research with rural communities in south-eastern Salento, Italy. Initially developed by the EspérO university spin-off and incorporated into the P.L.A.C.E. Laboratory (Participatory Local Action for Community Empowerment) in 2024, the model integrates research, education, and intervention by recognising the value of situated knowledge and engaging local actors in interpreting their contexts and defining pathways for change. Its core methodological tool is Needs Mapping (MdB), which facilitates the articulation of local systems of meaning, participatory feedback, and the intersubjective validation of interpretations, supporting their translation into co-design priorities. The analysis highlights the role of researcher reflexivity and mediation in fostering shared learning processes. ACL® thus conceptualises community engagement as a constitutive dimension of *co-research*, in which territorial agency emerges as a potential outcome and the relationship between universities and communities is grounded in reciprocity.

Keywords: community engagement; agency; co-research

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1. Introduction[1]

The growing centrality of *community engagement* in social, educational, and higher education contexts calls for a critical examination of the quality, rather than merely the intensity, of engagement. The same term encompasses a range of activities, including information provision, consultation, participation, co-design, partnership, and shared governance. The presence of citizens and organisations does not, in itself, guarantee reciprocity, the capacity to influence decisions, or learning. The scientific challenge, therefore, is to understand under what conditions engagement can move beyond an instrumental function and become a process capable of reshaping knowledge production, relationships among stakeholders, and opportunities for local initiative.

1 This article is the result of the authors' joint and collaborative work. For the purposes of attributing individual contributions, sections 1, 2, and 5 were written by Ada Manfreda; Section 3 by Eleonora Greco; and Section 4 by Riccarda Boriglione.

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To address this challenge, this paper brings *community engagement*, *agency*, and *Action Community Learning* (ACL®) into dialogue. The first defines the relational space within which institutions, researchers, and communities engage with one another around shared concerns. The second makes it possible to assess whether and how such relationships can enhance individuals' capacity to interpret their own circumstances, formulate intentions, and influence the conditions under which they act. The third provides a methodological architecture, grounded in the *co-research* framework, for integrating research, education, and intervention by connecting collaborative knowledge production, situated learning, and the experimentation of action. The central argument is that engagement can foster agency when it does not merely convene participants, but recognises them as epistemic partners and establishes the conditions for meaningful reflexivity, decision-making, and action.

This paper pursues two objectives. At the theoretical level, it seeks to identify the points of intersection among the three aforementioned key concepts, avoiding both their conflation and a merely additive interpretation. At the methodological level, it examines the mechanisms through which ACL can translate the relational quality of engagement into conditions conducive to agency. Particular attention is given to specific stages of the process: Needs Mapping, feedback and restitution, co-design, and the use of performative languages. The long-standing experience of the School of Performing Arts and Community Care serves as a field for observation, experimentation, and critical inquiry.

2. Materials and Methods

he analysis brought the scientific literature into dialogue with materials from our research, focusing on the conceptual areas and methodological tools relevant to the study in order to examine: definitions and configurations of *community engagement*; relational and situated conceptions of *agency*; and the principles, tools, and experiences of *Action Community Learning*[2]. The conceptual recombination proceeded through four steps: identifying the definitions, dimensions, operational conditions, and critical issues associated with each construct; conducting a cross-cutting comparison, with particular attention to relationships, context, power, knowledge, reflexivity, learning, and capacity for action; identifying the connections between community engagement as a form and quality of relationship, agency as a transformative possibility and evaluative criterion, and ACL as a recursive framework for research, education, and intervention; and comparing the identified connections with the processes and outputs of the territorial experience under consideration.

The procedure was not intended to produce a systematic review or measure effects. Rather, it sought to develop an argued theoretical synthesis aimed at constructing a model that connects categories originating from different traditions. The validity of the proposed framework rests on the coherence of the relationships formulated, their traceability within the research materials, and the model's heuristic capacity to make practices and tensions intelligible. Field research experiences are

[2] Among the contexts in which our P.L.A.C.E. research group experiments with and develops the ACL model is the School of Performing Arts and Community Care (https://artiperformative.com/), a long-standing initiative which has been active in small rural communities in south-eastern Salento since 2012. For further reading: S. Colazzo-A. Manfreda, *Le arti performative come leva per l'innovazione sociale*, in press.

therefore used as generative cases: they help clarify the conditions under which the constructs interact while also highlighting the limits of any assumption that participation automatically leads to transformation.

ACL was analysed as an ecological-systemic model articulated through the recursive relationship between research, education, and intervention. Research reconstructs meanings, needs, resources, and constraints; education supports the individual and collective elaboration of the knowledge produced; intervention translates interpretations and priorities into practices to be tested. The effects of action become new research materials and reopen the educational process. This recursive dynamic constitutes the main methodological lens used to examine how engagement can create conditions conducive to agency without presupposing it as a necessary outcome.

3. Defining the theoretical and methodological framework

Community engagement is a construct that is difficult to delimit, having developed and been articulated across different disciplinary fields and often overlapping with related concepts such as community development, community participation, collaboration, and empowerment (O'Mara-Eves et al., 2013; Brunton et al., 2017). An important reference point in its conceptualisation is the document *Principles of Community Engagement*, which brings together different theoretical and practical traditions previously developed around the construct within a unified framework. It defines community engagement as a "process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people" (CDC/ATSDR Committee on Community Engagement, 1997, p. 4). This definition highlights the need for engagement processes to recognise communities in accordance with how they identify themselves and define their own needs and the issues they consider relevant. This formulation is particularly significant because it outlines several key elements that recur in subsequent conceptualisations: the processual nature of engagement, its collective dimension, the existence of an issue of common concern, and the collaborative nature of a relationship oriented towards action. Along similar lines, O'Mara-Eves et al. (2013) propose an operational definition of community engagement as the direct or indirect involvement of communities in decisions, planning, design, governance, and the implementation of interventions and services. This definition is sufficiently broad to encompass forms characterised by limited involvement, such as information provision and consultation, as well as more participatory forms (O'Mara-Eves et al., 2013). Participation, therefore, represents one possible configuration of community engagement, whose forms vary according to the relationships between communities and other actors.

This heterogeneity reflects the different purposes attributed to community engagement. Brunton et al. (2017) identify two meta-narratives: a utilitarian one, in which community involvement primarily serves to enhance the effectiveness and acceptability of interventions; and one oriented towards social justice and empowerment, which values communities' capacity to identify problems and priorities, mobilise resources, participate in decision-making, and acquire greater capacity to influence the conditions affecting them. According to the authors, these two perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive and may coexist in practice.

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Their distinction is useful for understanding how the same term can refer to processes that differ in their political and relational implications, particularly in terms of how power is distributed and how knowledge circulates, as highlighted by the *Ecology of Engagement* model proposed by Boivin et al. (2022).

In light of the debate outlined above, we understand community engagement as a relational, situated, and dynamic process through which communities, organisations, and institutions engage with one another around issues and needs recognised as relevant by the community itself. Its quality depends on the conditions of reciprocity, trust, recognition, and power distribution within which it takes place. It is at this level that the construct of community engagement intersects more directly with that of *agency*. Agency is not regarded as an automatic outcome of engagement; rather, it can be fostered when the community engagement process enables individuals to influence the construction of meanings, decision-making, and opportunities for action. This shift from mere presence to the capacity to exert influence may distinguish predominantly formal involvement from engagement with transformative potential. It also inevitably raises questions about initiatives whose conception and direction remain in the hands of the "technical expert".

Agency is a polysemic construct that has developed at the intersection of different theoretical and disciplinary traditions (Fabbri, 2025). Here, it is understood as the capacity of individuals and collectives to act intentionally, consciously, and responsibly within their living environments, interacting with the conditions and constraints of their contexts and being able to influence them (Battaglini, 2022; Colazzo, 2024). This definition is consistent with Fabbri's (2025) account, which emphasises the dynamic, relational, and situated nature of the construct. It moves beyond an individualistic conception of action by recognising the relationship between individuals' capacity to act and the social, cultural, and material conditions that enable or constrain its exercise. Giddens's sociological perspective (1984/2024) considers agency in relation to actors' capacity to intervene intentionally in the course of events, within social structures that simultaneously constitute conditions for and constraints on action. Archer (2000) further explores this relationship by examining the role of reflexivity and the processes through which individuals negotiate their relationship with the social world. Sociocultural perspectives, moreover, emphasise the mediated nature of action: practices, relationships, artefacts, and systems of meaning all contribute to shaping the possibilities for intervening in reality. Agency thus takes shape through the relationship between individuals and their environments, by means of processes of interpretation, negotiation, and transformation.

An important reference for our conceptualisation is the *Capability Approach* (Sen, 2000/2020; Nussbaum, 2014), which makes it possible to distinguish between the formal availability of an opportunity and the actual possibility of exercising it. As Morselli and Ellerani (2020) point out, agency is closely connected to capabilities, understood as combinations of individual potential and contextual opportunities that make a particular course of action practically feasible. The contextual dimension intersects with the relational one: the concept of *inter-agency* (Crivelli & Balconi, 2017) recognises that action can emerge through relationships with others and produce reciprocal effects between individuals and their environments. Agency can therefore take a *co-agentic* form, in which the capacity to influence reality cannot necessarily be attributed to a single individual but may emerge from joint action and

from the recognition of one's own contribution to the production of a shared outcome. Individual and collective agency constitute interconnected dimensions of agentic experience (Faggioli, 2021). Agency thus has a processual nature: it is exercised through the relationship between intentionality, reflexivity, resources, and contextual opportunities, and can change through experience and the relationships in which individuals are involved. From a pedagogical perspective, particular importance is attached to the contextual conditions that enable individuals to interpret their own situations, recognise constraints and opportunities, formulate aspirations and plans, and experiment with possibilities for intervention. The focus therefore shifts from the individual capacity to act alone towards the construction of environments in which awareness, reflexivity, initiative, relationships, and the capacity to influence reality can develop. We therefore understand agency as the situated, intentional, reflexive, and relational capacity to direct one's own actions and influence contextual conditions through a dynamic negotiation of constraints, resources, and opportunities. This capacity can manifest itself at the individual, inter-agentic, and collective levels and depends on the conditions that make action genuinely exercisable. This definition allows us to consider agency not as a fixed characteristic that individuals possess once and for all, but as a possibility that can be supported and expanded through specific experiences, relationships, and contextual conditions. If agency also depends on the conditions under which individuals can exercise their capacity to act, it becomes necessary to examine the mechanisms through which these conditions are constructed.

Particular importance is therefore attached to practices that enable individuals to generate knowledge about their own reality, participate in its interpretation, compare perspectives, identify resources and critical issues, formulate possibilities, and experiment with concrete forms of initiative. In this regard, the perspective of *co-research* (Alquati, 2022) provides an important point of reference for us. It conceives inquiry as an ongoing process in which knowledge production is an integral part of the processes through which subjectivity and collective organisation are constructed. Knowledge develops from individuals' involvement and situated experience, but does not stop at describing that experience: it interrogates the conditions and social relations that structure it and guides the development of capacities that enable individuals to critically interpret existing conditions and formulate alternative possibilities for action. Researchers and social actors are therefore jointly implicated in a single process of defining objectives and collaboratively constructing knowledge in order to understand and transform reality simultaneously. It is within this perspective that we situate Action Community Learning (ACL®), a research-education-intervention methodology (Colazzo & Manfreda, 2019), which we examine in terms of its capacity to create conditions in which agency and community engagement can be exercised, learned, and progressively developed into capacities for collective action.

ACL is neither a synonym for engagement nor a general theory of agency. Rather, it performs a mediating function: it designs and implements mechanisms through which involvement can become productive in terms of knowledge, meaningful in educational terms, and relevant to practice. The recursive formulation of research, education, and intervention prevents knowledge from being treated as a preliminary phase entrusted to experts and action as its subsequent application. Research data are not extracted from participants as mere informants. The

epistemological challenge and primary objective of the research are to free knowledge production from hegemonic and technocratic tendencies and place it at the service of learning and change by enhancing the subjects' capacity to formulate and pursue their own purposes, through research conducted *with* them. Inquiry transforms how the context is understood; learning reworks these interpretations; intervention tests possibilities and limitations; and the effects produced generate new questions. ACL thus integrates knowledge production, learning processes, and performative actions within community contexts. The model is described as a «cognitive artefact» capable of connecting a theoretical structure with the concrete realities of specific situations and of being reformulated in light of the outcomes of the intervention (Colazzo & Manfreda, 2019; see also Dalle Fratte, 1984).

4. Results: connections, complementarities, and criteria

The comparison between the constructs, conducted through the analytical categories of relationships, context, power, knowledge, reflexivity, learning, and capacity for action, enabled us to develop a coherent map of relationships and identify evaluative criteria.

The first connection concerns the relationship between engagement and agency. The quality of engagement depends on the circulation of knowledge, the distribution of power, and participants' ability to influence problems, interpretations, and decisions. The two constructs therefore converge in the shift from participation as presence to participation as effective influence. Engagement does not automatically produce agency: even highly participatory processes may leave power asymmetries unchanged or limit participants' contributions to decisions that have already been made. Agency therefore provides a more demanding analytical criterion. It requires examining whether individuals have developed an understanding of their context, whether they can formulate goals, whether they have room for choice, and whether their contributions generate discernible effects. This criterion shifts the focus from participation figures to the conditions that make action feasible.

The second connection concerns ACL, which can be examined in relation to the construct of agency, understood as the situated and relational capacity to act and influence the context in light of available resources and the opportunities offered by the environment. From this perspective, ACL becomes significant insofar as it helps transform how people interpret their own situations, recognise existing constraints and available resources, formulate alternative possibilities, and position themselves in relation to decisions concerning collective life. Its methodological tools include:

- elicitation of situated knowledge: experiences, memories, representations, and local practices contribute to the construction of research data;
- intersubjective validation: interpretations are returned to participants through mu timodal feedback and restitution processes, enabling them to recognise themselves in the findings or challenge, question, and supplement them;
- reflexivity: dialogue and comparison make previously unexamined constraints, resources, and possibilities visible;
- co-design: priorities and knowledge are translated into initiatives and territorial projects, bringing together responsibilities and resources while keeping the process open to revision.

In this context, the researcher assumes a dual position as both insider and outsider, engaging with the context, its internal dynamics, and the actors who inhabit it while maintaining the critical and reflexive stance required to examine it. Following negotiation of access to the field, the researcher facilitates and mediates complex processes, working within local relational networks and accompanying the community in the co-construction of its own plans and initiatives (Boriglione & Manfreda, forthcoming).

Needs Mapping emerges as a central methodological tool. Need is not treated as an immediate given or an objective deficit, but as a construction of meaning that takes shape through the very process of inquiry. As a form of community assessment, mapping gathers narratives and collective representations, reconstructs the symbolic and cultural landscape, and brings relationships, resources, and constraints to light. Its function is not merely descriptive. By making tacit elements communicable and comparable, mapping can transform how individuals understand their own circumstances and create opportunities for community reflexivity. The feedback and restitution phase marks the distinction between sharing knowledge and merely extracting information. Findings are not presented to the community as definitive conclusions but are returned to it through different media and formats. This makes it possible to assess the relevance of interpretative categories, document areas of agreement and disagreement, and incorporate the plurality of participants' perspectives. Restitution therefore serves a scientific function, by strengthening the traceability of interpretation, and a pedagogical function, by turning the knowledge produced into an object of learning and deliberation.

The use of performative and creative languages within ACL increases the potential to engage effectively with the different social groups present in the community, expanding the researcher's ability to communicate with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Performative practices of restitution and sharing are particularly relevant because they mobilise bodily, narrative, and imaginative dimensions of experience, offering additional ways to express and compare meanings, memories, and visions of the context (Colazzo & Manfreda, 2019). The subsequent co-design phase, aimed at developing socio-cultural initiatives and enhancing local knowledge and social practices, is the point at which the relationship between engagement and agency is tested through action. Participants have the opportunity to contribute to defining the priorities and directions of the intervention. Within ACL, co-design is the stage at which needs, resources, and meanings emerging from the research are revisited, interpreted, and collectively negotiated (Manfreda & Boriglione, 2026). On the basis of the discussion above, the educational and intervention tools considered point to the following qualitative criteria for engagement aimed at fostering agency:

- involvement of stakeholders from the earliest stages;
- recognition of experiential knowledge;
- circulation and sharing of knowledge;
- critical examination of interpretative categories within spaces for reflexivity;
- process recursion;
- reciprocal movement between research and action;
- accessible and multimodal restitution;
- openness to emerging outcomes.

5. Conclusions

This paper has brought community engagement, agency, and ACL into a coherent theoretical framework. Community engagement gains theoretical depth when examined in terms of individuals' ability to influence the production of meanings, decision-making, and action. Agency, in turn, becomes pedagogically observable when considered in relation to the relational, material, and institutional conditions that enable it to be exercised. ACL provides a methodological means of mediation through the recursive interplay of research, education, and intervention.

Needs Mapping, the community of practice, feedback and restitution, and performative practices contribute to the construction of environments in which shared knowledge can be produced, experience can become a source of learning, and the capacity for initiative can be explored in practice. Reflexivity and the redistribution of epistemic power constitute cross-cutting criteria throughout these processes.

The territory is recognised as a cultural agent, and local witnesses as research actors capable of contributing to the definition of problems, needs, and resources. The transformative value of the model does not lie in a promise to produce empowerment automatically, but in its capacity to establish and critically examine the conditions through which a community can become more aware of its own possibilities, better equipped to negotiate them, and more capable of acting upon them. The researcher mediates and facilitates these processes, helping to build the relational, epistemic, and operational conditions needed to support the autonomy, awareness, and project-design capacity of those involved.

However, the research experience gained in the field leads us to recognise that these conditions cannot be taken for granted. They are often shaped by tensions and constraints that run through community engagement processes and require critical examination. These include:

- Unequal access to participation: actors have different cultural, relational, and institutional resources, which shape their ability to take part in the processes.
- Tension between technical-scientific direction and openness of the process: researchers must contend with the unpredictability of research-intervention, continually questioning their own assumptions and interpretative categories.
- Continuity and sustainability of engagement: building relationships takes time, which does not always align with the timelines of activities or projects.
- Institutional, organisational, and resource constraints: existing arrangements can limit the translation of shared knowledge into opportunities for action.

The proposed connection does not warrant deterministic conclusions. A process may be formally participatory while leaving asymmetries unchanged; it may generate knowledge without creating room for decision-making; or it may support intentions for which the resources needed to translate them into action are lacking. For this reason, analysis must consider who gains access to spaces for dialogue, which forms of expression are recognised as legitimate, which aspects are genuinely open to negotiation, and which effects endure beyond the life of the project.

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