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## Developing Scriptural Agency Through Participatory Action Research Embedded In Service Learning

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**Abstract:** This study addresses the gap in Islamic higher education, where learning often emphasizes theoretical knowledge rather than practical application, by exploring the development of scriptural agency through participatory approaches. The purpose of this study is to examine how integrating Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) within a service learning module can enhance students' ability to apply scriptural knowledge in real-life contexts. Using a self-study case study design, the research focuses on students at an Islamic higher education institute in South Africa, combining experiential learning principles with reflective and collaborative activities. The findings reveal that students developed stronger agency, reflected in increased confidence, critical reflection, and the capacity to translate religious teachings into meaningful community engagement. Additionally, students improved essential skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving through direct involvement in community-based projects. The study highlights that learning faith becomes more meaningful when practiced in real contexts. This research contributes to the field of Islamic education by emphasizing the importance of shifting from traditional rote learning to applied, experiential pedagogies, thereby fostering socially responsible graduates and supporting sustainable community development.

**Keywords:** Islam; Participatory Action Research; Scriptural Agency; Service Learning

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The proposition that this paper aims to explore and affirm is that religious students' scriptural agency can be developed through embedding community based participatory action research (CBPAR) within a service learning module. Further we argue that this intervention helps students apply their scriptural knowledge and create positive change in their communities. The novelty of this research is that it reports on the introduction of a service learning (SL) module to augment student agency into the curriculum of a religious studies program, which is traditionally classroom-based.

The primary focus in many traditional schools and Islamic studies institutes is scriptural content and theory. Current research laments this and calls for activating students' agency in their learning (Suddahazai, 2023). Similarly, the faculty at a private institute of higher education offering full time programs in Islamic Studies and Arabic where this research was conducted, identified a problem: the gap between the knowledge that was taught and the lived experiences of individual students. Furthermore, a gap was identified in that students were learning and studying for personal enrichment and were struggling to translate this into positive contributions to their community. Students were not able to see how to go about intervening within their communities and harness their agency and potential for active positive change.

The call for increasing student agency can also be derived from the work of Abduh and Taqwa (2022: 24), who ask that teachers "develop several models or varied learning methods to increase students' learning motivation". A service learning module was added so that students could have an opportunity, with support, to engage with real world problems and put into practice what they were learning. While religious education, and specifically Islamic religious education, does in fact deal with social justice, the practical implementation of social change and community upliftment is lacking. Furthermore, religious clerics are often absorbed into existing structures, without being taught how to challenge the status quo, think critically, and develop new processes and strategies (Suddahazai, 2023).

The research site is an institute that primarily attracts young South African Muslim adults between the ages of 18 and 30. Students come from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds and very often begin their Islamic studies with an elementary level baseline knowledge of their practised faith. Approximately eighty percent of students come from households that face financial difficulties and are reliant on the support of a student tuition bursary fund.

The Community-based Participatory Action Research and Service Learning (CBPAR-SL) was introduced as a pilot elective module in 2021. The purpose of the module was to develop student agency and social responsiveness through action research within service learning to help students apply their scriptural knowledge and create positive change.

The theoretical framing for this study is David Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycles theory. Kolb (1984: 9) states, "Learning is a process, in which

knowledge is created through transformation of experience.” The model asserts that the most effective learning is where the student undergoes four different learning phases: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation.

We combined Kolb’s theory (1984) with insights from action research. The action research model was adapted from Stringer (1996) and Calhoun (1994). Action research cycles align with the experiential learning cycles. Koshy et al. (2010:4) explain: “the purpose of action research is to learn through action that then leads on to personal or professional development.” McMahan (1999) confirmed that there is an overlap between the reflection in action research and Kolb’s reflective observation. Combining Kolb’s theory (1984) and action research provides a robust theoretical framework. This framework guided the module preparation and the research study.

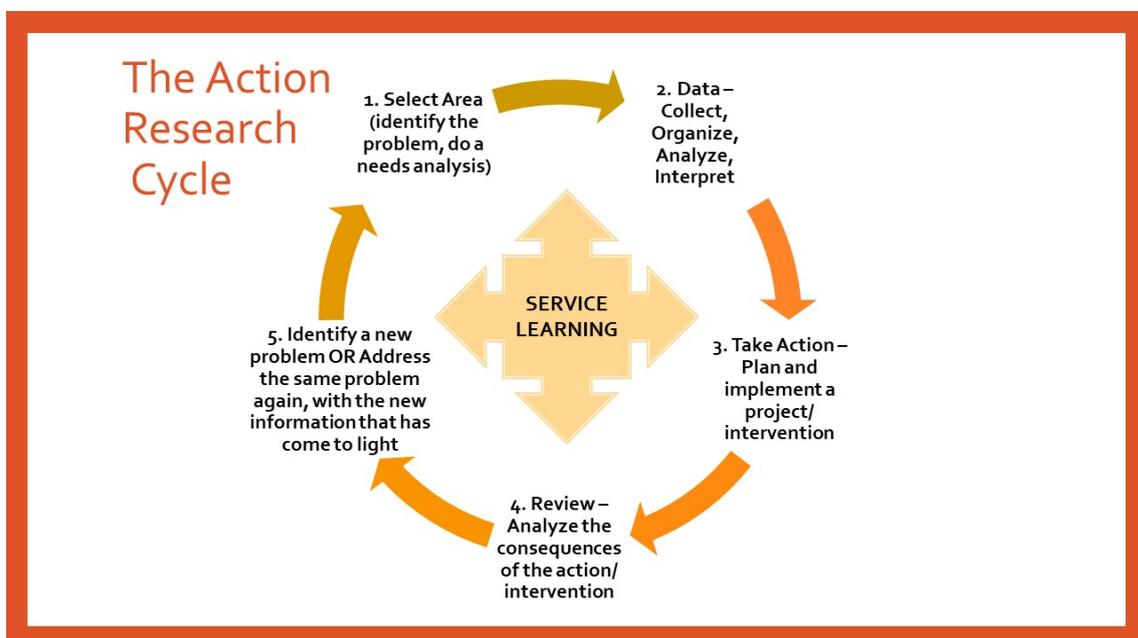
South African universities have been called upon to include community services as the third pillar of higher education in the post-apartheid era. Salaam et al. (2019) assert that there is a lack of research on the role of service learning within higher education. In terms of defining service learning, Halberstadt, Timm, Kraus and Gundolf (2019, p.1926-1927) define “SL formats as those kinds of modules or seminars designed to teach students about topics stipulated in the curricula while using community service settings.” Thus, service learning is a community engagement pedagogy that combines learning goals and community service with the intent to enrich both student educational achievement and the common good. The idea is that SL has two key components: it involves a learning experience, and it involves providing a service or benefit to a community of people outside of the classroom (Matthews, 2017; Dapena et al., 2022). Fullerton et al. (2015) explain that service learning practitioners use engagement with community partners to impact their students in transformative ways. Their programmatic decisions and pedagogical practices are based on this intention. They further explain that college students who engaged in service learning during their studies were more likely to engage in community service after graduating. Graduates explained that service learning helped them develop leadership, communication, and teamwork skills (Fullerton et al., 2015).

Johannisson and Hiete (2021) add that service learning motivated students much more than achieving good grades. This indicates that the feeling of fulfilment derived from acts of service can serve as a springboard for greater acts of goodness and achievement. Fullerton et al. (2015) observes that years after graduation, students enrolled in service learning programmes can identify and describe specific experiences of personal value, and that can correlate this to their approach to life in later years, especially with regards to human interaction. This, they explain, indicates the learning experience was powerful, and that it was a foundation that is built on in later years.

Higher education within South Africa has been called to lead social responsiveness. This experiential reflective approach to learning is being recognised as key in the transformation of education within the global south.

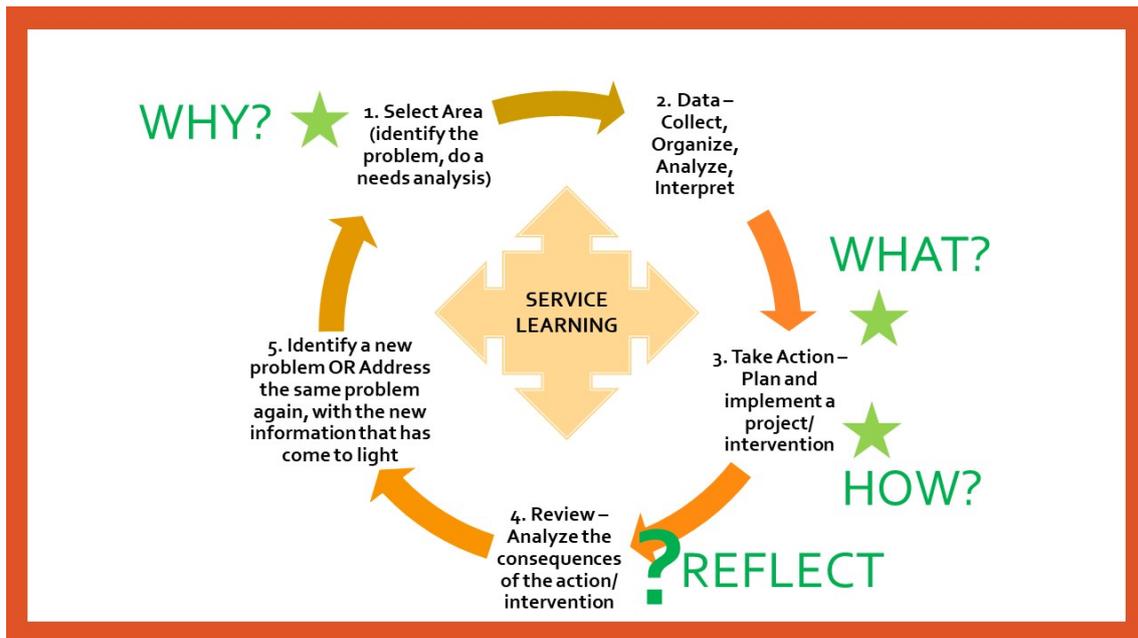
## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a self-study case study design integrated with an action research framework to explore the implementation of a community-based participatory action research and service learning (CBPAR-SL) approach in higher education. The self-study method emphasizes reflective practice, allowing educators to critically examine their teaching experiences, while action research follows a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Stringer, 1996). The learning design was further informed by experiential learning theory, which highlights the importance of reflection in transforming experience into knowledge (Kolb, 1984). The action research cycle used in this study was adapted from Stringer (1996) and Calhoun (1994), as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. The Action Research Cycle**

Additionally, reflective components grounded in Islamic principles, such as tafakkur (reflection), were integrated into the cycle (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Action Research Cycle adapted with reflection points**

The participants were first-year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts in Islamic Studies and a one-year Islamic Sciences program at a higher education institution. Students were organized into small groups and engaged in identifying and addressing real community problems as part of the CBPAR-SL approach. Ethical approval was obtained from the institution, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Data were collected through multiple qualitative sources to ensure credibility and triangulation. These included student feedback questionnaires, interviews conducted via a community radio platform, student project presentations and reports, and the first author's reflective journal. The use of diverse data sources allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the implementation process and student learning experiences.

The researchers assumed dual roles as facilitators and reflective practitioners. The first author was directly involved in the design and implementation of the module, while the second author contributed to the instructional design and acted as a critical peer reviewer. Data analysis focused on identifying patterns related to student engagement, experiential learning, and the effectiveness of the CBPAR-SL approach in fostering collaborative learning within an Islamic educational context.

## RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Scriptural agency lies in making decisions on how you take the Islamic instruction and how you go into the community to actualise and realize the principles that were learnt. The reflective decision making cycle is the marker of the augmented scriptural agency. As the student engages with the scripture and real-world situations, and moves back and forth between the two, they find themselves empowered and confident to tackle community challenges from a

faith-based position. The scriptural agency lies in the iterative reflective cycle that students go through, grappling with scriptural content and affecting the changes they want to see in the world.

### **Pedagogic Lessons Learnt**

Davids and Waghid (2019) explain that *Ibadah*, an Arabic term meaning worship or acts of submission to God, can be defined as acts in which one renders oneself in service to God and humanity. This can be extended to any of God's creations, including animals, plants, and the environment. With acts of service being considered acts of worship, there is an emphasis in Islamic teachings to do good, contribute to society, and develop communities. An important aspect of being able to do good is to recognise one's own ability, and agency, to effect change and make a difference. As young Muslims begin to embrace and understand adulthood, they are beginning to mould their identity and integrate their faith into their day to day lives. Their learning and their reality need to speak to each other and come together so that these young people may thrive and grow. They also need to embrace their own self, and define their own purpose, learning to use their talents, abilities, and skills to achieve success.

In interviews and surveys with the students, pedagogic lessons they had learnt were highlighted through their reflections and observations:

“In the beginning I just saw this as another project, but as we continued to go forth with our goal, I realised that what we were doing really changed my perspective on certain things. It taught me patience and definitely made me understand the definition of perseverance. I am and will forever be thankful that we were given this task.” (Female, Survey)

This student notes some of the many benefits of service learning, that success in real life situations requires patience, commitment, and dedication. The student shows she is formulating her own opinions and developing her own thought process. Her understanding of her own agency is developing. We argue that if she had not had this experience, she would not have learned these life lessons. It is through the experience of service learning, that she could reflect and grow. Her observations were supported by a second student:

“It taught us resilience and perseverance, especially with all our challenges... it strengthened our bonds with each other” (Female, Mosque clean up)

An interesting point here that is also highlighted by the next quote is that agency is tied to relationships with others. Furthermore, what we saw emerging was that students provided each other with emotional support. Perhaps as an individual, effecting change in the real world would be more challenging but working in a group or community, with each other's support, serves as a support for self-belief, accelerating the development of individual agency. A third student

explains that the opportunity allowed them to develop confidence within themselves, and also served as an opportunity for improved well-being:

“I want to add about the confidence levels, this project required each one of us to come out of our shells... I really think this project has uplifted us in that manner” (Female, Movement)

Showing a similar insight, a fourth student commented on the team dynamics they had been exposed to:

“The project allowed team members to build good relations with each other, we learnt so much about each other and built strong bonds. Through our project, we were able to spend time with each other beyond campus hours and spend our time together while simultaneously serving and doing good for others.” (Female, Survey)

This comment reflects the importance of human connection and teamwork. Agency is often thought of as very much individual ability to act or effect change. With students working in groups, we observed an interesting dynamic, where individual agency and collective agency both played a role in the project's success. The teamwork aspect also allowed students to observe each other, and note the agency development within their peers, further growing their own agency.

This statement highlights a very important aspect of youth development. While many youths may have the cognitive and physical ability to effect change, they may lack the confidence and suitable opportunities and safe spaces to do so. This is once again linked to their understanding and perception of their own agency. Translation of ideas into actual projects requires students to be confident in their own abilities.

A fifth student identified communication and time management skills were among the many lessons learnt:

“It has definitely taught me that I need to manage my time, communicating with group members... it helped me recognise that communication is especially important in group work... and everyone really does need to be on the same page.” (Female, Mosque clean-up)

This statement highlights another key aspect of their agency. Youth need to be able to be given social spaces - which were provided by the service learning intervention- to communicate their thoughts and ideas in order to contribute and effect change.

The students were also asked to identify challenges within the module. One of the main areas of improvement was the size of the group. Most students felt that they would be able to achieve more in terms of their projects had the group consisted of fewer members. A student explained: “I felt that our group was too big as while this could be an advantage in terms of manpower and input of ideas

from various viewpoints, we lacked the ability to control the group as a whole and scheduling was very difficult with everybody having different livelihoods and circumstances". Another student added: "Having such a big group also led to conflicts of ideas and it is quite difficult to sometimes manage that."

In terms of lessons related to teaching and the roll-out of the module, the researchers identified gaps in the use of the rubrics. In future modules, students will be taught how to use the rubric to guide their preparation. They will also be taught the value of the rubric. One of the challenges of a rubric is that it does not always accommodate creativity. This challenge could be addressed by including bonus marks. We also recommend that the institute uses rubrics and service learning in other modules as well. Another suggestion that came through strongly was for the module to run over more weeks to give students more time to plan and implement their projects. A student indicated that they felt they would have benefited from learning presentation skills and also if they had engaged in more practical opportunities.

Peer assessment was included in the assessment in the hopes of exposing the students to the practical application of using a rubric. From this, we observed that many students could not be objective, did not have the maturity level to critique peers, and were concerned that their peers would be upset by the feedback. To protect their social interactions and relationships, the rubrics were not given to the presenting group. The group was given oral feedback which was disadvantageous. It prevented them from reflecting on their scoring and discussing their feedback as a group. In future modules, the first presentations should not be peer assessments, and more time will be allocated for in-class engagement. This will give the students the opportunity to see and understand that critique is not negative, even if the comments are uncomfortable or challenging. Peer assessments will then be included in later assessments.

Additional challenges that need to be addressed in future modules are equipping students with basic project management skills and supporting students to deal with group dynamics and interpersonal issues.

When reflecting on the group that did not succeed, we observed that they exhibited poor teamwork, lack of commitment (absenteeism, tardiness), poor communication skills, and lacked motivation. From a module facilitator perspective, we acknowledge and understand that this could have been impacted by the fact that the module is not credit bearing. It could also have been influenced by the fact that service learning is not supported by other modules and/or lecturers, with most of the faculty leaning towards traditional teaching methods. The rehabilitation and disciplinary action for poor conduct and poor performance at an institutional level could also be investigated and perhaps improved to support student success.

Students also expressed their dismay that their projects were impacted by Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns that were in place at the time of project implementation. They did however acknowledge that learning to be flexible, creative, and determined in unprecedented conditions was a great opportunity for personal growth and development.

### Lessons related to student agency

From our observations as researchers, we believe that from the feedback we received, students felt an increase in being able to be active participants in the world. They felt a sense of accomplishment, having successfully completed their projects, and this was a motivational springboard for further community projects. The SL module encouraged students to be creative and innovative in their thinking and approach. They were given space to try new things and learn from their mistakes. This developed confidence within them, which was clearly seen in their final presentations, as well as their student yearbook.

Our observations are supported by the works of Johannisson and Hiete (2021) and Fullerton et al. (2015) who noted that students derived fulfillment from acts of service and that the effect thereof was seen in later years. Within our context, we observed the link between the fulfillment and the awareness of God. Students were linking their success to their intention of attaining the pleasure of God.

Scriptural knowledge may be considered textual knowledge but has added dimensions of faith, love, and self-awareness, which are not tangible (Yayha et al. 2018). This is a key difference between worldly/conventional knowledge and scriptural knowledge.

The development, and transformation of the students can be seen from their reflections:

“I have recently come into the *dīn* (religion) of Islam. So for me, I know that being a Muslim is all about community, it’s all about brotherhood, sisterhood, compassion and sharing knowledge. It’s this absolute unity, this big massive community that no matter where you come from... you are a Muslim and we share with each other. So one thing I learnt from this is... we all have knowledge in a certain capacity, and we all have something to share... it was such a beautiful experience, to talk to all the ladies and to see the happiness on their faces...” (Female, Movement).

This reflection highlights that young people feel a sense of community. We draw from this, that once one feels a sense of community, it makes one more inclined to care for, and act on behalf of that community. The student would have come across Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions about unity and brotherhood. In the above quote, we can see that she had actually experienced it. The action research project allowed the students to experience theories and concepts they learnt about in textbooks. Witnessing, observing, and actively participating became an opportunity for reflection. We observed the alignment with Kolb's Theory (1984), where concrete experiences were opportunities for deeper reflection. This experiential learning would only have been possible through action research and service learning.

A female student explained:

“In a project like this it is important to recognise that it's not actually us that did all of this - we are just a means to helping people. The ultimate objective was not for this project or for a mark or for the recognition of it, but we hope to make a difference in these girls' lives...” (Female, Period Poverty).

From this, we observed that students were beginning to understand their role in their communities and claim their space as agents of the religion. Their agency allowed them to contribute, and they could see the impact of their actions,

Another student added:

“We are very grateful to have had this opportunity... the amount of growth we have gained from being forced to step out of comfort zones, I don't think we could have gotten it from any other assessments” (Female, Period Poverty)

This statement highlighted that students began to see their own transformation and embrace their agency, recognising that they have the ability to do great things. The students were pushed out of their comfort zone. The project provided the opportunity for this transformation.

Two transformative aspects of service learning are being given an opportunity to work with a community and being made aware of that community. The interaction between students and the community provides an opportunity to develop cultural awareness and sensitivity (Damons and Dunbar-Krige, 2020). This method is a shift from the traditional 'working for the community' to 'working with the community' (Damons and Dunbar-Krige, 2020).

We can see how this emerged from a conversation with two students who worked together to tackle an environmental issue within their community:

Student 1: “(We chose) a problem on our doorstep” (Male; Vygieskraal)

Student 2: “We saw this as a matter that must be dealt with... it affects so many people... we wanted to contribute.” (Male; Vygieskraal)

Student 1: “There was definite interest from the community to help out and they acknowledge that it is an issue in the area, and they want to do something to help their community. So that was inspiring.” (Male; Vygieskraal)

It wasn't just that the students identified the problem, it was that the community worked with them. This was supported by a student in a different group who explained:

“We listened to them, and we implemented what they (said) they needed.”

(Female, Mentorship)

This showed an understanding of their role as partners with their community by listening, and how their individual and collective agency could support their community to achieve success as described by the community.

A female student highlighted the need for the participation and involvement of the community that they were working with:

“We weren’t only telling people ‘This is what you need to do’, we were doing it with them” (Female, Movement)

From this, we can see that the students understood that they needed to participate and be involved directly with the community to effect the changes they wanted to see. We noted the emergence of the understanding that they need to help others recognise their own agency too.

Two key themes emerged from this SL project: Pedagogic lessons and student agency. Pedagogic lessons included developing self-reflection, confidence, deeper thought processes, human connection, teamwork, time management, and communication skills. The student agency lessons included developing a sense of community, understanding one’s role in the community, embracing transformation, and the recognition of the ability to effect change. Both types of lessons contributed to students' augmented agency in being able to transfer scripture to the real world.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research provides evidence to make the claim that CBPAR-SL helps students develop their scriptural agency and understand their ability to positively impact their world. We conclude that learning Islamic scripture that goes beyond the classroom and into the community builds a bridge between Islamic scripture and student agency. Azlan, Amran, & Ishak (2020) confirm the natural affinity between the ethos of Islam as a religion of doing good and the objectives of a service learning approach. Islamic faith-based learning has an inherent strong focus on agency, change, and transformation. Based on our findings our recommendation is that all institutes of higher education offering Islamic studies programs should offer service learning modules and opportunities for community-based participatory action research and, or SL should form a component of other modules. We also call on lecturers in Islamic studies higher institutes to incorporate pedagogical practices that in addition to rote learning and recall help students to develop the skills to contextualize Islamic scripture within modern contexts without losing their rootedness in scripture. We also suggest that this CBPAR-SL model be considered across the curriculum beyond Islamic studies. We advocate that community projects should have a strong research basis to make lasting change within communities and as a platform for developing the agency of all involved.

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