THE

PAR
PLAYLIST

An Exercise in Developing Self-Awareness &
Shared Language for Group Change
Processes

CONTENTS

01 Introduction

This section introduces the PAR Lexicon Song Facilitation Exercise.

➜   A method to achieve organizational change.
➜   The approach and the problem of shared language.

PAR, Organizational Change, & the Problem of Shared Language

Many groups and organizations are grappling with **what equity and justice can mean** for their missions, structures, and operations. This work can be both challenging and unsettling as it brings into sharp focus the different identities, experiences, and privileges of group members. Yet simultaneously, reckoning with these realities is essential for an organization seeking to restructure or attain lasting change in how it operates.

A **PAR approach to organizational change** can allow for widespread participation in and ownership over the process. Communication is critical –– but also a site for misunderstanding.

Members of an organization often share common language, but each person grants different interpretations and nuances to these terms and ideas. A failure to get on the same page can be an obstacle for meaningful, sustained change. This work demands the **surfacing of assumptions and the development of shared agreements** about complex concepts rooted in PAR processes.
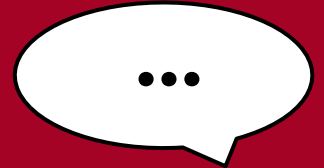
Music is a cross-cultural mode of communication

Music can be a tool to **stimulate emotions**, feelings, and senses in a way that pure dialogue typically does not.

Music offers a means for **self-definition**. Sharing the music with which one identifies is a way of sharing oneself with others.

Music can be a catalyst to **facilitate** the shift between process and content.

Music offers a **representation** of shared meaning and group cohesion (or lack thereof).

Alternative Approach

Describing abstract concepts in a widely accessible manner can be challenging. The difficulty of defining concepts makes it all the more complicated for group members to develop a shared, mutually understood meaning.

Music can be an alternative way to exchange perspectives and engage in dialogue around definitions. This guide outlines a music-based exercise designed to help draw connections and identify gaps in the ways various group members interpret a concept.

Music as method offers four key advantages:

- **Emotional stimulation**
- **Opportunity for self-definition**
- **New tool for facilitation**
- **Representation of meaning and the group**

02 Exercise Steps

This section outlines the PAR Lexicon Song
Facilitation exercise, which includes the
following stages:

➜   Identifying key terms.
➜   Suggesting songs.
➜   Identifying similarities and differences.
➜   Questioning together for better shared
      understanding.

Facilitation Exercise Steps

Step 01 – Identification of Key Terms

Begin as a group by identifying terms that you believe will be necessary to your PAR work and conversations. Once identified, narrow this list down to approximately ten terms which your organization believes may be defined differently by different people. Examples include "equity," "justice," and "collective decision making."

Step 02 – Song Selection

Each member of the group should then select a song to go with each of the terms which speaks to their personal definition of the term.

Step 03 – Song Interpretation

Each member of the group should then listen to all of the songs for all of the terms, making notes about the similarities and differences they notice between the attitudes, perspectives, and definitions that the songs communicate.

Step 04 – Collective Definitions, Questions, and Answers

Through the song interpretations, group members should now have a better understanding of how others in their organization are defining the selected terms. Now, the group should collaboratively define the words and use the words to pose questions about their share goals, problems, and structures which can then help as they move forward.

03 Example Exercise

This section is intended to provide a model for how the exercise could be conducted, going through the following stages:

➔ Sample words selection.
➔ Example of song selection.
➔ Example of song interpretation.
➔ Example of collective definition making.

Selection Process for 10 Words

Start Individually

Individually, we identified 33 significant words to PAR and listed questions, concerns, & wonderings about each word.

Discuss Collectively

As a collective, we talked about similarities, differences & conflicts in our meanings of each word. We narrowed the list down to 14 words.

Select 10 words

We picked 10 words where there was most interest. We did not agree, yet the discussion added extra clarity and shaped our own thinking.

Identifying Key Terms

Example of terms necessary to PAR that people frequently understand differently

1. POWER
2. HISTORY
3. AGENCY
4. LIVED EXPERIENCE
5. POSITIONALITY
6. CONTEXT
7. NON-LINEAR
8. IN-BETWEEN
9. TRUST
10. LANGUAGE

Rationale for Key Terms

As a team, we choose these 10 key terms because these terms highlight the essence of PAR. Yet, there was not collective agreement on their meanings. We also had conflicting interpretations of the words and unanswered questions that we wanted to explore further.

We started with 33 key terms, narrowed it down to 14, and then to 10. Our selection process allowed us to engage in dialogue and mutual learning and provide different views based on our identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences. It helped us to understand each other better.

Song Exercise

The song exercise uses the vehicle of music to convey the complex meaning of words. It reveals questions, tensions, similarities and emotions.

Each person listens to all of the songs selected by people in the group & make what meaning from the different songs.
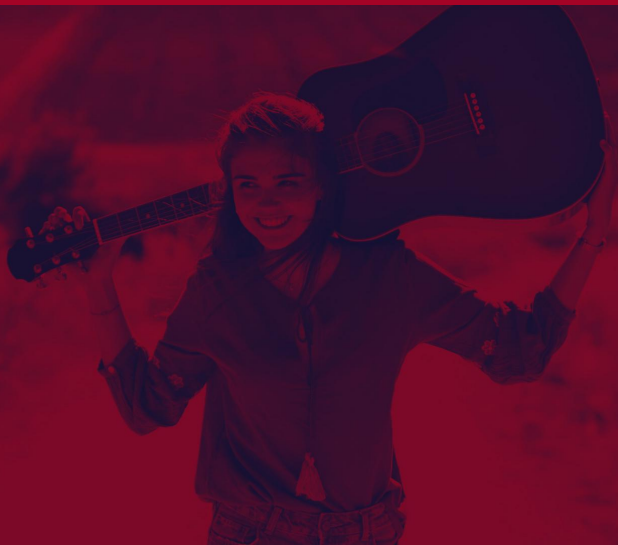
Each person shares their thinking and discuss with the group. It is a launching pad to gain clarity, understanding and collective agreement.

Examples

Non-Linear

Non-Linear was chosen because of interest in exploring alternative conceptions of time and progress. The exercise highlights context, human involvement, and predictability.
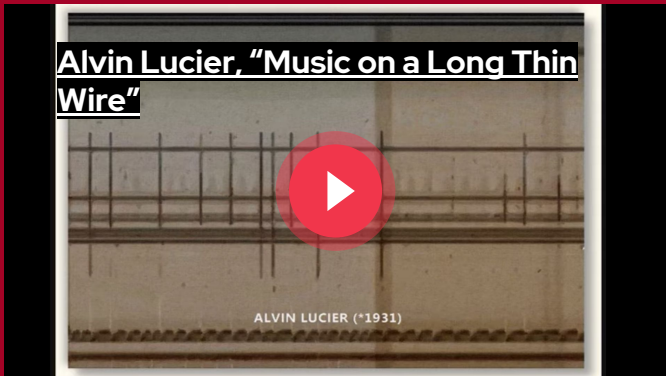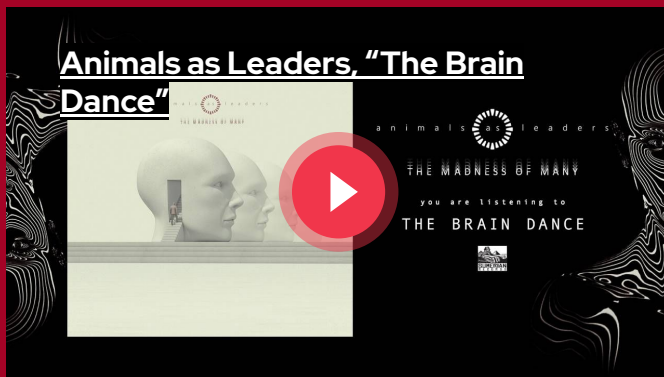
Agency

Agency was chosen because we were curious about what forms agency can take. The exercise notes various tensions, gaps, and connections with the term.

2Pac, "Changes"

Animals as Leaders, "The Brain Dance"

Alvin Lucier, "Music on a Long Thin Wire"

Tash Sultana "Big Smoke - Part 1"

Observations / Non-Linear

Changes

Lived Story: Circumstance isn't destiny; New paths of unity, dignity and love

The Brain Dance

Learning lies in the process of experiencing; Unbounded by one identity

Music on a Long Thin Wire

Spontaneity of change influenced by context & human proximity

Big Smoke

Search of the unknown between right and wrong

Context

Context shapes unique voice, agency and experience

Unpredictable

Not being defined by society and individuals. Allows for uncertainty.
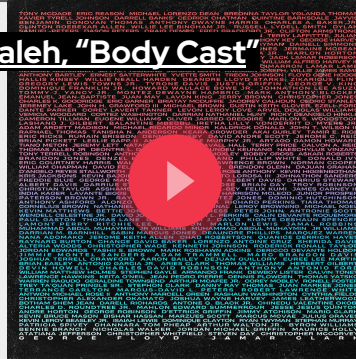
Agency

Run The Jewels, "Ju$t"

Halsey, "killing boys"

Lupe Fiasco, "All Black Everything"

Dua Saleh, "Body Cast"

Observations / Agency

Ju$t

Explores agency via superficial vs. structural lens, and how one's agency can be constrained.

All Black Everything

Reclamation of agency through imagination and expanded possibilities. Centers one's own identity.

killing boys

Agency as freeing oneself from reliance upon those who do harm. Active assertion of one's power.

Body Cast

Agency as ability to protect oneself and one's domain. Challenging who controls the narrative about oneself.

Connections

Agency as act of opposition to status quo. Makes no room for paternalistic gestures / savior complex.

Gaps

Agency on an individual vs. group level. Agency as co-generative vs. retaliatory form of action.

04 Conclusion

In conclusion, the facilitation exercise should end with questions designed to shift from the exercise to practical application.

➔ Sample Discussion Questions

REFLECTION IN ACTION

Collective definitions are just the beginning of collective work, especially for taking action to redistribute power and resources within an organization or between an organization and its environment. So now it's important to begin applying your understanding of these concepts to your group or organizational setting. Here are some suggested questions to get you started on thinking more critically about next steps for your organization.

Power

How are leaders in this organization identified and selected?

Who decides? Who makes decisions? Who has the ability to say yes or no to a proposed decision/action?

Who controls the allocation of resources?

What resources (financial and otherwise) does the organization depend on to exist? Are there potential threats to those resources now or in the future?

History

Why does this organization exist? When was it created? Who created it? Where did it exist? On whose land? How has its purpose and structure changed over time?

Who has been present in this organization? Who has not?

With whom has the organization worked in the past? With whom has the organization not worked?

What concerns have people expressed about the organization in the past? What was the response to these concerns?

Agency

Who sets the agenda?

Who decides? Who has the ability to say yes or no to a proposed decision/action?

Who controls the allocation of resources? Are there opportunities for members to express disagreement or disapproval with a resource-allocation decision?

Lived Experience

What are the most important sources of information, knowledge, expertise, and advice for the organization?

What opportunities exist for members of the organization to share and reflect on their observations and experiences outside of the organization, and what it means for the work they do?

Positionality

Is there a formal or informal hierarchy in the organization? How is that hierarchy known and experienced by different members? Where do you fall within this hierarchy and why?

How did you come to learn your location in the organization? How do others learn their location?

How do different members of the organization understand the goals of the present change process?

How do expectations of certain identities carry into the organization?

Context

What is the broader set of political, economic, and/or social forces in which the organization is located? At local, regional, national, and global scales?

What key challenges is the organization's surrounding community facing? How are these challenges addressed by the organization? Is the organization implicated in these challenges in any way?

What factors are spurring a desire for change and accountability? Why now?

Non-Linear

How should members of the organization address repeated failures to change?

How should members identify and celebrate successes in organizational change?

How can relationships between members of the organization be sustained and repaired in the face of failure to change?

In-Between

How is membership within the organization defined? Are there people affiliated or involved with the organization and its work who are not considered members (e.g., clients, partners, consultants)?

Are there members of the organization who feel disconnected or harmed by the members or mission of the organization? Who are these members? Do they have anything in common (e.g., shared role, identity)?

Trust

What types of relationships are expected or accepted between members of this organization?

Where do members of the organization turn when they have problems? Who do members of the organization rely on for different kinds of assistance? Do they rely on other members of the organization?

Who has been hurt by the organization's decisions now and in the past? What are their needs? Whose obligations are these?

Language

What types of communication does this organization prioritize? What other forms of communication exist?

Under what conditions do different members engage in listening to one another? What does this look like?

How are ideas for change typically expressed or communicated?

What are the cultural and social norms of interaction within the organization? Do these vary by role, space, time? How do these norms limit the participation of some members within the organization, or others outside it?

FURTHER INQUIRIES

Add additional questions your organization is asking and working through here.

Questions should draw attention to issues of (un)fairness, (in)justice, and possibilities for change with a focus on the organization's structure, internal and external operations, rules for membership, narratives about what it is, has been, and will be. Questions can also direct members of the organization to identify and reflect on key features of the organization's (and its members) functions and roles in the conditions of its surrounding physical, economic, and social environment.

Thank You!

Katharine Kettner
Enjoli Hall
Lin Johnson
Patricia Cafferky

October 19, 2020
Participatory Action Research