



Methods for Change

Engaged Capacity- building Workshops

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Engaged Capacity-building Workshops



This is a method that draws on repeated, interlinked workshop activities as a way to bring people together to work on shared issues. Workshops are not one-off events aimed at extracting data from participants, but rather are embedded in long-term engaged forms of knowledge exchange and research, which may draw on multiple methodological tools such as interviews and ethnography, with communities as project partners. Using this approach can help to build networks of groups and individuals. This could include those who play different roles in relation to a particular service, resource, community or product, within food systems, social care, health or planning, for example.

Engaged Capacity-building Workshops can be applied to understand the materials, values, norms and relationships that shape the issue or system in question, and how power relationships and inequalities are reproduced, to establish avenues for changing and redesigning these relationships. Using this approach can help to build networks of groups and individuals, for example those who play different roles in relation to a particular service, resource, community or product, for example within the food system, social care and health or planning. It involves the researcher working closely with participants, often in experimental ways, to explore problems and questions and to identify solutions. By strengthening relationships between the different stakeholders, this approach can increase resilience and build the capacity of organisations and individuals, leading to improved practices, ways of working and outcomes for those involved



How do Engaged Capacity-building Workshops create or contribute to change?

Engaged Capacity-building Workshop methodologies aim to create significant changes in the systems in which they work by enhancing the learning of all who participate, including the researcher. By bringing together diverse groups to work through problems collectively, and identifying solutions based on varied, lived experience, this approach can have a meaningful impact on the lives and practices of individuals, as well as informing changes in policy or funding regimes. Working closely with participants over a significant period of time can create change by supporting the formation of trusted relationships between the researcher and organisations or communities, which often extend beyond the duration of an individual research project. Further, by reimagining the relationship between researcher and researched, Engaged Capacity-building Workshops can shift understandings of what research can be, and the power dynamics that are involved. They can therefore improve the image of research in communities that may be over-researched and sceptical about the value of further intervention, because the aim is positive and meaningful change for those communities.

What ideas or concepts influence this approach?

This is a qualitative approach aimed at understanding power dynamics and processes, involving elements of coproduction. During organised, facilitated workshop activities, the researcher spends extended time with stakeholders and often contributes to the production of outcomes which can help develop and strengthen participants' capacities to self-organise and self-determine. Similar to other participatory approaches, Engaged Capacity-building Workshops involve the researcher participating in the setting that they are researching. This may involve exploring the activities, experiences, perspectives and values of the different groups that make up that system, then experimenting with different framings to break down barriers between various groups. It is research that is done with participants, rather than to, for or about them. The researcher's aim is not to extract knowledge from participants, but instead to be a resource that the individuals and groups involved in research can draw upon to achieve a shared goal. This approach is influenced by grounded theory, with themes, questions and theories generated iteratively from qualitative data that is produced in collaboration with participants through workshop activities. It can also be used in mixed methodological approaches, where questions and themes generated with participants form the basis of quantitative surveys.



Why might I want to use Engaged Capacity-building Workshops?

- Working together with participants as partners or co-researchers, this approach supports individuals, organisations and groups to self-organise. It can be used to help communities to create the interventions that they need to overcome problems and to thrive. Instead of feeling like they are 'under the microscope', participants can become more invested in the research.
- Engaged Capacity-building Workshops emphasise learning by doing, reflecting, observing and listening to those who experience and engage with the topic or problem under investigation.
- They are well suited to understanding complex issues or systems that involve a diverse range of different stakeholders with competing agendas. This approach can be useful for overcoming tensions, misunderstandings or conflicts between various groups or individuals, by encouraging participants to work together on shared problems and to understand one another's viewpoints.
- By listening to participants, understanding their stories, perspectives and priorities, researchers using this method can develop research questions which have the potential to yield further meaningful data and insight. Questions and themes generated collaboratively can also be used to inform the design of nuanced quantitative surveys.
- Engaged Capacity-building Workshops often draw on experimental, creative and playful ways of working to encourage problem solving, critical thinking and networking between diverse participants. They can support curiosity-driven, rather than expert-driven, theory-driven, or data-driven research.
- This approach is interested in understanding the big picture by investigating small details. Facilitated workshops can be used to identify and map the elements that are connected together to make up a complex system, as well as building a picture of the wider landscape in which these elements are embedded. They can be used to develop a framework to explain and communicate the workings of a system or community, so that ideas and solutions can be shared with others working on similar issues.



Step by step guide to Engaged Capacity-building Workshops:

1. Understand the wider landscape.

The first step is to build a picture of the landscape that shapes the system or problem that is of interest in the research, and involves:

- Connecting with key stakeholders: speak to as many people working on or impacted by the issue, including community groups, local authorities, charities, national organisations or companies and members of the public. Listen carefully to their stories and try to understand the variety of perspectives that frame the topic under investigation.
- Mapping stakeholder values and priorities: identify what the values are for each stakeholder group and where these might intersect. What are the core issues that need to be addressed or better understood?
- SWOT activity to identify strengths (assets), weaknesses (barriers), opportunities, and threats (constraints) to solving the problem: What do stakeholders see as the current barriers and limitations, and how do they frame them? What needs to change, and what resources are needed to build capacity? What does transformation look like for those involved?

2. Organise and facilitate workshops.

Facilitated workshops are an effective tool for bringing together diverse stakeholders, enabling safe opportunities to experiment and learn from failure. They can take place at all stages of the research and can be carried out as part of organised events, which might also include a programme of speakers. Ideally, they should involve practical activities that encourage participants to work together on a shared problem.

Workshop activities could include collectively deciding on shared research questions or priorities, or a SWOT activity. They could also include creative prompts, such as building with Lego, clay modelling, drawing tasks and post-it note mapping exercises. These types of activities can encourage people to problem solve and discuss ideas in creative ways, and can generate rich data for further analysis.

3. Continue engaging beyond organised events.

Spending time with, listening and talking to key stakeholders is an ongoing process, before, in-between and after facilitated workshops, in informal conversations as well as structured interviews. The researcher may also go along with practical tasks and activities taking place within the wider stakeholder landscape, which might involve volunteering or observing the day-to-day work of an organisation or charity.

Analysis takes place throughout the entire research process. Themes, questions and theories are developed iteratively by moving between the big picture and the detailed specifics. The researcher's role is to understand where there are contradictions, pressure points and frictions, and to identify ways of moving beyond these tensions. As analysis progresses it can be useful to go back and 'sense check' – testing out theories or interpretations that the researcher has developed with participants.

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4. Make sure it's collaboration: share outputs with stakeholders and seek their feedback. Any written outputs that the researcher produces should be shared with participants to give them the opportunity to make comments and offer alternative perspectives, although they are not required to do so. Where opinions differ, the text is altered to reflect that there are multiple viewpoints or interpretations. While Engaged Capacity-building Workshops leave the researcher with clear data to take away and disseminate, research participants should get something in return as well. Depending on the social values and aims of organisations involved, researchers may also provide advice on how to practically meet the needs of their community. Community

members who took part in workshops may appreciate a voucher or other forms of help to access goods or services.

There are specific approaches for addressing the ethical issues involved in doing this form of research. With regard to using the data derived from Engaged Capacity-building Workshops, a negotiated ethics approach can work well. This involves being clear about how you would like to use the data, discussing anonymity with groups and participants in advance and how they would like you to handle this, and offering a right of reply to written reports and papers before they are made public.



Workshop activity in the FareShare Academic in Residence project



Example of Engaged Capacity-building Workshops in social science research

FareShare Academic in Residence

Researcher: Dr Megan Blake, The University of Sheffield

Over several years I have been working with a range of organisations, local authorities and communities to consider how to address the 'wicked' problem – a problem that is difficult to solve, and where there is no single solution - of household food insecurity. For example, in 2018 I secured an Impact Award funded through the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council) to be the Academic in Residence with FareShare UK, a national network of charitable food redistributors, who supply good quality surplus food to frontline charities and community groups. This collaboration emerged from a SWOT workshop that I organised. FareShare were involved in this workshop as part of a collaborative project with Doncaster Council that sought to understand how healthy foodscapes can be enhanced in low-income areas by community and council partnerships.

Given that they are a charity organisation, a key motivator for FareShare was to understand what social value there is in distributing surplus food and how they might capture this impact. Over the year that I was embedded within their organisation I ran a number of workshops with them as well as with their commercial partners to understand what they saw social value as meaning and to consider what they as an organisation could do to enhance that. In one workshop, groups drew pictures to illustrate the social value

of food, which included creating community connections between people, exposing people to unusual foods, reducing stress around food access, and increasing the presence of healthier food options in the local foodscape. In another workshop we used Lego and playdough to consider how bringing these elements together can facilitate community resilience. One of the key things to emerge was an awareness of the diversity of food support that is offered by the organisations that they serve and that FareShare employees can help these organisations to learn from the good practice of each other.

Engaged Capacity-building Workshops also helped FareShare to understand that different organisations have different food needs depending on how they use the food. This shifted FareShare's focus from simply providing food in a manner that is safe to also considering how food support can help tackle loneliness, for example. As a result of this workshop process FareShare has developed collaborations with other national charities that it would not have considered as relevant to its mission previously. This increased understanding led FareShare to identify new ways of identifying and measuring their impact, which involved redesigning the way that they capture data about those organisations who access food through their distribution channels.

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While the initial period of intensive engagement lasted a year, I remain involved with the work that FareShare is doing around the social impact of surplus food. Recently, for example, I collaborated with members of their impact and data teams in a series of weekly workshops that they designed and organised using virtual white boards and post-it notes. Together we reviewed and updated how they understand their data needs with regard to reporting the social impact of food distribution.

Engaged Capacity-building Workshops are an important part of the research process from question identification through to project completion. Through carrying out these workshops my research network has expanded, which has also meant that a number of other collaborative projects have emerged from this work with an ever-increasing circle of academic and non-academic partners. Working in this way also is very rewarding because I can see real change happening as a result of my involvement which makes a difference to the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.



Workshop activity in the FareShare Academic in Residence project



Where else could Engaged Capacity-building Workshops be used?

This approach is useful for conducting research on difficult social challenges, particularly those that involve multiple stakeholders and complex systems. Engaged Capacity-building Workshops can be useful in building trust and developing stronger connections between groups and individuals, such as those who play different roles in relation to a particular service, resource, community or product. This could include the range of community, charities, public sector groups and businesses involved in the food system, as in the example above, but equally it could also apply to other complex systems such as those related to health, social care, or planning. Using workshops as a research method works well with diverse groups as well as within a single organisation to help tease out what the motivations, shared values, processes and power dynamics might be that are linked to the problem under consideration. While the workshops can be conducted with very large groups, dividing them into smaller groups of 8-12 people gives participants the opportunity to think deeply and creatively.

Top tips

1. Remember that you are not the expert. See yourself as a partner in the research who is there to learn. Be aware of your own assumptions, and constantly question them.
2. Listen actively, let participants guide you, and be flexible. If something is not working, be open to trying something different.
3. It is normal to feel a little out of control or afraid of places that are unfamiliar. When you can engage with people and listen, those places become quite safe.
4. Pay attention to things that feel a little uncomfortable or odd, as these are often important moments.

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Further reading

- Feeding Affordances and Decent Helpings: Working Together to Reduce Food Poverty and Improve Public Health.
- Formality and friendship: Research ethics review and participatory action research.
- Workshops - collaborative arena for generative research.

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