

EQUIPPING COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS AND LEADERS WITH PROJECT MANAGEMENT SKILLS IN A DISTRESSED COMMUNITY: A PRACTICAL APPROACH IN HELENVALE, RSA

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Abstract

An evaluation of the application of taught principles, skills, knowledge and practices will have to be conducted in future to determine the overall success of the programme. In a survey we conducted in Helenvale to a sample of 34 respondents with a response rate of 100% which was designed to include both quantitative and qualitative information, we made the following findings: the initial part of the training programme; training delivery, was successful. There is more female than male involvement in community development projects in Helenvale. The training delivery was successful and the method adopted for training was appropriate. The training was relevant and the material interested community activists and leaders. The participants expressed confidence in their ability to manage community projects better than before the training.

Keywords: Project, Project Management, Problem based learning, Project team builder, Simulation, Experiential learning activity Community, Community activist, Community leader.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communities in any society play a major and profound role in shaping society's values and success. Many studies have been conducted on gangs and gang related violence in communities in South Africa. But few have focused on the evaluation of training programmes in distressed communities due to gang violence; particularly basic community project management training.

This study is located in a social and educational space. This paper uses collected data to answer the following two key questions: (1) What are the opinions of participants on the content, quality and effectiveness of a training programme in a gang trouble community? (2) Can problem based learning method be appropriate for improving participants' level of understanding of the programme content in a gang trouble community?

2. BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

In the Eastern province of South Africa, there exists a community known as Helenvale. The community is plagued by constant violence from organized gangs whose egos offload extreme violence onto the community leading to loss of innocent human life as well as hindering the future of many children from accessing education.

Drive through the community during the day on a repeated basis attested to this. Plenty of children who should be in school are seen in the streets, playing innocently not aware of future ramifications of staying away from school; but what can they do?

The Management College of Southern Africa undertook a social and business interest in championing a community project management programme to assist and alleviate some of the distress encountered by Helenvale community in the Eastern Cape.

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

When a community is plagued by persistent gang violence its social success is impeded. The shackles of poverty and disease cripple in and mental emancipation is almost non-existent.

The Helenvale community in the Eastern Cape, located particularly in Port Elizabeth is constantly under gang attacks. This has led to an environment not conducive for community projects' success. Even during the presentation of the training, one beautiful sunny morning, some participants were extremely terrified due to gun battles that ensued on that day. One of the researchers personally saw how terrified a participant was.

Many training approaches do not take the social contextual factors into account. Thus, the core problem addressed by the study was – how to train community activists and leaders in distress without access to computers, classes free from violence and other basic facilities.

4. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study was to investigate the impact of community project management training programme in a community perpetually affected by violence. Specifically the objectives were:

- to evaluate the students' opinions on the content, quality and effectiveness of the administered training programme.
- to evaluate the appropriateness of the training method used.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Training Method used on basic community project management

Talna and Reyes (2005) argues that project management if taught theoretically only, some nuances issues of the profession will escape students and that the challenge of teaching project management is thus in being able to provide, in a short period of time, a learning process that students can integrate into their own knowledge.

Rolle, (2011) espouses the importance of technology in teaching – that it empowers students to be self-directed and it also offers many other benefits. Carter, D (2006) agrees, however, makes the point that technology at its best only amplifies the pedagogical capacity of educational systems. It can make good courses better but that it can also make bad courses worse.

There are many technology platforms that can be used in a class or indeed any training or learning setting. Carter, D (2006) identifies a number of them such as the SMART whiteboard.

This is a digital hub that comprises a computer linked to the data projector and a large touch-sensitive electronic board, which can display projected images. The images can be manipulated directly by hand or with stylus. Many other methods such as the e-book and the iPad initiative through iBooks Author application, videos, video clips, scenarios and role play can all be used.

Wallace, R.M (2002) however, says the know-how to use computers is not the same as knowing how to teach with computers. A teacher or indeed a trainer can easily be an early adopter of or a “techie” and a good science teacher and yet not teach or train effectively with technology. The reasons would be:

- An early adopter can be so enamoured of the technology that she teaches technology rather than the subject matter.
- A competent computer user may know the tools for their own work, for instance word processor or emails but without cognitive tools for teaching their own subject matter.
- A teacher or trainer may know a lot of technologies to which they have no access or because the premises for teaching or training have no technology facilities.
- Technology is specific, the grade level, the subject, computer configuration and availability may not be possible in a classroom or any venue. It is thus hard to provide “generic” education for teaching with technology.

Levi, R. 2009 alludes to problem based learning, a teaching method where teachers guide students through a problem solving process which includes identifying, developing a plan, testing the plan against reality, and reflecting on the plan as the process of designing and completing a project is unfolding. This constructivist’s pedagogy intends to deepen learning by allowing students to utilise an inquiry based approach to engage with issues and questions that are rich, real and relevant to the topic under study. Leitch, S and Warren, M (2007) are in agreement.

According to Barron, (1999) its use is rooted in a method designed for complex issues that require students to investigate in order to understand.

Levi, R (2009), also advocates the use of simulation. Simulation is a set of computer-based techniques that illustrates the behaviour of dynamic complex systems. Simulation based learning is an effective tool for discussing surprising consequences of simple assumptions. This provides new knowledge experiences for decision making or otherwise.

Project team builder presents a new approach to teaching and training of project management- an approach based on a software tool that combines an interactive, dynamic case study and a simple but effective project management system. Project builder applies recent developments in the field of learning histories in simulated based teaching.

Project team builder is meant to support individual training in project management and to provide a new environment for practicing team work in managing dynamic stochastic multiple projects. The new concept of a simulation-based training environment with a built in learning history recording and inquiry mechanism is used in the project training builder. It can be applied as a stand-alone system because it has models for scheduling, budgeting, resource management, monitoring and control. It can be used in conjunction with Microsoft project to plan a project.

Cook, L.S & Olson, J.R. (2006) describe the use of experiential learning activity (ELA) as an effective method for teaching project management. ELAs are used as a multiple process starting with the planning phase, then introduction phase, activity phase and finally feedback phase.

During the planning it is important for the instructor to set the basis for the ELA exercise, including the learning objectives. These must be reinforced throughout the activity. During the introduction phase, the students are given basic knowledge to engage in the activity such as an objective overview, detailed set of instructions, and a short demonstration to clarify the mechanics of the activity. The activity phase allows time for students to achieve the objectives. The challenge for the instructor lies in the design of an activity that should be comprehensive but simple but simple enough to present reality.

An effective activity is one that challenges students to make key decisions and trade-offs and reflective observations at feedback time.

Hossein, (1993) advocates teaching courses such as project management using the following methods:

Lecture.

Questions/answers related to the lecture material

Short case studies with questions

Long case studies with questions

Hands-on computer assignments using software

Projects that require students to work with an external organisation to apply the concepts and techniques learned in class. Clarke, D & Llewellyn, A (2011) agrees with this last point by pointing out the need for work based education principles. They define work based learning as “all and any learning that is situated in the work place or arises directly out of the workplace concerns.

For the training we conducted, Hossein’s (1993) approach was the most suitable considering the myriad problems confronting Helenvale, such as lack of access to computers and many others and was adapted as follows:

Lecture.

Questions and answers related to lecture material

Short case studies

Long case studies

Hands on application of tools and techniques

MS project Video demonstrations

Application of tools, skills, knowledge and concepts learnt in class to real community challenges in Helenvale.

Problem based learning is indeed a deeper approach that can be used to teach project management. Leitch, S and Warren, M (2007) are in agreement with Hossein when they argue that they have found introducing more practical real life studies, often in the form of case studies, students understanding is better and that students experience a deeper level of processing. They however, observe that the challenge lies in creating a “good” and “realistic” problems for students to work with.

5.2 Structure basic community project management

The basic community project management structure for the module was designed as follows:

Factors influencing community development projects

Stakeholder coordination and public participation in community development projects

Management of community development projects

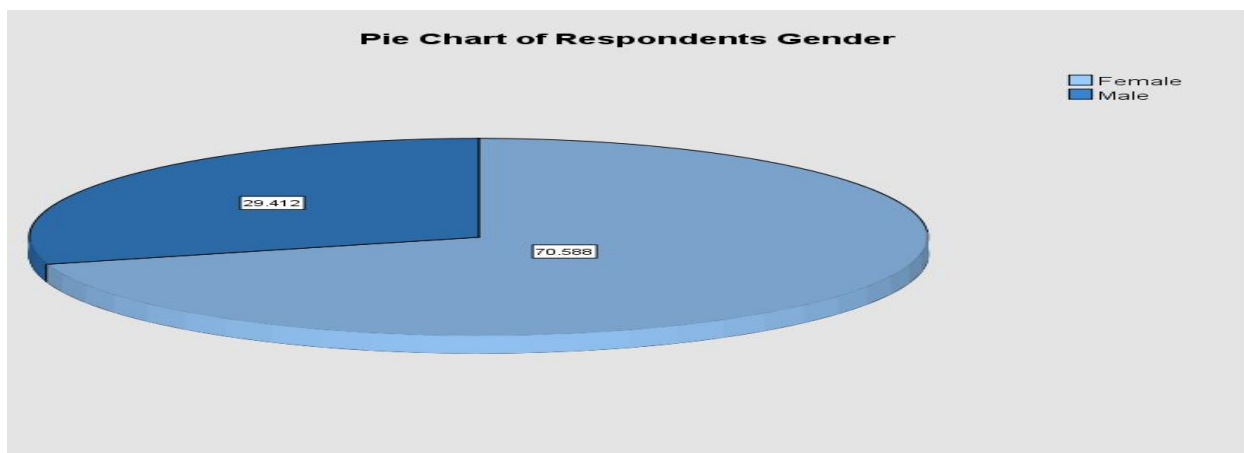
The project management cycle

Basic financial management in projects

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We obtained our data through a survey in Nelson Mandela Bay in Port Elizabeth – Helevale community ward 13. The responding sample constituted 34 participants categorised on the basis of gender. The profiles were: approximately 71% female and 29% male. The survey instrument used was both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative part had closed ended questions. For more insightful information we also asked open ended questions. Our choice of the method was informed by suitability to gather this type of data. Quantitative questions were answered with a four and seven-point rating Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Qualitative questions were answered through provision made comments. Quantitative data was analysed using excel and the qualitative part was analysed using NVIVO specialised software for qualitative data analysis. The response rate was 100%.

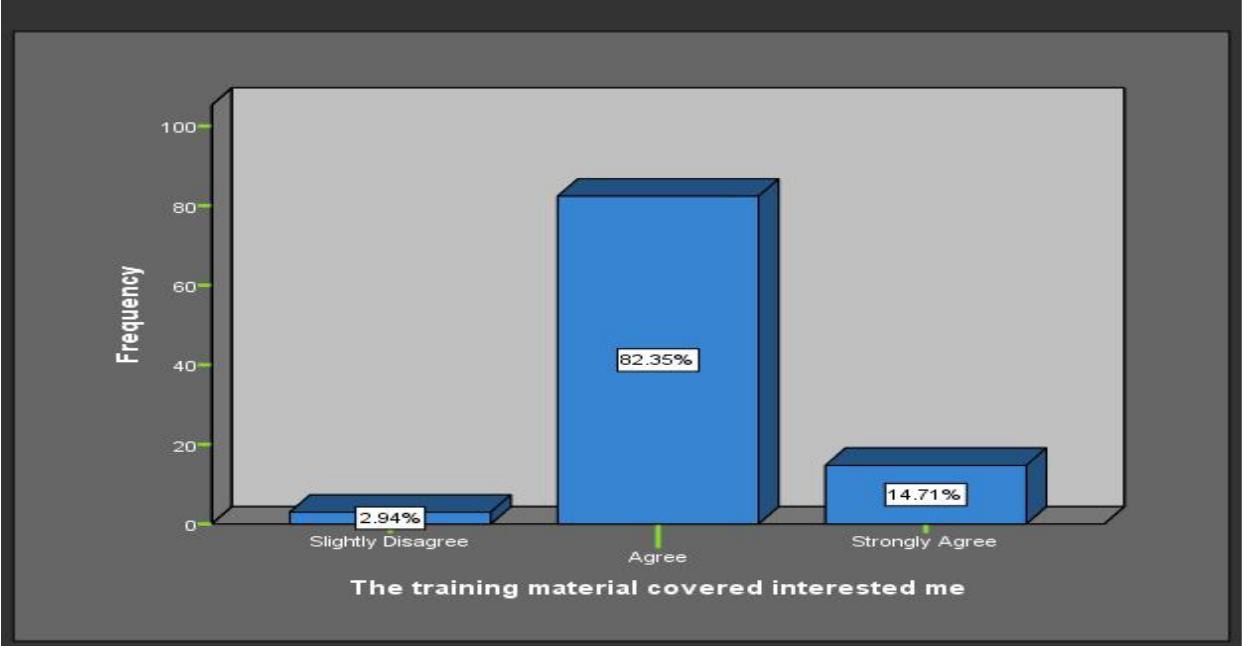
7. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION



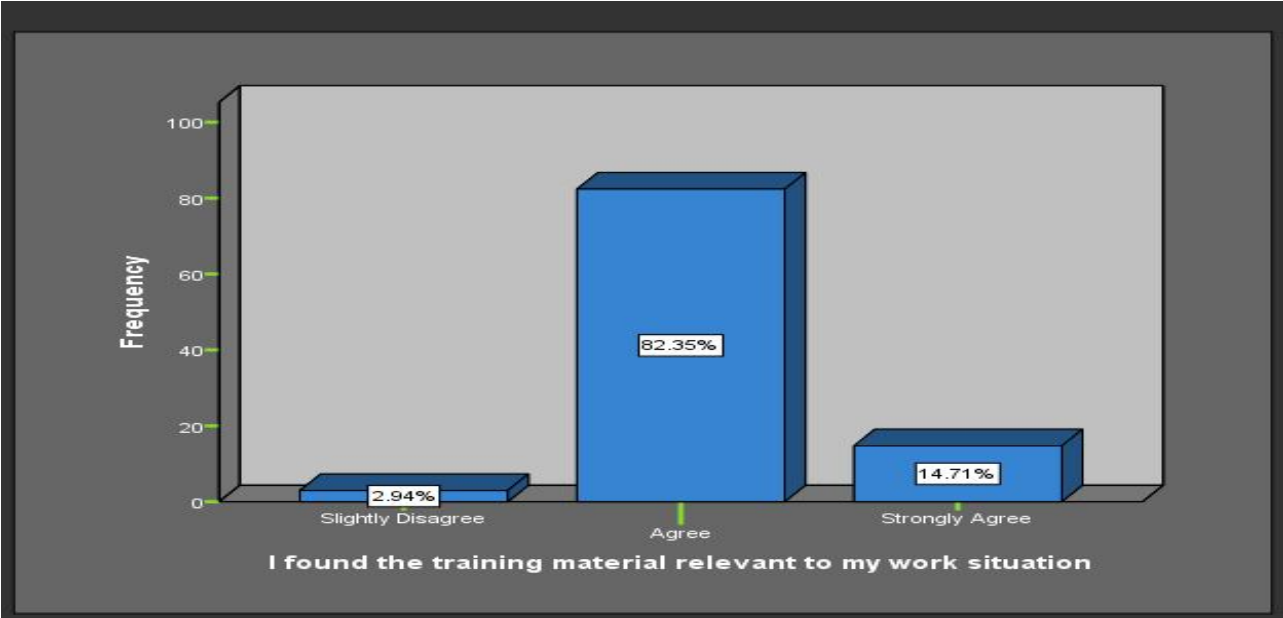
Clearly there were more females than males on the training programme. This speaks to both demographic issues as well as interest in community activism and leadership. At the heart of this huge difference in participation, lies the fact that females are the most affected by community hardships and violence as far as that relates to children. An observation is made that more males need to come to the fore to confront community problems in Helenvale. Men and women working hand in hand will take communities forward. Men in particular should take a leading role in creating an environment where women and children feel safe.



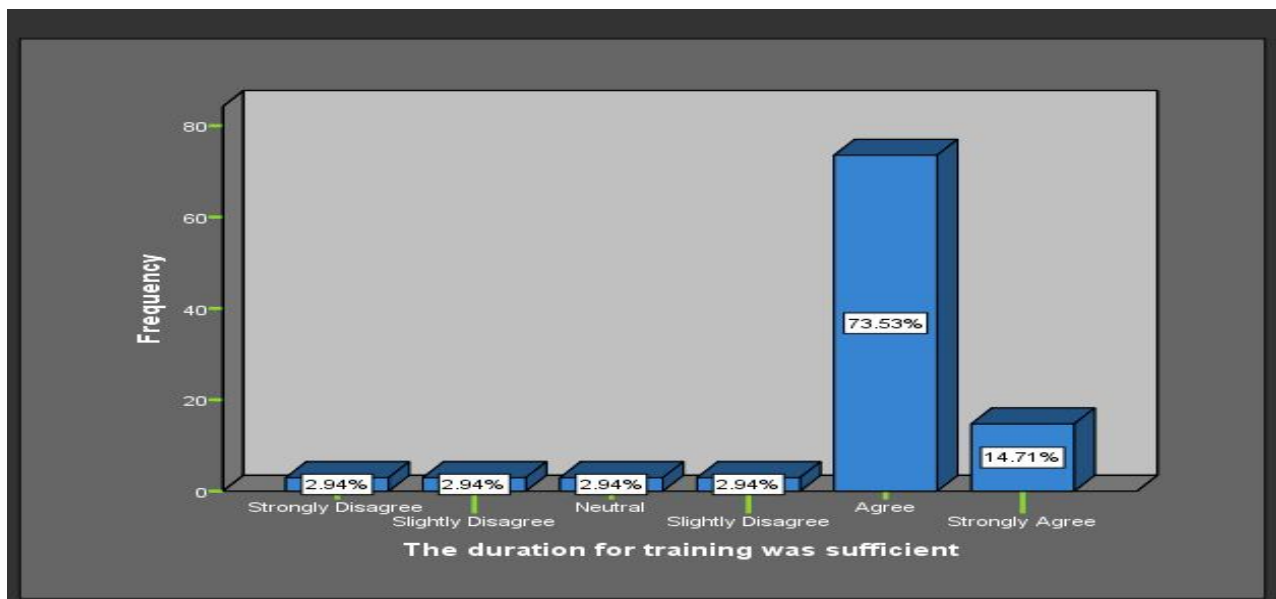
The results of the study reveal that the training programme was appropriately structured. An overwhelming majority of 94.12 % indicated that the training programme had adequate examples, exercises and activities.



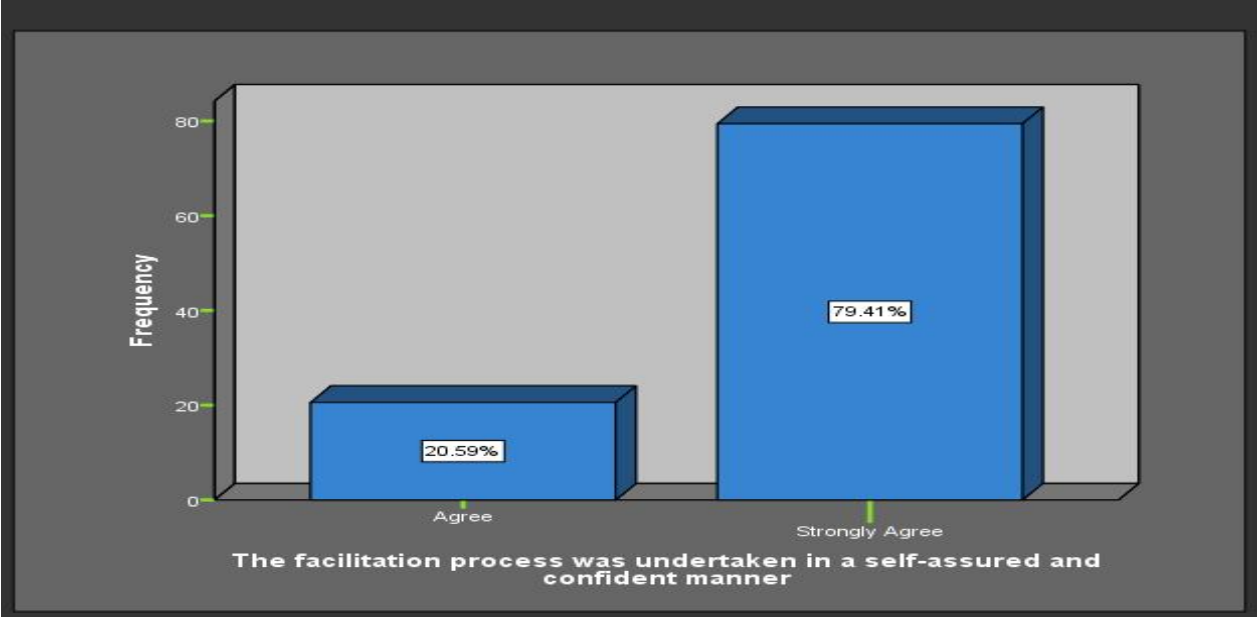
The training material also interested participants. This is confirmed by 97.06% of the respondents. This is a strong affirmation of Mancosa’s customized programme on community development combined with project management. A platform is laid for the Management College of Southern Africa to extend its noble services anchored in more social development than business, of the majority of distressed communities in South Africa such as Helevale, Cape flats and many others.



The results indicate that the training programme was very relevant. With 97.06 % of such an affirmation, the reasons are clear. Helevale community is in dire need of community development projects and programmes. Simple projects such as cleaning up the streets, parks, children play ground, activism against abuse of drugs and gangsterism are and so forth are currently pursued by community activists and leaders. Thus the skills they acquired in project management had immediate relevance. Principles of community organization, stakeholder engagement and solicitation of participation as well as basic financial management coupled with basic project management skills from initiation to implementation and control interested participants very much. They practically made a request for future follow-ups.

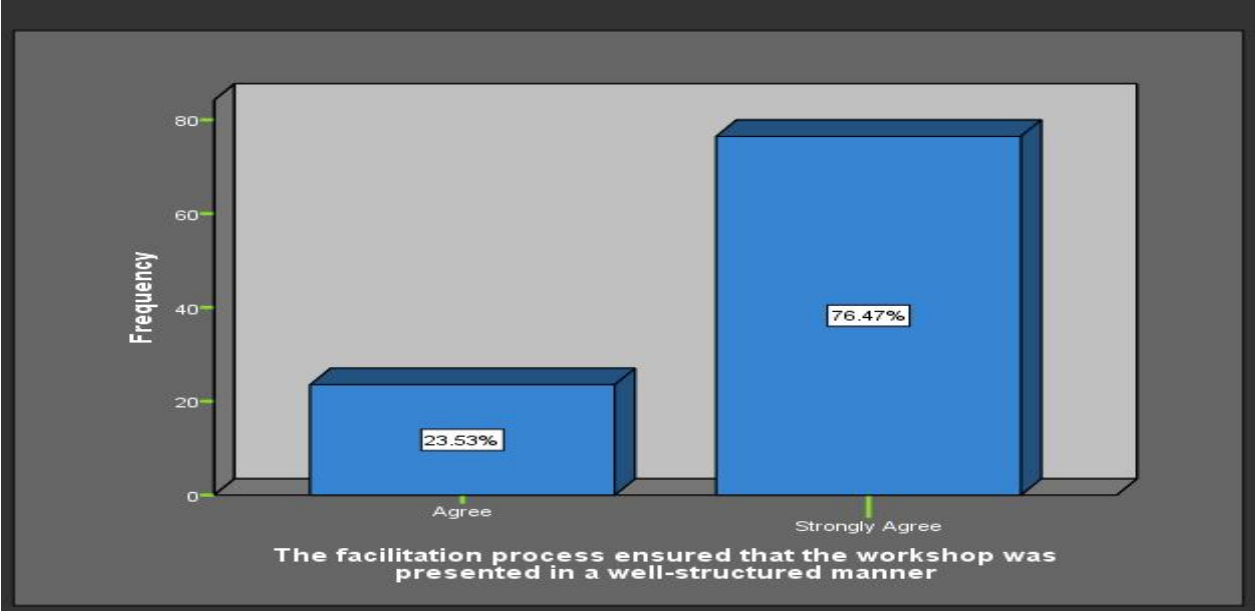


The study disclosed that 88.24% of the respondents felt that the short training programme was sufficient enough to equip them with the requisite project management knowledge, skills, techniques and practices to enable them to better manage community projects.

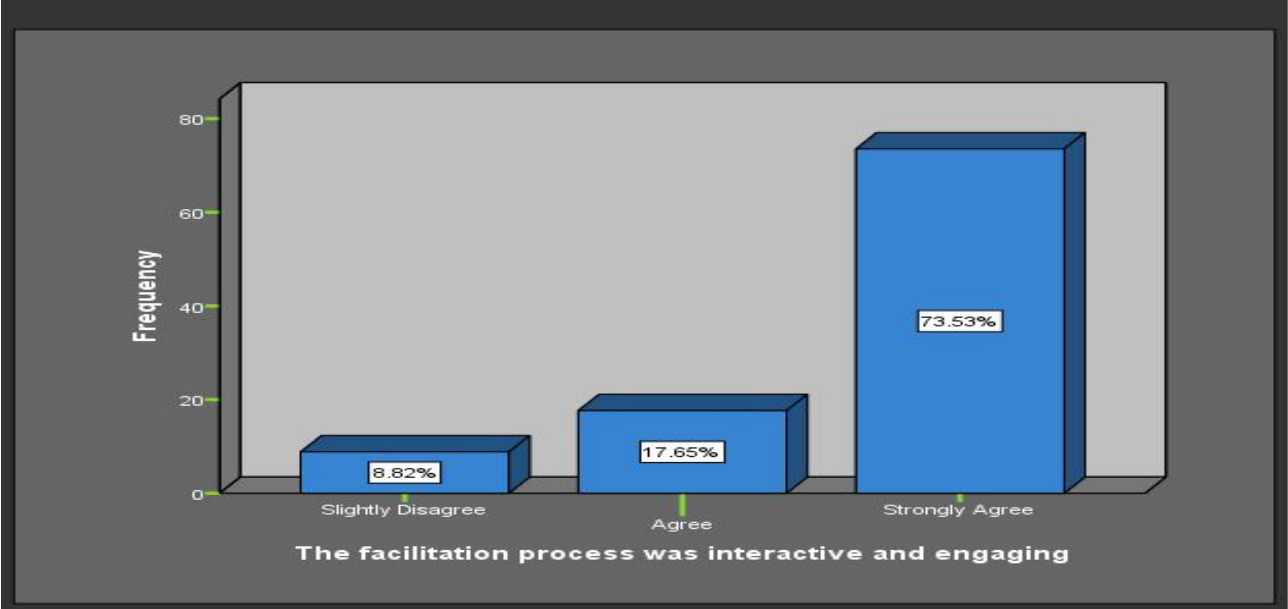


Regarding facilitation of the training programme, every participant agreed that the facilitators were self-assured and confident in delivering the programme. This speaks to the quality of the organisation of the programme as well as the dedication of the facilitators to ensure achievement of results both efficiently and effectively. The facilitators also empathised the situation from the social perspective to reach out to the participants. The training venue was turned into a ‘family’ meeting point full of emotional connection with one goal in mind; to defeat the violence in the community through community projects. This was a key aspect of the training.

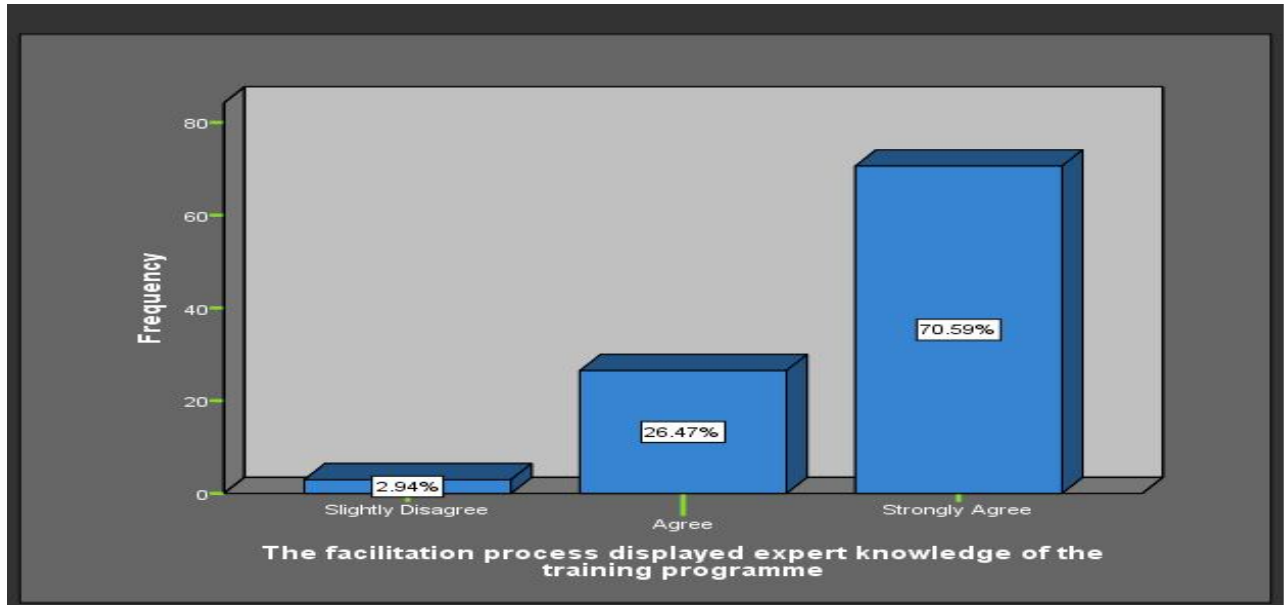
The atmosphere around the training venue was electrifying. Given the backdrop of the community; ever present troubles caused by violence, a community where young people are left to emulate a criminal’s lifestyle and where mothers are trying their best to reverse this ever entrenching social disorder, it was be-fitting to start the sessions holding hands and offering a prayer to God for divine intervention.



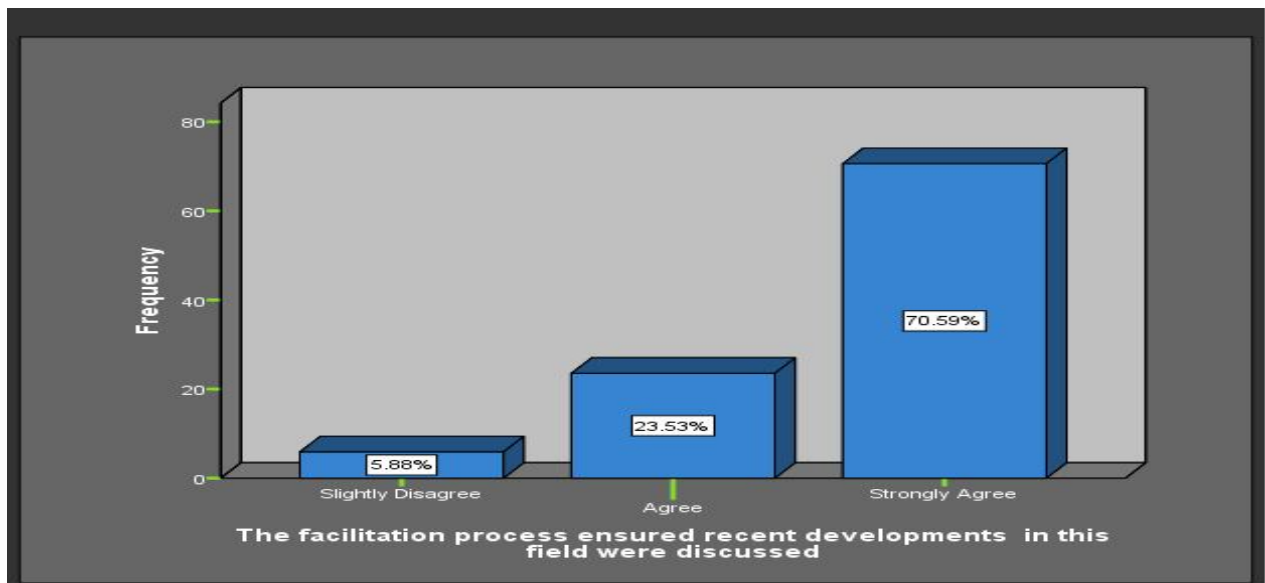
The workshop was structured in two parts; part one was community development and the second part was basic project management skills. A programme schedule for delivery was handed out on the first day and delivery was done accordingly. Endorsed by the deputy dean the programme proved worthwhile from a structural point of view. Evidence of how good the presentation structure was is confirmed by 100% of the respondents.



The second objective of the study was addressed very well in the responses from the above figure. 91.18% of the respondents acknowledged that the method used for delivering the programme was indeed appropriate. Only 8.82% felt that there is a need to improve on the deliver and of course continuous improvement has become a dominant feature of Mancosa programmes.

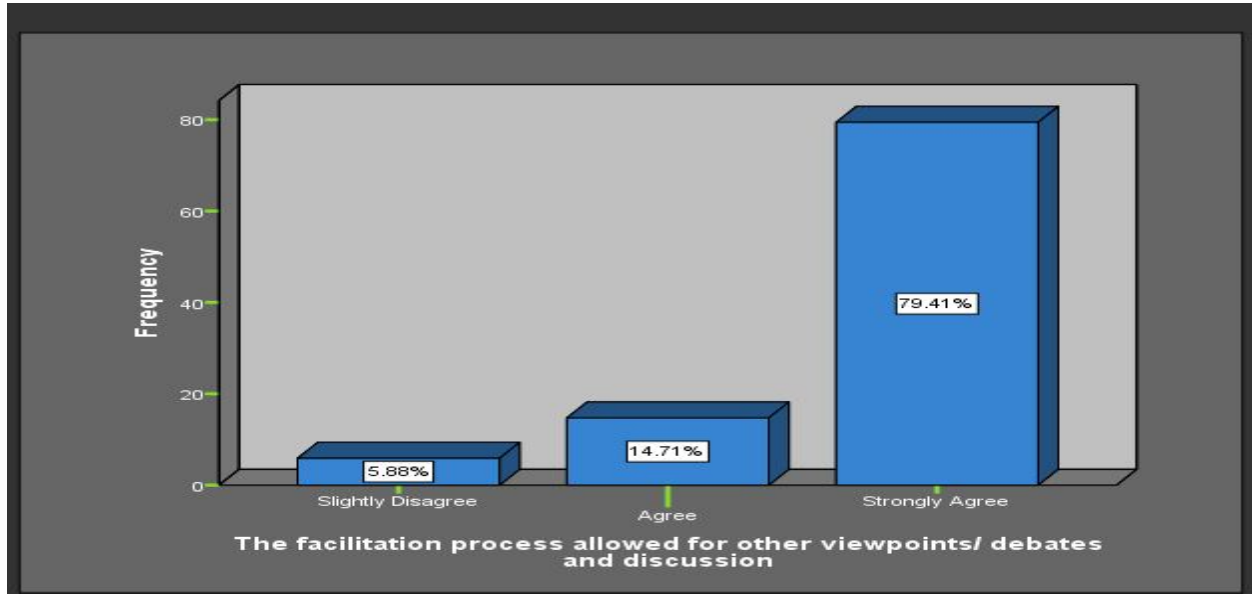


The facilitators displayed expertise in presentation. Respondents agreed. 97.06% the participants made this confirmation.

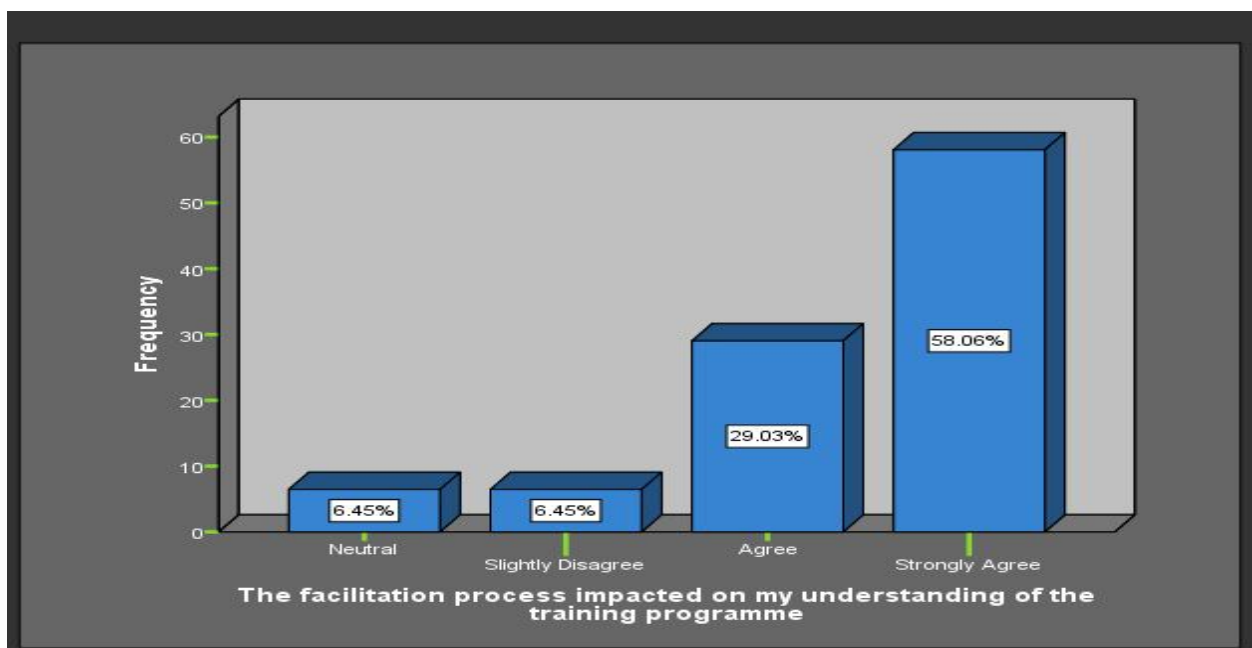


Mancosa takes very seriously the task of incorporating breakthrough knowledge, skills and practices in its training materials on an on-going basis. Facilitators are also in tune with recent developments in their fields through research activities designed to constantly add to the body of knowledge in a variety of disciplines.

Participants are encouraged to know more about recent developments to keep abreast with new knowledge and thinking in various disciplines. 94.12% agree.



Facilitation training programmes of this nature ought to allow for different viewpoints to encourage sharing of ideas and more so, experiences. 94.12% of the respondents agreed and further acknowledged the importance of discussions allowed by the facilitators.



87.09 % shared the thought of having taken something away – skills they would use to manage community projects. Project management has two important sides; the cultural part and the technical part. It is the technical part that poses challenges during training. However, with much patience on the part of the facilitator and a hands-on approach plus more practice, the odds are in favour of participants walking away with a good understanding.

Comments1

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Best Workshop Experienced, full of activity and interaction	7	20.6	25.9	25.9
	Useful and Enjoyed Content, good facilitation	4	11.8	14.8	40.7
	Understandable and Useful Information	3	8.8	11.1	51.9
	Enjoyable	1	2.9	3.7	55.6
	Good luck	2	5.9	7.4	63.0
	I was overwhelmed by the knowledge	1	2.9	3.7	66.7
	I think more time must be spent	2	5.9	7.4	74.1
	Want to go to the next level, very interesting	2	5.9	7.4	81.5
	looking forward to implement it in the community	2	5.9	7.4	88.9
	Pass the two days	1	2.9	3.7	92.6
	I think the time is short on the technical point: project management	1	2.9	3.7	96.3
	Module is great, problem is we don't have computers to do our assignments. I will recommend anyone to use MANCOSA	1	2.9	3.7	100.0
	Total	27	79.4	100.0	
Missing	System	7	20.6		
Total		34	100.0		

Through comments, the following insights were inferred: participants revealed that this was the best workshop ever to have been attended because it was full of activity and that it was interactive. The content was useful and that participants enjoyed the presentation. Some felt that the knowledge was very interesting to the point that they identified a need to progress to the next level of project management. Other looked forward to implementation.

On the development side, more time could have been allocated. Also the community, given the background and social setting need to have basic knowledge of computers. For statistics refer to the above table. This is another training gap to be taken advantage of by Mancosa.

Comments2

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Increased knowledge	5	14.7	15.6	15.6
	Very Understandable	5	14.7	15.6	31.3
	Great facilitation, professionally done	9	26.5	28.1	59.4
	Very Enjoyable	5	14.7	15.6	75.0
	Grateful for this opportunity, hope to do advance course in Project Management in future	1	2.9	3.1	78.1
	Great facilitation, utilise lessons learnt in community	2	5.9	6.3	84.4
	Increased knowledge, take back to community	1	2.9	3.1	87.5
	Good/Excellent	2	5.9	6.3	93.8
	excellent but very fast paced	2	5.9	6.3	100.0
	Total	32	94.1	100.0	
Missing	System	2	5.9		
Total		34	100.0		

Participants' knowledge increased. They understood the content and that facilitators exhibited professionalism during presentation. Some were grateful for participating. Again the need to increase knowledge of project management was reiterated. Knowledge gained would be utilised in the community.

Another need for programme development was identified; time. More time could have been of great assistance to participants.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

It emerged in line with research objectives, that the initial part; delivery of the training programme was successful. The second part of success will however, require a follow-up to determine the extent of the application of knowledge, skills, techniques and practices of project management imparted to the community. The training method used was indeed appropriate.

The following recommendations are made:

- Mancosa needs to take advantage of the training needs for computer knowledge that still exist in Helevale. If this community is anything to go by, then Mancosa has a vast market to tap into; all communities with social factors similar to Helenvale.
- Mancosa should take advantage of the need for further knowledge of community project management by those participants wishing to upgrade their knowledge and skills.
- Mancosa should revisit the community in order to determine the second part of the training programmes' success; evaluation of community project implementation.
- The training programme's duration definitely needs extension for full students' benefits.

- More men should get involved in community projects' training; their input will add value to communities. More advocacy programmes are needed to sensitise men on their obligation as members of communities.

9. CONCLUSION

The research provided the researchers with support information and validation of the training material design and final delivery. Helenvale was the 'testing ground'. We clearly indicate that the initial training programme undertaken was effective. Thus achieving the first part of the first objective we set out. We say the first part of the objective because we view the objective as being two-fold; part one being the initial delivery of the programme and part two the evaluation of the impact of training which can only be determined after seeing the progress on projects introduced and successfully implemented. The second objective was achieved out rightly with a firm affirmation that the training method used was appropriate.

Our initial findings point out the need for further research as follows:

- Evaluation of the true impact of the training by reviewing progress made with community project implementation after the training.
- Impact of violence on children born in distressed communities in Helenvale, South Africa.

10. AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Both Mr Stebby Mutobola and Dr Anthony Rippon were involved in data collection, construction and analysis. Mr Stebby Mutobola was the author of the paper.

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