

Participatory research or self-directed education . . . In both cases, learners become the responsible decision-makers about values and priorities.

The How and Why of Preparing Graduate Students to Carry out Participatory Research

by Dr. Beverly B. Cassara
University of the District of Columbia

With the ever-increasing sophistication of oppressed people, whether in Third World Countries or in marginal populations in industrialized countries, there is a growing trend in social science research to reject those modes that treat individuals as objects of research. Further, there is an increasing demand that the results of social science research serve in a timely way to improve the situation of those involved. The developing mode of participatory research meets these two requirements. However, participatory research is not a simple method; neither is it easily explained or carried out. Based, as it is, in the principle of optimal and imminent human development, it requires a value system and a kind of commitment not necessarily inherent in traditional social science research.

Participatory research is a combination of education, research, and action so intertwined that the three components can not really be separated from each other or approached serially. The purpose is the empowerment of people by helping them to determine their own problems, educate themselves about these, decide how they wish to prioritize them, learn about their causes, find out where help is to be found, decide upon solutions and take action.

At this time, when the concept of "self-directed" education is receiving particular attention as a means of enhancing the autonomy of the learner in serving his/her own educational needs most effectively, one could see "participatory research" as group self-directed adult education. In both cases, learners become the responsible decision-makers about values and priorities. Participatory research is a democratic idea, placing the responsibility for self-direction onto the group.

Dr. Beverly B. Cassara is a professor of adult education at the University of the District of Columbia in Washington, D.C.

The term "Participatory Research" is, in a way, a misnomer, because it does not fully describe the education and action phases of the total concept. The name developed in Tanzania in the mid 1970s, when researchers and researched decided that traditional social science research often did not help any given group of people directly, if at all. At this time, the objection that traditional research patterns made objects out of people was felt so keenly that the name, "Participatory Research," was coined as a counter concept and has stuck like glue even though it is not completely descriptive.

It was inevitable that the academic community would have difficulty accepting participatory research as true research. To the traditionalist, research is carried out by an academic who begins with an hypothesis, who searches the literature for relevant material, sets up conditions which can be replicated, carries out the work, writes up the results, and publishes the findings, but has little or no responsibility for follow-up action. While this is a most acceptable method for many kinds of research, this paper will show that none of these attributes apply to participatory research, and thus a certain amount of confusion, criticism, and misunderstanding occurred, especially in the early years. Rajesh Tandon, the Coordinator of the Participatory Research Network of the International Council for Adult Education, explains that now, a decade and one-half later, participatory research has proven itself as a useful and valid mode in its own right:

Participatory Research has reached a stage of clearer articulation. (It) is no more presented as a critique of traditional social science research, it has a philosophy and a world view of its own. It is beginning to articulate questions of political economy of research: who's interest does research serve? It is transcending the petty debate on the issues of techniques and methods. The practice of Participatory Research has demonstrated that the tools and techniques are not central issues. The issue is control over the process of the production of knowledge, its storage and its use. (Tandon 1987)

Nevertheless, in so far as one of the components of participatory research is indeed research, it is necessary to understand its distinctiveness in relation to traditional research, especially traditional survey research to which it was a reaction. Dr. Budd Hall, secretary general of the International Council for Adult Education, based in Toronto, who is one of the founders of the concept of participatory research, points out some of the shortcomings of traditional survey research. According to Hall, surveys oversimplify social reality by forcing choices; they reflect poorly the dynamics of a situation since they present one moment in time and experience in a changing world; and through testing the individual in isolation, he believes that survey research can be dominating, oppressive, and alienating. Further, no direct action results. (Hall 1979)

The basic premise of participatory research is the democratic principle that oppressed and marginalized peoples, through education, research, and action can transform their social realities. This kind of empowerment will be based on their own value systems. The research methods will be various and different to fit different situations. Knowledge will be created, which may or may not be published in books, but will enhance the quality of life in this world, however informally it is dispensed.

Participatory research can only be carried out in societies which allow some minimal amount of freedom. Participatory research will not solve all the world's problems, but it

is a logical extension of modern adult education principles of andragogy—that adults must be autonomous, self-directed learners, who engage in educational situations to solve the problems they pose themselves.

Methodology

From the foregoing description of participatory research, the reader will already have observed that, as opposed to traditional research, methodology for participatory research is comprehensive, various, creative, and never twice the same. This does not mean, however, that there are not very definite philosophical guidelines for carrying out this type of research effort.

In the first place, the role of the facilitator bears little resemblance to that of the traditional researcher, for the motivation is quite different. This person facilitates not only research but also education and action. In any event, the facilitator does not choose the problem to be studied, the method whereby it will be studied, the persons to carry out the study and can lay no claim to research findings.

While the role of the traditional researcher requires objectivity and neutrality, the role of the PR facilitator may never be value-free, but rather the facilitator must be committed to the very special development of the group he/she is serving. The facilitator may indeed write up and publish accounts of the experience, and hopefully would, for the rewards of this work for the people themselves are so significant that they should be reported.

The basic premise of participatory research is that oppressed and disadvantaged persons can empower themselves through examining their own situation; developing understanding of the political, economic, and social determinants of that situation; researching alternative scenarios; taking action that grows out of their own culture and values; and thus adding to the knowledge base for the enhancement of the quality of life.

The very first step for the researcher is to spend sufficient time with the people concerned to develop a relationship of understanding and trust. Only then can an authentic discussion of the needs and aspirations of the people begin. The role of the facilitator will vary with the situation, depending on the level of awareness of their problems by the people themselves, and especially on the extent to which the people have an initial belief that their own intervention can make a difference.

The process begins with the people, but the facilitator must relate to them and with them so closely that he/she can tune in on their needs, interests, and values and serve as an animator to help the people choose a starting point. It would be ridiculous to claim that the facilitator takes no part in expediting the process. The people need the knowledge and skills of the facilitator to help them change their situation, but the facilitator must resist the temptation to make decisions for them. The facilitator walks a fine line between animating and decision-making, but the difference is distinct.

The process starts with informal discussions with individuals and small groups, but over time, a more formal structure must evolve so that the decisions that are made are truly representative of the people as a whole. The first decision will have to be the setting of priorities and the choice of the first problem for study and action. And at this point education and research meld with action. The roots of the problem must be explored and documented so that all the people have clear understanding of them. Documentation may take whatever form is natural to the group. In some instances, popular theater is a better vehicle than the written

word. The next step involves research into the various alternatives for correcting or changing these root conditions. The research must be comprehensive enough to assure that all sectors of the community have been heard, and through this process they have developed a common understanding to undergird the action which must follow.

It is obvious that the foregoing steps do not happen serially. Education, research, and action are really taking place simultaneously while the people are asking the questions about the problem and the possible answers—how, when, where, why, and who.

Once the process has started it should continue in some form with some of the people almost spontaneously. The solution to one problem makes evident the next problem. As the ripple effect continues a new perspective grows that shows the various problems in relationship to the structure of society.

The greatest virtues for the facilitator are patience and perseverance to help the people develop their own leadership process. This is critically important because sooner or later at some level the process will turn political. Then it will be crucial that the politics of the situation represent the authentic politics of the people themselves and not some notion dreamed up by an outsider.

Knowledge gained through PR is immediately put to use for as people understand the causes of a problem and plot remedies for that problem, they have educated themselves for action, but action is not only an end product. Small actions have been taking place throughout the whole process.

Documentation is important, but the emphasis on written documentation may not apply. Where knowledge has been gained, it should be shared, but people have been sharing knowledge through the oral tradition for centuries, and it is still an effective means, especially for illiterate peoples. Where peoples are used to sharing through pictures on blackboards or even newsprint, that, too, is effective sharing. The reports of the facilitator are also important aspects of the documentation.

Case Study

Space in this article does not allow for a full description of even one case study, but two types of cases will be briefly examined to show how PR is applicable in developing and in industrialized countries.

The first case is that of a group of women in India who, with the help of the facilitator, developed the skills of popular theater as their vehicle of communication. This group of women goes to a particular urban area and makes every effort to get to know the people there and to become known and trusted by them. The next step is to create small theatrical productions about the various problems people have mentioned to them. Popular theater is an established community experience for these people, but it is customarily performed by men and for entertainment purposes. These women decided to use it for enhancing the quality of life. After each presentation, they held discussions with the members of the audience, asking them to critic the performance to see whether they are expressing a problem as it exists in reality. If sufficient suggestions are put forth for altering the show, they perform it again right away making the corrections, until the people are satisfied that it represents the total picture.

The next step is for the women to mix with the people in their daily lives again and listen to the various suggestions that individuals and small groups might have for improving a given situation. When the women have exhausted the

ideas for remedy, they again make theater presentations depicting the various solutions possible. They act out each and again take suggestions from the audience as to how the scenario would be achieved. When all the possible alternatives have been portrayed and discussed, then it is time for the people to decide the actual steps they wish to take.

In this case the women of the community had decided that their first interest was gaining some equality with the men, in a situation where the women, in addition to the complete responsibility for the home and children, were also employed. The unquestioned power of tradition and religion kept them oppressed. Not until they had this public discussion, could any change be imagined. However, the community agreed that boys should be trained to help their mothers and not only should men take some responsibility for the home, but that the women should have a voice in community decisions. Thus, in opening up for discussion the formerly closed bonds of tradition, the women were transforming their own reality.

The second case took place in a city housing project in Washington, D.C., when the author and some graduate students wanted to ascertain why the women did not make use of all the educational opportunities available to them through city initiatives. In this particular instance, the women immediately proved their sophistication by refusing to be studied, but they did invite the group to come and meet with them regularly and work with them in various ways, and suggested that in the process the university group would gain some knowledge. The women made it clear that they would be the leaders, and they were.

Their particular method could be described as trial and error, but it was their best way of learning reality and preparing themselves to upgrade their situation. Having been recipients of many stipended government programs, which seemed to wash over them and leave them in no better situation, the women were very cynical and hopeless. They also needed to test out the university group to see whether they were deserving of any more trust than the government. At first they asked for help in locating jobs, but with their limited educational levels, the entry level jobs that a few secured were not worth the effort of getting off welfare. Secondly, they wanted help with nutrition and weight control, but after some weeks at this effort, they decided they did not have the discipline to carryout programs, and they gave over this effort. Then they went to activities like furniture refinishing which was a fad at that time. They soon learned that materials for this cost quite a bit, and further they did not like working by themselves on a piece of furniture when the real life was going on out in the community. They gave this effort over, and asked for driver education. The university group tried in vain to get city help for this and finally found driver education instructors from the public schools to help on their own time. A number of the women succeeded in procuring their driver's licenses and this was a huge accomplishment for them.

This process of trial and error was a very effective way of checking out their own interests and abilities and needs. When they succeeded at driver education, they saw themselves differently—as capable persons equal to all other drivers in the city. They had a new sense of self which told them more than any counselor ever could have done. They were ready to attack their basic problem which was lack of education. They asked the university group to help them work for the GED. They did not want to go out to city programs, they wanted to do it right there with the people they had learned to trust, the university group. The story of how this all developed is too long to complete here except to say

that 14 of them did complete the GED and did get admitted to the city college. Some of them stayed through four years and some of them quit after a year or two when they were able to get good jobs that they liked. That was success to them and they are the ones who must define success for themselves.

One could ask if traditional researchers from outside either of these communities could have carried out studies which would have been nearly as meaningful either in the creation of knowledge or in the benefits to the women themselves. Dr. Budd Halls' criticisms of traditional survey research mentioned earlier in this paper would have been valid in these cases.

How to Prepare Graduate Students

The basic question is, of course, why graduate students should be prepared to carry out participatory research, especially since it is most unlikely that PR would be acceptable as dissertation research. Furthermore, most graduate programs do not provide a great deal of flexibility which would allow students to deviate from prescribed paths, and students are usually very goal-oriented toward the completion of their long years of study.

However, professors who have an interest in PR can help their students to develop this special skill, for students who have studied the theory can have a try at applying it in a practicum or field experience requirement. Here again the logistics are not easy, simply because the semester is so short. The professor must have an ongoing project or at least relationship with a suitable community group. This is not easy for a professor since there will be little praise for this work, certainly not credit for research, and it is very time consuming.

Nevertheless, professors and students who are concerned with the particular importance of enhancing the quality of life of disadvantaged persons are finding ways to use and further develop the concept of participatory research.

Also one must consider that there are levels of understanding and practice of participatory research. Doctoral students who have already had a thorough introduction to the various philosophies of education may be in a position to evaluate their practical work more systematically than the Master's student who has had only a brief overview of the educational philosophy. However, one thing is true for both; each person must have developed his own personal philosophy of education so that he knows that his beliefs fit into the humanistic goals of PR.

Therefore, step one in preparing students to do PR is to organize the learning situation which will provide a sufficient philosophical background. Step two is obviously providing the learning situation which makes students knowledgeable about PR. There is a great deal of printed material available now, although most of it is not in book form, but rather in booklets, monographs and articles. The participatory research network of the International Council for Adult Education is developing more material continually to keep up with the advancement of the concept and its use throughout the world.

As necessary and essential as steps one and two are, the student will only really learn about participatory research by doing it. Since the methodology for participatory research requires the absolutely essential step of the development of friendship and acquaintance with a particular group and their needs and interests, the semester will be a frustratingly short time to carryout a project. Indeed, it could not be done at all if the professor did not already have

an ongoing relationship into which the students could fit with some assurance of trusting acceptance, and this can only happen if the community group knows and believes that even though one group of students leave, the professor's commitment is ongoing and new students will come with a new semester.

From this point on, it is not possible to prescribe or predict how a situation will develop. Students will learn that it is not easy to develop an authentic relationship with disadvantaged persons and it does not happen quickly. From the beginning students have to know that there is only one relationship that matters and that is the authentic relation of friendship and respect of persons. This is a special kind of commitment that alone can be helpful to persons who have fallen through the safety net. It is a commitment that social workers and case workers cannot provide by the very fact that they are representative of a social structure that sees these persons as dependents. Therefore, as enlightened as the social worker may be, he/she is still paid by the government to get a job done—to see that people have something to eat, and some health care, and a place to live. Therefore, it is inevitable that the disadvantaged will be treated as dependents and will resent it.

It has been the experience of this author that the students who participate in such a project appreciate the chance to relate to housing-project women and learn from them some of the dimensions of life that they have not experienced. They can become impatient when they see possibilities of a better life for the women that the women do not see for themselves. They wonder if they are failing at their project if they do not see results in a what they feel is a timely way. For the professor, patience is needed also—patience to let the students sweat it out, patience to let them work in their own way and not try to save them from mistakes. Above all, in so far as possible, communication between all members should be open and free. This is not to say that the professor will not need to have privileged discussions with the students, but it is surprising how much can be discussed in the full meeting with students and group participants, to the benefit of all. This is not hard to understand when we stop to consider that PR is based on the philosophy that the people themselves have to take the leadership, that facilitators are co-learners with them and that beyond everything else we share a mutual respect.

Along the way the students will take great pleasure as they see various steps individual women may make for their own improvement. The real success comes when even after

the semester is over, the group forms a committee to improve the apartment building, bringing specific suggestions to management about the use of the laundryroom, the lighting needs of the building, and requests for certain kinds of security arrangements. Then the women have indeed taken leadership, identified their problems, researched alternative solutions, educated themselves further, and have altered in a small way the social structure of their lives. They have moved from helplessness to the belief that their intervention can be meaningful, and they are ready to move on to larger problems.

As was stated earlier, special conditions are needed for helping graduate students learn to carry out participatory research projects. There are probably not too many universities which offer such training at the present time, at least with the practical experience component. Probably there are quite a number of courses which deal extensively with the theoretical aspects of participatory research, such as those taught at the University of Massachusetts by Dr. Peter Park (Critical Theory and Research) and by David Kinsey (Alternative Research).

However, there are probably more courses with the practical component than we know. For instance at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Professor Joan Reeves takes public health students out into the various ethnic groups to help them build their own primary health care groups. The methods they use are very similar to PR, but they do not happen to use that name.

This brings us to one final thought about participatory research. It is not really new. At least much of it is not. What is new is the idea of the research component, and the fact that it is a developing connection with adult education training at the university level. The really important idea which is coming to light in various parts of the world is that the future for civilization will depend on the extent to which all adults will become autonomous learners and be equally responsible for the quality of life on this small planet.

References

- Hall, Budd (1979). Participatory research: Breaking the academic monopoly. In John A. Niemi (Ed.), **Viewpoints on adult education research**. (pp. 50-53). Columbus, Ohio: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education.
- Tandon, Rajesh (1987). Participatory Research Network. Unpublished report to the Program Advisory Committee, The International Council for Education. Pelham, N.Y.