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PRA training in universities: some thoughts prompted by a recent workshop in Canada

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• Introduction

The workshop was run on a fee-paying basis every day for ten days, with 13 participants (eight women) and two facilitators. Six of the participants were full or part-time students (undergraduates and graduates) from university schools of Rural Planning and Development, Rural Extension Studies, or Landscape Architecture. The remainder were in professional work related to rural or urban development in Canada or overseas. One of us had previously conducted PRA training in the field and in development agencies, and the other mainly in academic institutions in the Netherlands and Canada (but not in a course which brought together students and non-students).

Although the workshop was judged by us and the participants to be a success, some issues and problems arose that gave us food for thought. We have put this note together mainly as an *aide memoire* to help sort out our thoughts in the cold light of day, but also to start to thinking about possible strategies to deal with the problems and issues. It may also be useful for other PRA trainers who find themselves facilitating workshops in academic institutions.

The argument is often heard that universities must find a place for PRA training, "before it's too late" (i.e. before people become cynical professionals/career-oriented technocrats etc.). Sounds fine in theory, but in practice there are obstacles which are peculiar to universities which do not make it easy or for that matter desirable. In our experience, there are a whole range of things that need more thought and preparation. These include issues relating to:

- participants' identity;
- participant maturity in relation to diversity of goals;
- emotional baggage;
- the lack of university staff as workshop participants;
- logistics; and,
- placements.

Participants' identity

Though the student participants were all adults in their early twenties upwards and mostly already had experienced professional and adult domestic roles, they were treated in the university as juniors, to be directed and guided intellectually, with low status in the academic hierarchy. This had given rise to all sorts of frustrations, resentments and unresolved power questions. The students brought into the workshop the loss of confidence and insecurity that academic life had created in them. The undergraduates and post-graduates also were conscious of fine distinctions in academic status among themselves. The working professionals for their part brought a mistrust of the 'undisciplined' and 'intellectual' nature of academia and time pressures from their work commitments.

PRA gave everyone a chance to re-integrate and re-establish themselves as responsible and confident persons. But less painful and more explicit learning exercises for this would be useful additions to the PRA tool-kit. Would more rigorous self-selection be possible through more information being given on the process before people sign up? However this might put off those most ready to learn and/or who could derive most benefit. An additional strategy would be for the facilitators to be more explicit about these tensions when the workshop contract was being formulated.

Participant maturity in relation to diversity of goals

PRA would seem to require a certain level of personal maturity, and a critical mass of 'real world' experience in trying to change the status quo, for the concepts and principles to make any real sense to participants. If their only work experience has been in institutions (such as schools, universities or research stations), they may lack the empathy to understand what PRA is trying to achieve, why, and where personal 'reversals' fit in. Or, as in the case under review, some may treat the workshop as just another piece of the curriculum with no 'real world' implications. Related to this concern is the narrow view held by some participants that PRA is a research methodology which can be adapted to satisfy academic thesis requirements.

On the positive side, those whose primary concern is research tend to be young, enthusiastic, full of energy, less cynical than 'done it all, seen it all' participants who are inclined to propose an endless series of reasons why PRA 'cannot work'. The ones who engage most readily are young professionals with experience of the limitations of other approaches but still with the energy and commitment to doing something about it.

The mix of starting orientations and personal goals is quite different to the field-based or the profession-based training situation in which participants, whatever their idiosyncratic objectives, tend to be united by the need to address a specific problem or issue and/or a shared context or goal. Without an immediate goal, context and task in front of them, the additional distractions and stresses arising from the timing of the workshop at the end of the academic year, the need to submit research proposals, fulfil domestic, family and work-related duties, and worries about housing, finances and health added noticeably to the difficulties in maintaining focus and cohesion.

Emotional baggage

People seem particularly prone to carry into any course with 'participation' in the title a heap of emotional baggage which they appear to expect to be able to examine or to dump.

Students seem especially prone to the indulgence of unburdening themselves. PRA does (and indeed should?) stimulate self-reflection and heightened awareness of behaviour and process. But it should also instil a certain discipline in behaviour and rigour in application.

Where (as in this case) a number of participants already knew each other and had developed inter-departmental and personal rivalries, cliques and friendships, the specifically PRA dynamic was hard to get going against this already partly established emotional backdrop. We might have done better to stress the items in the contract which emphasised the need to keep the workshop proceedings off-the-record and confidential to the participants.

Paradoxically, despite all the self analysis, there was a general reluctance among the participants to relate the exercises and the reflections on the process to their own performance or to feed the learning back into the group dynamic. There was a marked tendency to intellectualise the learning, to push the analysis away from any personal application, and to deal with the abstract rather than the concrete or the 'here-and-now'.

Lack of university staff as workshop participants

Faculty staff, though invited, did not sign up. This has also been the experience in the four other PRA-type university trainings facilitated by one of us. Fear of loss of dignity and authority in the presence of students seems to be a reason. Problems with getting time off from other academic commitments, as well as week-ending or domestic priorities, also seem to play a role. Pre-workshop consultation and adjusting the scheduling to two-three weeks of half day sessions could overcome staff reluctance and allow them to keep up with their administrative and teaching duties. Half days would also respond to participants' complaints at the intensity of full days, with too little time for reading and digesting.

Logistics

The logistics on campus offer some advantages and disadvantages. Mobilisation of

resources such as video, felt pens, paper etc. is relatively easy and good workspace is available. Food and bars are at hand, cheap and friendly. On the other hand, there are many distractions, as telephones and faxes allow non-students to address work-related queries from their colleagues, and students can cut workshop time to hand in essays, attend tutorials etc. An off-campus venue might be preferable.

Placements

Real-life placements in the field are a must, but they have to be carefully chosen, for two main reasons. Not all contexts and problems lend themselves to PRA; PRA is not a universal panacea. It is, for example, not particularly well-suited to handling the social work problems of the emotionally disturbed. Secondly, in a short workshop, participants are only in the community for a number of hours, typically with no likelihood of follow-up in a continuing relationship. Another consideration is the location of the interaction: it is off-putting to invite non-academics for meetings on campus. The 'university' is an alien and somewhat awe-inspiring institution for non-academics.

• Final reflections

These problems and issues are likely to be intensified in conservative academic institutions which do not have interfaculty or interdisciplinary courses or a record of accommodating or encouraging experiential learning. Many, perhaps most, agricultural universities tend to be conservative. The past several years of political conservatism and financial retrenchment seem to have reinforced innate conservatism in teaching methods and a retreat behind disciplinary boundaries.

Mind you, we hear you say, surely it won't be these universities that ask for PRA training? Don't be so sure: a bit of fashionable window-dressing might be all they think they need to preserve their budgets and claim pre-eminence.

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