THEME SECTION

PARTICIPATORY MODES AND PROGRAMMES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

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THEME SECTION

No beginners: teaching participation at the graduate level

by NANCY GRUDENS-SCHUCK

Introduction

Where I teach, there are no beginners. Students who enrol for my graduate course in participatory evaluation already 'do' participation. It is part of their working lives. Participation is also a steady presence on our campus. This morning, I witnessed a student leading a group of young people and administrators in a team-building exercise. The technique involved ball-tossing, a giant 'scrunchie' (stretchy fabric band), and lots of talking and laughing. The technique was in the student's repertoire well before taking my class. I made a mental note to copy the technique.

Other students taking the course make their living as trainers or consultants, proficient in rapid rural appraisal (RRA), open space technology[1], or network analysis[2]. Some of my students have provided leadership for refining and advancing participatory assessment techniques, such as use of the Kenyan bao game to assess new crops (this game resembles the 'mancala' game that involves moving small stones into piles).

Overall, it is good news that students come to the classroom with knowledge of participatory strategies. This is partly a result of successful distribution of participatory practices worldwide, especially in the field of agricultural development. North American students, in particular, have been introduced to participation through employment in the cooperative extension system or community development initiatives.

But how does one teach such competent students?

About the course

The course I teach is entitled 'Participatory Evaluation Using Qualitative Inquiry'. The syllabus emphasises theory and practice of participation in the context of programme evaluation. I am the founder and instructor for the three-credit course, which is taught at Iowa State University, a large research university in the US. I offer the course through a department of agricultural education but the topic attracts students from other majors, such as sustainable agriculture, sociology, education, and family studies. The course is offered at the doctoral level on alternate years, like all our doctoral courses. It is one of two at the university that features participation, and it provides the most intensive training. Nearly 30 students have worked their way through the 13-week course, which has been offered twice. The focus on evaluation is purposeful. After deliberating with colleagues at the university, we noted the dearth of courses on evaluation in general. Also, my faculty position is respon-

[1] Open space technology is a technique that allows a group to propose their own ideas for conversation, rather than imposing them at the outset.
[2] Network analysis focuses on people's connections, and helps them to see how practical elements of their lives, such as marketing, are embedded in social relationships.

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sible for evaluation studies, so the fit was good. In addition, participatory monitoring and evaluation is an exciting field in rural development, with lots of interesting recent activity.

I created the course in 2001 believing that it was possible to teach participation despite academia's rigidities, isolation, and the way in which it structures experiences hierarchically. Both colleagues and administrators approved development of the course – not for its focus on participation but because it is considered advantageous for new professors to offer new courses. I benefited in my planning from having completed two formal courses in participation during graduate study several years earlier.

Higher education in the US is not, to my mind, the least promising place in which to infuse a participatory ethos. Moreover, Iowa State University began as an agriculturally focused land-grant college and our halls still echo with the 'people's college' ideal associated with its land-grant status. Further, it is important that training in participation occurs where elites are educated. Why would we neglect the professional development of potentially influential citizens? Self-serving reasons for creating the course include the benefit of focusing on one's passion and also on one's publishable activities (participation is the focus for my research).

Teaching strategy

Truly, my students are experts and not beginners. How, then, does one teach experts? Perhaps we should ask instead: how do experts learn? There are many theories, but most emphasise that adults learn in an environment that enables them to take their experiences and current knowledge seriously. Consequently, students' prior knowledge is the foundation for the course. Students' experiences influence what they value, what they find truthful, and the extent to which they may change. A student-centred strategy is not incompatible with scholarly study. My students read plenty of books and are introduced to key scholars. I also sequence activities purposefully, and select techniques that develop particular types of knowledge. However, a focus on students' individual frameworks of knowledge comes first.

These ideas about education work best when students take an active role in their learning. Such notions recommend that the instructor use participatory approaches to instruction. Participation must inform the whole package. Standardised lectures and universal assessments are minimised, and dialogue encouraged. Using such participatory methods to teach participation lessens the cognitive dissonance that students experience when teaching strategies are at odds with the subject matter.

Working with students' prior knowledge is a constructivist approach, although 'constructivist' says both too much and too little. In brief, a constructivist view emphasises the role of the learner in creating knowledge rather than receiving knowledge. As Paulo Freire noted, we do not insert knowledge into people's brains as we might money into the bank. My application of constructivism focuses on the preparatory phase of **unlearning**. This phase is associated with 'transformational learning' (e.g. a profound change of mind), after Brookfield (1998) and Mezirow (1991). Other types of learning are also important, e.g. skill building and mastering abstract concepts. However, these types of learning are more widely supported at the university. Transformational learning is not, so instructors may need to do more in this regard. Apropos of participation, transformational learning may be necessary for students who desire to succeed with very challenging tasks, such as catalysing participation in complex political and social environments. Highly knowledgeable students may have even more to unlearn because prior experiences anchor both reasonable and unreasonable ideas with great weight.

Theory and prior knowledge

I would like to discuss why it is important for the instructor to address prior knowledge first. Simply put, old learning affects new learning. Particularly if we desire transformation in thinking, great attention must be given to what adults already know and believe. It is not so much an accept-reject situation whereby students fail to learn what instructors tell them unless a yielding surface is prepared through use of prior knowledge. It is more that new learning is shaped to old learning, no matter what. Moreover, the shape that learning takes is strongly controlled by the learner.

Students' prior knowledge is likely to be a mix of the tenable and the untenable. If we fail to draw prior knowledge into the open and deliberate its quality, students will hook new ideas onto frameworks that have not benefited from critical reflection (see Grudens-Schuck, Cramer, Exner, & Shour, 2003). The result is poor quality thinking.

Box 1 lists some beliefs with which students have arrived in my classroom. These ideas capture, in a simple way, prior knowledge about participation. This knowledge is a combi-

Box 1: List of student beliefs

Dorothy: Participation is something I already do and have seen lots of others do. I don't believe that a great leap in quality is possible or even needed. Classroom study is simply needed for the advanced degree.

Mackenzie: I do participation on the job, but the results are disappointing. There must be a way to unlock 'real' participation. The course could reveal this.

Jim: Participation is a legitimate approach. I need to know something about it, but it's not really 'me'. The course is useful, however, because it will boost my skills. Then I can claim participation as a speciality, which will distinguish me.

Sabine: Participation can be implemented for technical programmes, such as on-farm research. But it's impractical, even dangerous, to use participation to solve social problems such as child labour or gender issues.

Eli: Participation could be a radical force if only we could do more! This course will strengthen my resolve and build solidarity.

Bellis: Theories that underlie participation can be explained by principles of human behaviour with which I am already familiar. The course will show how to apply these theories to the practical tasks of monitoring and evaluation.

Mai: Participation is a lifeline and a vow. It always works for me, but it isn't always accepted. The course will heal wounds from the struggle.

Jeris: There is already too much participation led by people who don't know what they're doing. Training should locate talent, build skills, maybe certify. I have some talent, so I'll take the course.

Elliot: The course just feels right. I'm in a class with people who have so much experience. I'll learn a lot. I'm the only younger student enrolled, so they shouldn't have any problems with me taking the course.

nation of technical, personal, historical, cultural, and political elements. A student's prior knowledge becomes a focus for critical reflection and potential unlearning. The list suggests what's at stake for the students and, by extension, what may be at stake for the future of participation. The composite statements are paraphrased from things students have said or written. The names are fictitious.

Challenges of unlearning

It is important to discuss **who decides** what prior knowledge is valid and what needs revamping – student, teacher, stakeholders, peers, or a combination? I am amenable to the argument that the student should decide in the main – with the benefit of a dialogic process. There are too many things unknown to me, including personal and political issues that I cannot fathom, which stop 'the instructor' from knowing

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best. For example, Jeris' meritocratic stance sounds arrogant to my ears, but he may come from a field filled with inept practitioners. He may, in fact, be right. I am sympathetic with Mai, but her intensity and isolationism may get in her way. Sabine's 'technicist' perspective is a focus of criticism in the participation community, but it may be a necessary first step for her. Elliot's humility is charming, but does he believe that he has nothing to contribute? In the world of participation, such beliefs lack currency.

Co-managing prior knowledge

The class environment must permit students and instructor to bring to the surface, understand, and (perhaps) modify prior knowledge. This is a difficult task. It is emotional labour. I try to connect personally with the student to learn their history and interests and to find strengths. If a student voices particular concerns repeatedly, I mark the belief as something that the student is testing. In response, I probe for more of everything: more about context and commitment, more about regrets and remedies that have been tried, and something about punishments that have been levied. Sometimes, I will test a student's willingness to modify a major belief by suggesting that their papers or presentations explore the idea critically. I do these things in the classroom, but also through private discussions and written communications. I proceed carefully, mindful of the wide range of human processing and the fragility that can appear unexpectedly. I try to judge less (difficult), and listen more (also difficult). I do not force (I do not **intend** to force). I encourage students to do the same with each other, according to their own style, which is part of what makes the course participative. To accomplish this, we use various exercises, talk at length, and read what others have said about participation. We also laugh a lot, especially during participative exercises.

Evaluations

We conduct joint, ongoing evaluations of course materials, our group relations, and individual and collective contributions, so there is lots of feedback. Anonymous course eval-

uations, de rigueur at our university, have been favourable. Some students tell me that the course changes them profoundly. They change their lives; together we change the state of evaluation practice. A few exit mildly content or neutral.

I have concerns about the course. The first relates to outcomes. Are students better than before? Together with evaluation stakeholders, I hope that my students are more knowledgeable and more effective – or have the wisdom to delegate to those who are. However, like many participatory practitioners (and many instructors), I don't assess outcomes. Second, I regret that the course does not have a community-based component. I suspect that particular students (those who are half-hearted?) would learn more outside the classroom. Also, my course is the only one of its kind for most of the students, which also limits learning. Lastly, I address participation more thoroughly than evaluation because insight into participation seems more precious. I wonder what the consequences of this choice are, particularly for students who enter with little background in evaluation. However, if I restricted the course to individuals who have taken all prerequisite courses, I might bar interested students. Despite gains, there aren't that many of us.

Postnote: what students said

I shared an earlier version of this paper with students in my Spring 2003 class. These are their key reactions. First, students spent most of the time talking about the list of composite student statements (earlier). Therefore, I have reproduced the entire list with only minor revisions. With great energy, students told me that they spent a lot of time figuring out, 'Which one is me?'. Students identified with one or two, but were tempted to claim others as well, despite clear differences in tenor. This suggests that the list in its entirety may describe students in general, although to different degrees.

Additionally, the concept of unlearning was powerful for students. These expert students agreed that a principal challenge of the course was the struggle to integrate new with old. There was no doubt, students said, that they exited the course with a substantial stock of knowledge. Some of it was the prior knowledge with which they had entered, some was new knowledge, and some was close to 'muddled' knowledge, which might also be termed emergent.

CONTACT DETAILS
Nancy Grudens-Schuck, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Studies
Iowa State University
217 Curtiss Hall,
Ames
Iowa
50011
USA
Tel: +1 515 284 0894
Email: ngs@iastate.edu

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