

Making a Difference in Communities: Bridging Research and Community Agendas through a Participatory Research Approach

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Putah Creek Lodge, UC Davis

Co-sponsored by the California Communities Program at UC Davis, Forest Community Research, UC Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, and the Pacific West Community Forestry Center

Workshop notes

These notes were compiled from a variety of sources – including flip charts, tape recordings, written notes and a synthesis provided by Gary Nakamura. They are intended to capture the comments of the workshop participants – highlighting recurrent themes. A proceedings will be available at a later date.

The purpose of the workshop was to explore how Extension and other researchers can use participatory research methods and approaches to make research more responsive to community needs and aspirations. Through a series of case presentations and group exercises, workshop activities were intended to engage participants in a discussion of how participatory approaches can be applied in the research process. Case examples presented included:

- The Sierra Nevada Eco-system Project – Big Science Becoming Open to Local Knowledge presented by Jonathan Kusel
- The GreenNet project – a partnership between the Santa Barbara Housing Authority and the county CE office presented by Michael Marzolla
- The Latino Forest Workers Leadership Group – Research in Service of Community Goals presented by Jose Montenegro.

Additional presentations included Gary Nakamura's talk describing a traditional model of the research process and how, through his work as an Extension specialist, he has come to reframe it in a way that is more participatory. Robert Sommer in his presentation on action research and publications provided numerous examples of how researchers can meet the demands of "two masters" – the need to publish peer-reviewed journal articles to meet the requirements of academic disciplines and the University, and to present research findings and projects to a public audience through popular press publications and communication methods.

Over 65 participants attended the workshop. The majority of the attendees were from UC-Cooperative Extension, or other UC departments. In addition, a large number of graduate students also attended. Other participants included representatives from a variety of nonprofit organizations. In addition, four community leaders who have engaged with university researchers were invited to share their perspectives during the two days.

Discussion among participants was rich and wide-ranging. Many issues regarding participatory research and approaches emerged during the 2 day workshop. Three areas of discussion stand out. First, many points were raised about what constitutes participatory research – how it is defined and how is it used. Second, how to work effectively in communities and establish relationships was another key area. Third, there was a concern as to how the use of participatory methods can and should be applied within the constraints of an academic institution. These notes summarize key points made by workshop attendees in each of these areas.

Participatory Research Approaches

Participants cited many challenges to using participatory methods in research, including how to define “community”, “participation” and “research”. Many agreed that the issues that confront researchers using participatory research methods may be similar to those of using more “traditional” methodologies, but the intensity and complexity may differ. Questions such as, “what is research? what are its attributes? who benefits?” can be asked regardless of the methodologies and process used.

- ❖ Participatory research involves engaging community members/ the public in the research but who is the “community”, the “public?”. Whose interests are represented?
 - Diverse players within communities can identify different research questions
 - Researchers may be “captured” by the community and face difficulties maintaining objectivity
 - It may be difficult to not “project” ourselves into the research – since we are all part of communities.

Exercise: What are the characteristics of Participatory Research?
 (give groups a list of terms, and ask them to select their top 3, to modify them or to create their own)

Terms: (examples)	Inclusive (over time) Practical – leads to action/ change Self-Discovery Fun	Participatory Top-Down Formative Non-participatory
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Presented by Jose Montenegro, CIDERS

- ❖ PAR can mean different things to different people. The small group exercise in which participants chose three characteristics of participatory research resulted in varying interpretations and priorities among group members and between groups.

- ❖ Engaging the public and fostering community participation is time-consuming and can take many years, while a research project/ researcher may face tighter time limits.
- ❖ Due to the high level of commitment it can require on all sides, everyone in the process can suffer burnout.
- ❖ Working with community members/ public requires a large number of skills that many researchers are not specifically trained for – understanding context, conflict management and facilitation for example.
- ❖ Using participatory research methods may not be addressing a root cause of the problem with “traditional research” – one of power and control. The potential empowerment aspects of PAR and the difficulty of working within current institutional structures (university, disciplines, research paradigms) can create conflicts.

Exercise: The 7-question assessment scale provides a way of evaluating the degree to which the community and public are involved in a research project and suggests different entry points for participatory methods and different levels of participation. Not all may be appropriate in all situations, while others may always have some applicability.

- Who defines the problem? or, Who identifies/ determines the research question?
- Who initiates the research? Who does the research? (how involved are those affected by the research outcomes)
- Who analyzes and interprets the results?
- Who uses the research/ information?
- Who benefits from the results / the research?
- Who owns the research results?
- What actions follow from the research?

Developed by Jonathan Kusel

- ❖ A participatory approach may not always be appropriate. Being participatory simply to be participatory may not further the research or the community’s interests and can be potentially damaging.
- ❖ Public participation may be genuine or it can be phony. Assessing when participation is effective is a necessary part of using participatory methods.

Working with Communities

Engaging with community members and promoting public participation in research projects can be extremely difficult. This can be particularly true in cross-cultural situations where research is often viewed skeptically or with hostility. Among the most noted challenges were how to identify the “absent” voices, encourage those for whom

participation may be difficult, and maintain public involvement. As the 7 question assessment indicates there are various points at which participation can be sought. Many strategies and techniques were proposed that could be adopted in the research process:

- Ask whether it is ok to go in as a researcher
- Recognize your limitations as a researcher and seek key contacts/ partners in the community to assist you. There is usually a broad and diverse expertise in the community.
- Work in partnership with existing organizations or groups rather than always trying to establish an individual relationship with the community.
- Don't go in saying the University is here to help you. The relationship between community and researcher needs to be reciprocal – what are the community benefits from the research? What is left once the researcher leaves?
- Go out and meet community members at their activities rather than trying to bring them to yours.
- Recognize and lay expectations out on the table. This may require negotiation but promotes a good working relationship.
- Involve community partners in developing the research question – a relevant and meaningful question that the community wants answered can help sustain involvement and improve the quality of the research

Fishbowl Exercise: The workshop opened with an exercise involving representatives from various organizations and communities describing their experiences with working with University researchers. The purpose of this exercise was to allow workshop attendees to listen to a discussion of community participants and their experiences in working with University researchers. The following questions were used to solicit discussion among community participants: These questions can be used to evaluate the impact of other projects with community partners.

- How did you become involved with science and scientists?
- How did the community initially respond to scientists and the work they proposed?
- Why did the community get involved?
- How did the scientists respond to local involvement? How receptive were the scientists?
- Did community involvement make any difference in the work of scientists?
- What might have happened had members not gotten involved?
- What value is there to local engagement with scientists?
- What hasn't worked well?
- Does the researcher value information community members might have?
- What is left in the community after researchers leave?
- How have previous experiences shaped the willingness of residents to work with researchers?

- Recognize that creating relationships among researchers and the community may require a great deal of time. Be realistic about what can and can't be done within a time-line.
- Bring people together to assist with the research design and process. The greater the input at the early research stages, the greater the feelings of ownership for the project and the more likely that community input will be sustained.
- Address issues regarding ownership and the sharing of the results early in the process.
- Encourage public involvement through media and outreach. Newsletters, meetings, and workshops are a variety of ways to inform the community about the research project.
- Bring community partners as authors/ coauthors on research papers
- Assist a community with its research needs – designing survey, finding control group, information needs, etc.
- Use an inductive approach – plan to do a series of related projects, building on your learning
- Share the messiness of the research process rather than hiding it and acknowledge where your biases might be
- Solicit comments on written products, including scientific papers, from community partners

Working within University Constraints

A third area that emerged were the challenges of using participatory approaches in research within a University setting that values more traditional research questions and methodologies. Finding supportive peers, and in the case of students, faculty, can be difficult. Meeting publishing requirements and obtaining funding were also raised as challenges. Although it may seem impossible, Bob Sommer in his talk demonstrated that with imagination and creativity it is possible to achieve two objectives.

Skills

Moving beyond traditional research skills, when asked workshop participants cited additional types of skills that would be helpful in their work. Among those listed:

Interactive facilitation

Grant writing and obtaining support

Participatory techniques and exercises to use with groups (e.g. community mapping)

Mediation skills

Listening skills

Flexibility in methodology to be more responsive to diverse communities

Cross-cultural training to work in cross-cultural/ multi-lingual contexts

Ability to reframe and relearn our role as not the holder of knowledge

Ability to articulate PAR methods and approaches

There are many resources available and this list is by means exhaustive. The following list is compiled from the suggestions of participants in the September workshop “Making a Difference in Communities: Bridging Research and Community Agendas through a participatory research approach”.

Books on Northern & Southern PAR, Feminist PAR, and Participatory Evaluation

[* = highly recommended]

For an extensive bibliography, see:

<http://www.msu.edu/course/ace/806/snapshot.afs/levine/8061998/par.htm>

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Journals

Action Journal International: on-line peer-reviewed journal
<http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arhome.html>

Action Research: new international on-line journal issued by Sage publications, UK
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Action research and orders of democracy Kenneth J. Gergen

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Framing practice-research engagement for democratizing knowledge L. David Brown, Gabriele Bammer, Srilatha Batliwala and Frances Kunreuther

INFLUENTIAL IDEAS

Pragmatist philosophy and action research: readings and conversation with Richard Rorty
Peter Reason

Websites

PARnet: www.parnet.org (the oldest action research web site). PARnet contains:

- PARchives: an interactive bibliographic database where you can add your favorite citations and comment on works you have read. Includes many hard-to-find papers & documents.
- list of 31 participatory research websites
- instructions for subscribing to 5 different participatory research listserves, including:
 - CPARN-L
CPARN-L serves the Cornell Participatory Action Research Network, and is primarily of regional interest—but is a great way to get ideas on any topic

To subscribe, send email to listproc@cornell.edu. Command: subscribe CPARN-L <firstname> <lastname>

PAR-announce-L

- limited to general announcements (no dialog) of interest to PAR community. Keep informed of new books, papers, conferences and events
- to subscribe, send email to listproc@cornell.edu. Command: subscribe PAR-announce-L <firstname> <lastname>

Cornell Participatory Action Research Network: <http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/cparn/>

- info about feminist PAR
- excellent definition of PAR: <http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/cparn/about/par.asp>
- examples of PAR-related courses

Participatory Development Forum: <http://www.pdforum.org/> (includes a searchable database of articles, reports, etc. on PAR topics)

Institute of Development Studies: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/>

- The IDS “Participation Group”: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/index.html>
- The IDS “Gender Group”: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/GenderWG/>

International Institute for Environment and Development: <http://www.iied.org/>

East St. Louis Action Research Project: <http://www.eslarp.uiuc.edu/>

PLA Notes (Participatory Learning and Action)—incredible resource for ideas on HOW to develop and use participatory approaches like mapping, diagramming, gender analysis

- http://www.iied.org/sarl/pla_notes/

Agua Pura Manual: <http://www.uwex.edu/erc/apsummary.html>

GreenNet Webpage: <http://greennet.ucdavis.edu>

CASEC Webpage: <http://rain.org/casec>