Participatory Action Research: A Way to Increase Personal Agency

by Linda M. Phillips and Karen L. Vavra

Within the social sciences, issues around the human condition are fundamentally important. Issues include individual, group and organizational dynamics that are studied by these same people working together with others in pursuit of solutions that are brought about by their active participation in reflection, inquiry, and theory and practice in context. Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist, is said to have coined the term "action research" (Gustavsen). In his 1946 landmark paper, "Action research and minority problems," Lewin argued that "we should consider action, research and training as a triangle that should be kept together" (p. 42). Action research (AR) was endorsed by anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists, educators and others. However, questions around the extent of participation prompted the nomenclature of participatory research (PR).

By the 1970s, Fals Borda and others converged upon the term Participatory Action Research (PAR) but it continues to be a disputed concept. There are numerous terms in use including action research, participatory research, critical action research, classroom action research, action learning, action science, hermeneutic or interpretative, instrumental, collaborative research, co-operative inquiry, industrial action research, and soft systems approaches. As one might expect, there are different definitions for each usage and it is challenging to find a consensus definition for PAR.

We certainly see PAR as a strategy of inquiry and, for the purposes of this paper, we adopt the description provided by Kemmis and McTaggart:

> Participatory action research is a form of 'insider research' in which participants move between two thought positions: on the one side, seeing themselves, their understandings, their practices, and the settings in which they practice from the perspective of insiders who see these things in an intimate, even 'natural' way that may be subject to the partiality of view characteristic of the insider perspective; and on the other side, seeing themselves, their understandings, their practices, and the setting from the perspective of an outsider (sometimes by adopting the perspective of an abstract, imagined outsider, and sometimes by trying to see things from the perspective of real individuals or role incumbents in and around the setting) who do not share the partiality of the inside view but who also do not have the benefit of 'inside knowledge'. Alternating between these perspectives gives the insider critical distance—the seed of the critical perspective that allows insiders to consider the possible as well as the actual in their social world (p. 590).

Some have described action research, participatory research, and participatory action research as if they were all the same phenomenon: "In participatory action research, one or more of the members of the community or organization being studied participate actively in the research process and in the actions that grow out of this process" (Whyte p. 127). Others see PAR as an "emergent process" (Greenwood, Whyte and Harkavy p. 176), or as a form of action research that involves practitioners as both subjects and co-researchers. PAR is based on the Lewinian proposition that causal inferences about the behaviour of human beings are more likely to be valid and

*Our focus this time is **Participatory Action Research (PAR)**. Dee McRae's research involving learners highlights many of the complexities of this methodology.*

enactable when the human beings in question participate in building and testing them. Hence it aims at creating an environment in which participants give and get valid information, make free and informed choices (including the choice to participate), and generate internal commitment to the results of their inquiry (Argyris and Schon p. 613).

Still others see PAR as an integrated "three-pronged process of social investigation, education and action designed to support those with less power in their organizational or community settings" (Hall p. 171).

Debates pertain not only to the approaches used but also to whether PAR is defensible research; whether participation is crucial and how it is expressed; whether the research really concerns social improvement; and appropriate roles for researchers, research and social agents in the enhancement of the human condition (Kemmis and McTaggart). Nonetheless, there seems to be agreement that PAR extends the possibilities and opportunities for social research, enhances inquiry, promotes positive changes in the ways individuals and groups work together, and evokes more broad-based support for change.

Current applications of PAR can be found in many fields and settings. One recent example is that of Dee McRae's two-year project, Make it Real: Participatory Action Research with Adult Learners. McRae assumed dual roles with separate purposes: (1) as facilitator of a National Literacy Secretariat project called *Hair Straight Back (HSB)* and, (2) as researcher of a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project.

Research purposes

As facilitator of the *Hair Straight Back (HSB)* project, McRae and the project team established two purposes:
- to identify the barriers and needs of adult learners who attend school; and
- to research and publish a map and brochure of the available community services in Houston [a small town in Northern British Columbia] which offer support and assistance to prospective adult students.

As researcher of the PAR project, McRae's research questions examined whether PAR led to changes in the learning dynamic between the instructor and the adult learners on the project team and the way adult learners viewed learning, their own personal capacity and agency in their personal situations.

Methodology

Ten adults learners who had not finished high school participated (two were completing fundamental-level course work, six were completing developmental course work, and two were completing advanced classes). Each experienced barriers and challenges to learning including substance abuse, violence, relationship breakdowns, and poverty. The group of adult learners participated in a project team to determine "what needs the adults have before they become students" and "how those returning to school could meet those needs" (McRae p. 9).

How the data were collected was not detailed, but the main source was "the reflective e-mail journal written to a colleague" (p. 10) who questioned, supported, and provided focused feedback. It is unclear how the data were analyzed and what constituted evidence of change among the adult learners.

Findings

McRae's findings were based on descriptive data from her reflective email journal which included her personal reflections and queries about the team and the project, as well as feedback from a colleague. The most salient finding reported by McRae from the HSB project is that it changed "the way the adult learners viewed learning and themselves as they developed their personal capacity and acted with increased agency in their personal situations" (p. 11). She went on to say that PAR projects help learners to "increase personal agency through facilitated group decision-making processes and the different learning opportunities related to the project...PAR offers an approach to teaching adult literacy learners that is respectful of their current place in the world and ... [helps them] to develop personal skills and capacities to allow them to further explore, expand, and negotiate their world" (p. 1). Several themes were extracted.
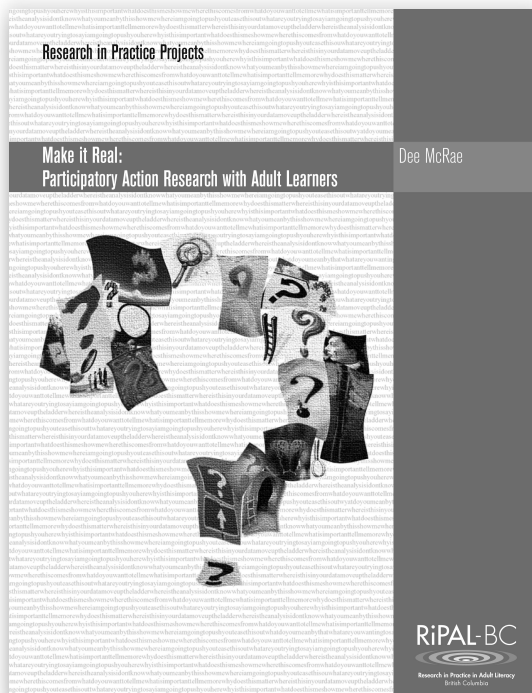
Agency and capacity: give a man a fish...
An understanding of the adult learners' context and current capacity was emphasized by McRae as essential in order to facilitate learning and the development of personal agency. In order to maximize potential, adult learners need to know the available alternatives so that they may make choices to address individual needs. McRae claims that agency is not only related to issues of access to services and community, but also personal initiative and perseverance which directly impact individual success. During the HSB project, the team members were considered experts with the knowledge

and power to make decisions about the direction of the project. McRae concludes that this dynamic promoted the development of personal capacity and agency within the group and amongst the individuals.

Ownership

McRae considered ownership a powerful component of building capacity in adult learners. She maintained that PAR projects offer a safe environment for adult learners with the necessary guidance and support from peers and the facilitator. When adult learners actively engage in making decisions, problem solving, and completing tasks within the project, these skills and capacities transfer to everyday life, thus increasing personal agency.

Research in Practice Projects

Make it Real:
Participatory Action Research with Adult Learners

Dee McRae

RiPAL-BC

Research in Practice in Adult Literacy
British Columbia

Let the learner lead versus the reality zone

The HSB project did not always proceed smoothly because of project deadlines, constraints and logistics that required certain compromises which were negotiated and discussed with and by the team members.

The power of money and its role in capacity building

One of the most difficult group decisions, reported by McRae, was deciding on the best use of the monetary honorarium offered to the members of the team for participating in the project. After much discussion, brainstorming and the passage of time, a consensus was finally reached in the second year of

the project. The team jackets that were purchased with the honorarium represent the pride, dedication and relationship that developed among the members of the project team.

Messiness/limitations

PAR projects are not static; rather they evolve and change over time. McRae points out that as a facilitator, she struggled to balance timelines and outcomes of the project while ensuring opportunities and time for authentic growth and change. PAR projects can produce dissonance for some adult learners because the process is not straightforward, linear and clean.

> The messiness of this type of learning where there is no right or wrong answer and where the facilitator is not giving direction, but rather is continually asking questions, is, for some adult learners, a scary and threatening place...This is a new way to make decisions and to think things through. It is accepting that there is no one right answer, no one correct point of view, and no one "quick fix" solution. It shakes their reality, just a bit, and gives them a different glimpse of the world and how they can operate in it (McRae p. 25).

The key feature of PAR projects is not simply the action or product of the project, rather it is the research and learning process that is central, according to McRae: "It is the whole complex process of collaborative research that goes into doing the task, taking the action, the very nature of PAR that allows for real failures and real successes. A PAR project and PAR learning are ripe with unexpected, non-measurable and non-academic outcomes" (p. 26).

Room to learn

Dee McRae attributed the growth and development of the project team and herself to the freedom and opportunity to converse and work collaboratively in an "open-ended way." In retrospect, McRae mentions that at times her preoccupation to comply with the expectations of the educational institution and funding agencies, and the completion of the final product of the project, restricted and limited some of the decisions that were made in her role as a facilitator. Nonetheless, McRae indicated that the individual and collective gains are more than just the final product: "[The adult learners] have all also had the experience of working on a team project, where the whole becomes greater than the parts. But most

important, they each developed increased personal capacities for dealing with learning and life" (p. 5).

Implications

McRae makes a case for the merits of PAR as "an approach to teaching adult literacy learners that is respectful of their current place in the world and also allows them to develop personal skills and capacities to allow them to further explore, expand, and negotiate their world" (p. 1). PAR honours the context and contributions of all participants and provides a framework for collaboration, ownership and self-actualization of adult learners, while also empowering adult learners to actively engage in research about issues that are relevant and important to them. McRae points out that the process and product of PAR are open-ended, unpredictable and equally valuable:

> Participatory action research projects can be used as a powerful tool to explore learning and develop personal agency in

an adult upgrading classroom. It is not any one principle of PAR that offers this benefit, but rather the combination of the principles: the relationship of the participant to the data and the project, the participant's role in the research, and the processes facilitated to bring about the action with the participants, all working together that brings about the desired effect (p. 8).

Whether personal agency was enhanced in McRae's project remains unclear based on the report. The lack of clarity is not because of the use of PAR but rather the longstanding question of what counts as evidence. ■

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Research in Practice from RiPAL-BC

RiPAL-BC exemplifies the very positive things that can happen when adult literacy practitioners are encouraged, enabled and supported to explore their practice and to share their questions and learning. In 2006, RiPAL-BC produced a series of reports on a range of research-in-practice projects in the province. The commitment, honesty and questioning spirit of practitioners comes through in all of this work. As Paula Davies, whose work examined personal narrative, put it:

> Engaging in practitioner research has brought an amazing new dimension to my classroom practice. In fact, I would say that practitioner research is one of the most productive professional development activities that an instructor can engage in!

The five reports are:

- **Make it Real: Participatory Action Research with Adult Learners** *by Dee McRae*

- **Catching Our Breath: Collaborative Reflection-on-Action in Remote-Rural BC** *by Anne Docherty*

- **From Concrete to Abstract: The Benefits of Using a Guided Reflective Writing Technique with Adult Literacy Students** *by Leonne Beebe*

- **Walking Alongside: Youth-Adult Partnerships in Making Change** *by Melanie Sondergaard*

- **See Me: Use of Personal Narrative in the Classroom** *by Paula Davies*

These publications can be downloaded from: http://ripal.literacy.bc.ca/completed.html