

Looking back, looking forward – Reflections on the International Participatory Research Network by Budd Hall

The International Participatory Research Network which was associated with the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) was begun in 1976. It expanded throughout the late 1970s and 80's and was responsible for giving visibility to a set of concepts and practices which have continued to stimulate social movement and social policy scholars and activists up to today. These notes are the author's effort to record his reflections on the early period of the network and some of the persons and issues involved and the relevance of this for the situation which faces us today.

Early influences: Looking back

I worked in Tanzania from 1970 to 1974 at the Institute of Adult Education of the University of Dar es Salaam. I was a research officer involved in a wide variety of research and evaluation studies related to the activities of the Institute itself.

The most profound influence were the ideas, strategies and programmes of the Tanzanian government of the day articulated most effectively by President Julius Nyerere. Nyerere, himself a former teacher, had written much about the capacity of education to unchain people just as it had been used by the colonial powers to enchain people. The philosophy of Ujamaa and Self Reliance, concepts of what we would call today Afro-centric development and local economic development were open challenges to the way that the rich countries saw the world. Nyerere and a generation of articulate and gifted leaders such as Paul Mhaiki in adult education challenged all who were working in Tanzania, national and expatriate alike, to look through a different lens to



understand education, agriculture, development, history, culture and eventually for some of us even research and evaluation methods. We were all encouraged to 'meet the masses more' and while on a day to day basis this was difficult to understand, over time many of us were profoundly transformed.

In September 1971 Paulo Freire visited us in Tanzania. I was responsible for organising that visit and for working with him during his stay. One of the things that we asked him to talk about were his ideas about research methods. Some readers may remember chapter three in 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', where Paulo wrote about what he calls "Thematic Investigation". In his account, he began to talk about understanding research as engaged practice, not a neutral dispassionate act but an act of soli-

arity and active support. His talk was documented and distributed as simply "A Talk by Paulo Freire". Some passages from the 1971 event:

"I think adult education in Tanzania should have as one of its main tasks to invite people to believe in themselves. It should invite people to believe that they have knowledge. The people must be challenged to discover their historical existence through the critical analysis of their cultural production: their art and their music. One of the characteristics of colonialisation is that in order for the colonisers to oppress the people easily they convinced themselves that the colonised have a mere biological life and never an historical existence." (Freire, P. (1971). A Talk by Paulo Freire, Studies in Adult Education, 2. Dar es Salaam, 10.)

Agents of developments and change

The work of Marja Liisa Swantz was another early influence. Marja Liisa Swantz was a social scientist attached to the Bureau for Land Use and Productivity (BRALUP) of the University of Dar es Salaam. She and a group of students from the University of Dar es Salaam, including Kemal Mustapha who was later to become the African co-ordinator for participatory research, were working in an engaged way with women and others in the coastal region of Tanzania. Through this practice, she and others began to articulate what she called "participant research". In an early BRALUP paper published in 1974, she notes, research strategies which developing countries such as Tanzania followed have generally been patterned in the universities of developed countries.

In planning research on a subject related to development, one has to first answer some questions. Who are the beneficiaries of this research? What are the aims? Who is going to be involved? What approach and methods of research should be used so that the research would bring the greatest possible gains for development?

*"Research and researcher can become agents of development and change in the process while the research is being done."*¹

First world assembly of ICAE

During 1974-75, I was a visiting fellow at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. It was at this time that I began to find that people in many other countries were thinking along similar lines to those of us in Tanzania. Francisco Vio Grossi in Chile, Rajesh Tandon in India, even researchers in England and Europe. The connection between research, politics and action had been opened up never to be closed again. It was during that period at Sussex that I compiled a special issue of the Journal *Convergence* on the theme of what I labelled 'Participatory Research'. That particular term was used because it seemed to be the best common description of the various approaches that were described within the issue. While I had begun to learn about the long traditions in Europe of action research, and Marja Liisa Swantz had been using 'participant research' to describe this approach for several years, the choice of the term 'participatory research' was simply made as a descriptive term for a collection of various approaches which shared a participatory ethos.

The first idea that something like an international network might be possible or welcome came with the response to the publication of the special 1975 issue of *Convergence*. The adult education community and related community development activists bought out all the copies of the journal for the first time in its history. Requests for copies poured in from all over the world. It was clear to me that many people in the majority world and people working with or for marginalised persons in the rich countries were actively engaged in research projects which were very different from the standards of the day in most of the universities of the world.

The next energy moving towards a network in this field came via the First World Assembly of the International Council for Adult Education which took place in Dar es Salaam in 1976. In the debates and committees which arose from the Dar es Salaam conference, a recommendation was made to the world adult education community that, adult educators should be given the opportunity to learn about and share their experiences in participatory research. Important for the next steps in the eventual development of the Participatory Research Network was the fact that Ted Jackson, an activist adult educator from Canada was a participant at Dar es Salaam as part of a study-travel course organised by Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) in Canada.

The Cartagena conference of April 1977

Paz Buttedahl, the Latin American Programme Officer for ICAE had met Orlando Fals Borda in Colombia and found out from him that he was planning a world conference on Action Research which sounded very much like the kind of work that I had spoken of from Tanzania, England and now Canada. Orlando Fals Borda and many of his colleagues in Colombia and elsewhere in Latin America had made decisions to use their intellectual skills and connections to strengthen the political movements associated with revolution and democracy of the time. Working as scholar activists, these Latin American intellectuals have amassed a set of important experiences. Orlando Fals Borda, through his links with the International Sociological Association had met others elsewhere who shared these

visions. So to Cartagena came radical intellectuals from many parts of the world to debate new directions for the late 1970's and 80's. Orlando's profound vision of a science of the common people was at times sharply criticized by colleagues who felt that a more orthodox Marxist understanding of the role of an intellectual vanguard was the way to work. For those of us from the rich minority world, we saw a sophisticated, committed group of activist scholars and militant intellectuals who totally and efficiently dismissed once and for all the pretension of detached positivist science. The work of Fals Borda himself, of persons like Paul Oquist (writing on the epistemology of Action Research) of Ton and Vera Gianotten of Peru and the Netherlands, of Xavier Albo of Bolivia and so many others, gave me, and through me, others in our group a high burst of energy and enthusiasm.

Founding of the international network

While returning from Cartagena I visited Francisco Vio Grossi who was living at the time in Venezuela. At Toronto we started organising an international event which would enable us to take a decision on starting a network.

Among the most important political principles of the network was the insistence that each node or networking group working in the various parts of the world would be autonomous and self-directed. We wanted a structure which was horizontal in power terms, which allowed for autonomous locally or regionally accountable nodes, which took the cues from the grassroots rather than the centre and where power flowed according to the tasks at hand rather than funding, tradition, or imperial world divisions. We were also very much aware that the 'international' was a context which we could use to strengthen our local work and increase visibility for our ideas in the settings where we lived and worked everyday. We were among the first groups to develop and consciously use the concept of networking, an organisational form, which has since become a nearly universal model for global collaboration. It is worth reproducing the definition statement from that first meeting:

¹Swantz, M.L. (1975), *Research as an Educational Tool for Development*, *Convergence* 8,(2) 44-53

- PR involves a whole range of powerless groups of people – exploited, the poor, the oppressed, the marginal.

- It involves the full and active participation of the community in the entire research process.

- The subject of the research originates in the community itself and the problem is defined, analysed and solved by the community.

- The ultimate goal is the radical transformation of social reality and the improvement of the lives of the people themselves. The beneficiaries of the research are the members of the community.

- The process of participatory research can create a greater awareness in the people about their own resources and mobilise them for self-reliant development.

- It is a more scientific method of research in that the participation of the community in the research process facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of social reality.

- The researcher is a committed participant and learner in the process of research, a militant rather than a detached observer.

By 1978 there were five nodes in the network: Toronto, Canada; New Delhi, India (Rajesh Tandon, co-ordinator); Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (Yusuf Kassam, co-ordinator); Netherlands (Jan de Vries, co-ordinator); Caracas, Venezuela (Francisco Vio Grossi, coordinator). We organised a series of meetings to increase awareness about our ideas, to deepen our understanding of our work, to build support for others who were trying such work and to show people in our various locations that our ideas had world resonance and relevance. And in all our work, we honoured the fact that the majority world had been the intellectual source for these exciting new ways of working and continued to inspire us. We also recognised that our ideas were as relevant in Europe and North America as they were anywhere, that people wanted to use research as a

contribution to changes in power relations. Our definitions of participatory research were explicitly political, were seen as valid in all parts of the world where unequal power relations persisted, and highlighted the use of cultural approaches to knowing in our work.

Looking forward: Social movements and civil society as a location for theorising

One of the most important and fascinating lessons from the past which we can use for the future is that participatory research was very largely theorised and disseminated from a social movement or civil society base. Among the original premises were the importance of 'breaking', what we referred to as, the monopoly over knowledge production by universities. This was not in the least a form of anti-intellectualism, but was recognition that the academic mode of production was and remains, in some fundamental way, linked to different sets of interests and power relations than women and men in various social movement settings or located in more autonomous community-based, non-governmental structures. Much of the energy and impulse for deepening the understanding of participatory research came from the social movement contexts in Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and elsewhere. The participatory research network made it possible for the creativity and knowledge making, or history making, capacity of all women and men to be seen at least partially by many of us in a profound way for the first time.

The role of the university

What is the role of the Academy in participatory research? What has the Academy done with participatory research? What is the status of the knowledge generated in a participatory research process? I have been very troubled by these questions over the years and cannot pretend to have a clear sense of the appropriate role for institutionalised university involvement in our work. Participatory research originated as a challenge to positivist research paradigms carried out largely by university based researchers. Our position has been

that the centre of the process needed to be in the margins, in the communities with women, with people of colour and so forth. Our experience has been that it is very difficult to achieve this kind of process from a university base, hence, the need for alternative structures such as networks, centres. But how do we reconcile this with the fact that most of the authors writing about this have strong university affiliations, including myself?

I believe that many of us operate in situations of contradictions and self-conflict. Doubt may be one of our most identifiable common denominations. Doubt and humility may be one of the strongest contributions that our work collectively has to offer. If the research process is genuinely and originally situated in a community, workplace or group which is experiencing domination, then we need not, I believe, be afraid that the knowledge which is being generated will be used for purposes that the community or group does not need or wish for. The difficulty arises because there are different uses of knowledge in the Academy than those in community or workplace situations.

To challenge and to be challenged

Knowledge within the Academy serves a variety of purposes. It is a commodity by which academics do far more than exchange ideas; it is the very means of exchange for the academic political economy. Tenure, promotion, peer recognition, research grants, and countless smaller codes of privilege are accorded through the adding up of articles, books, papers in 'referred' journals and conferences. Academics, in the market place of knowledge, know that they must identify or become identified with streams of ideas which offer the possibility of publishing and dialogue within appropriate and recognised settings. Collaborative research, or at least collaborative publishing, is informally discouraged because of the difficulty in attributing authorship. Collaborative research with persons who are not academics by the standards of the Academy is not common. And while academics, in fact, gain financially through accumulated publications of appropriate know-

ledge, community collaborators seldom benefit from such collaboration in financial terms. It is this structural pressure which plays havoc with academic engagement in the participatory research process.

Does this mean that there is no role for university based folks to be engaged in participatory research processes? Participatory research ought to be a tool which social movements, activists, trade unions, women, the homeless or any similar group use as part of a variety of strategies and methods for conducting their work. If they wish to invite a university-based group to become involved, they need to set up the conditions at the start and maintain control of the process which resembles participatory research every day without naming it or certainly without asking for outside validation of the knowledge which is produced.

Participatory research deserves to be taught in universities, and is increasingly being taught. The academic community deserves to discuss and challenge and be challenged by these and other ideas which raise questions of the role of knowledge and power.

Academics also do not cease to become members of the community by going to work in a university. There are countless community issues, whether related to toxic dumping, homelessness, high drop-out levels in local schools or unfair taxation policies, which engage us all as citizens. Academics have some skills which can contribute to community action along with the skills of others in the community. Academics don't have to be 'in charge' just because someone refers to a grassroots knowledge generating process as participatory research.

Can we co-construct knowledge with the rest of nature?

We have begun to realise, perhaps too late, that our species has supported a way of living that makes many of us sad, poor, alone, frightened or marginalised. We are informed in a variety of eloquent ways that our species has also damaged the biosphere to such a degree that the

survival of our species can now be questioned.

Environmentalists, including environmental educators, believe that one of the factors which has allowed us to put our very survival at risk is that we have become alienated from the rest of nature, from the other forms of life with whom we share the world. There are different theories about the nature of this alienation but it has something to do with our patterns of domestication and with the ways in which the enlightenment and scientific discourse arose more than 500 years ago in white male Europe. The notion that the world is knowable in predictable ways and that we are able to separate mind from body, thinking from emotions, has arguably made it easier for us to distance ourselves from the ancient knowledge of the world's first peoples and from ancient systems of women's knowledge.

Participatory research is a proposal for action that focuses on transformed understanding of the creation of the knowledge among human beings. Our discourse looks at context, issues of social identity, webs of power and such, seeking new forms of knowledge construction from places outside the walls of power and dominance. We think that at times we have found new ways to co-create knowledge. But can we imagine a process of co-creating knowledge which might happen between ourselves and other forms of life, other species, trees, grasses, rocks?

Important issues which need attention are:

- How is the rest of nature a participatory researcher?
- How is it that nature is both a site of new knowledge creation and a full or privileged participant in the creation of new forms of knowledge, a process which will draw our species closer to the rest of nature?

A permanent critical dimension

We did not find anything magical when we formulated what we call participatory research. We have touched upon and been touched often by the sheer power of human creativity and knowledge creating power through

our work. Our work, however, has also inadvertently reinforced already existing patterns of social inequality. While the university world explodes with and discourses on power in all its forms, the faces in the universities in my part of the world, the resumés of scholars we hire, the forms of sharing knowledge we use, and the structures of learning and knowledge production have changed but little.

Still we know that without the struggles we have engaged in and continue to engage in, things might well have been much worse. We are perhaps entering a truly fantastic period when all we know about knowledge will be changed. I personally feel an excitement because in spite of the multinational dreams of orderly and systematic mass consumption on a global scale, we are also seeing forms and levels of resistance that we have never seen before. It is our opportunity and responsibility to continue to peel back the layers of confusion and uncertainty not for the next few years but for the rest of our lives. □

Bud Hall, is faculty member in Adult Education and Community Development Program of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISEUT). He is also the founder and has been the International Co-ordinator of the International Participatory Research Network and Former Secretary General of International Council for Adult Education, a global civil society organisation.

For more information about the work of OISEUT and to discuss the issues raised in this paper write to **Bud Hall, Chair, Department of Adult Education, Community Development and Counselling Psychology, OISE/UT, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1V6** (Fax: +1 416 926 4749; Email: bhall@oise.utoronto.ca)