

Participatory training and self development

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The Context

Over the last decade or so, 'training' has become a common activity in development projects. This enthusiasm to train or to build capacities at different levels and amongst different sectors of our society tends to overwrite the fact that the most extensive and far reaching learning has proceeded with no trainers at all or with the trainers involved marginally and from a distance. If learning can take place without training, why is so much energy being put into training in general and participatory training in particular?

Before we address this question, perhaps it is appropriate to state that during the last decade, training has become reduced to a pre-planned technique-happy mass of simulations and role plays without any contribution to critical thinking and generation of understanding and awareness. In certain development circles, practitioners opt for training if a programme is not doing well. There are great expectations from training - as if knowledge and action are mechanically related.

On the contrary, as long as it is assumed that increasing knowledge will automatically lead to changes in action, training cannot contribute in preparing people to participate meaningfully in the development process. Such thinking only demonstrate a view of development which is technical in nature. Participatory training relates to a view of development where development actors develop critical understanding about their social reality. It facilitates the breaking of the culture of silence, instils confidence to express individual and collective interest, helps in understand social dynamics and in identifying solutions for social change.

Participatory Training Principles

Participatory training needs to be looked at separately from the generic word 'training'. Participatory training is based on a value premise which believes in empowerment of the poor, including women; and which believes in sustainability, ecological soundness and social justice. Participatory training cannot be encouraged in every situation. It is based on the article of faith of the trainers which, in turn, is biased towards the marginalised groups. It is rooted in certain basic values which gives centrality the poor people's participation in rebuilding their own future.

A participatory trainer does not make magic to alter existing social inequalities. The trainer only makes an educational intervention, whereby the people start thinking about their situation. Participatory training facilitates critical learning.

Agencies and projects believing in participatory development process emphasise concepts like 'organising', 'empowerment', 'participation', 'self-managed', 'community control', 'sustainability' in their project documents. Ordinary people whose basic knowledge and experiences have been de-valued and de-legitimised for centuries do not feel confident to exercise control. They suffer from low self-esteem and their trust in themselves is shaken. The reason for this is to be found in the conventional approach of education of the poor. If poor people are considered ignorant and if the approach is to simply feed them with information that is useful to them, it will never lead to instilling confidence or empowerment. However, this does not imply that poor people should not be provided with technical information.

To use example of a community health programme, training may be conducted for health workers on how to do safe delivery, but the training will only enable the health workers to practice this if they are given the opportunity to analyse their own experiences of

conducting deliveries. This would enable them to find out what is 'good' and 'bad' in their own practices and why there is a need to adopt new ones. This raises self-confidence and increases participation of the health workers. In other words, training related to social development change should not focus on information-giving or skill-building but encourage the practitioners and people to articulate their own knowledge, and need to know and learn more. Social development starts, by self development. This principle is the same for any programme, whether it is watershed development, forestry, income-generating activities, food security, or savings and credit.

Key features of participatory training

Though participatory training principles are based in a set of value premises, it is also built on the adult learning principles. In participatory training, we hear some common statements like 'start where the people are', 'learn from their experiences', 'learning is a social event'. These are nothing but principles derived for adult learning. Hence, participatory training is structured, keeping in mind both value premises and principles of. Some key features of this training are:

1. It is participant-centered or specific to participants' learning needs.
2. The learning focuses not only on knowledge but also on awareness and skills enhancement. This makes the learning complete, critical and useful. Even though
3. Learning is derived from the experiences of the participants; experiential learning is crucial to participatory training.
4. Participatory training requires a learning environment where participants and their experiences are valued and participants feel psychologically secure and safe to unlearn, try their new ideas and share their experiences.
5. When participation is valued, participants develop their own norms and values and take responsibility of their own learning.

6. Since ensuring participation and building a safe environment are key requirements of participatory training, the role of trainers becomes very crucial: the trainer not only believes in the participatory principles, but needs to demonstrate it, as a way of life.⁵

7. Participatory training not only helps in developing critical understanding but also appropriates the relevant and useful knowledge of the dominant system.⁶

Participatory training in practice

For the past decade, Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), New Delhi and several institutions have been involved in building competency on participatory training among grassroots groups. All these institutions individually and jointly have trained a large number of development workers throughout South Asia. The objectives of such a programme are:

1. To build internal capacity of the grassroot development agencies to facilitate participatory learning with the disadvantaged groups they work with.

2. To help the agencies to systematise their training interventions and to create a cadre of people who believe in participatory philosophy and practice this in training situations.

Some of the key features of participatory training elaborated here are drawn from the experiences and practices of various support organisations including UNNATI where the authors work. UNNATI (Organisation for Development Education) is actively involved in promoting participatory training.

The methodology used in strengthening the participatory training competencies is based on participatory principles elaborated in the previous section. It is based on experiential learning and building internal competencies of the development workers so that they emerge as participatory trainers. The training includes the following modules.

1. Why do we do training (the role of training in social change)
2. Developing insights into how disadvantaged people learn.
3. Developing insights into group behaviour: group process and dynamics.
4. Self-development of trainers.
5. Developing an understanding on the effective use of training methods.
6. Training design
7. Developing facilitation skills.

Modules for training participatory trainers

These seven primary modules are taken up in a three-phased training programme. The first and third phases are residential programmes of eight days' duration each. Between the first and the third phase, there is a gap of four months. During this period (the second phase) the participants make use of some of the principles they have learnt in the first phase. This phase also provides a chance to articulate learning needs.

While the first phase is devoted to understanding the methodological principles of training, the third phase is spent in developing skills to practice those principles. However, in both phases experience, analysis and articulation are in-built. In the first phase, the participants enter into the learning situation with individual identity. But as they are encouraged,

1. Role of training

There are polarised opinions on the role of training in the social change and development process. As practitioners of participatory training, we need to develop a balanced understanding of its role. When training is understood as a structured, deliberate, directed and purposive learning intervention, it makes the learning focussed. In a participatory learning perspective, it provides learning on the daily issues central to the life of the people who are undergoing the learning and also helps them to critically explore their

experiences. The process helps the learner to instil faith in his or her self. The contents of the training is of little value if the training does not create an environment where the learners feel confident to share and analyse their experiences. Participatory training does not provide information and skill alone but breaks the 'culture of silence'. People, particularly the poor, who undergo participatory training of any nature need to get structured space to gain confidence. Making people feel empowered and capable in a learning context enables them to practice in their own real life context. Besides this, learning in a group provides a microcosm of how a group functions to and the participants understand of this. From the training the participants draw the relevance of group and understand the norms, values and principles of group building which can be used in organising themselves.

2. How adults learn

Insights into the learning process of adults can help in structuring the learning programme. People often avoid structured learning as it requires some degree of unlearning which is painful. Learning creates different emotional states like stress, anxiety, fear, confusion, agitation and happiness. It has been found that people learn best when learning is useful, relaxing, concrete and when their own experiences and understanding of these is valued. Such an understanding helps in building an appropriate learning environment and in preparation of the trainer. This module highlights the importance of the learning process rather than the content. Developing insights into the issue of why people do not participate in learning as well as in the development process is very crucial for a trainer. If people are treated as objects rather than as active participants they feel alienated. Adults participate best in learning when they are provided a safe, supportive and accepting environment to express themselves and take action.

3. Group process

The group is basic to experiential learning and action for its tasks. While maintaining group identity, there is also a need to understand the process of participation communication, leadership building, conflict resolution and decision making amongst group members while they are undergoing learning. Any inability to recognize these processes creates a problem in helping the group to get involved in the learning. Therefore, trainer's insights into the group process is essential in order to facilitate collective learning.

4. Self development of trainer

Knowing oneself is the basis for knowing others. During the training, the trainer needs to know how the participants are feeling, how comfortable they are to pursue learning, whether the participants' experience and knowledge is being valued. Therefore, the trainer needs to know himself or herself completely. Without this, the trainer might impose her or his own views, pressures and anxieties on the participants.

Hence, the trainer needs to undergo an analysis of his/ or her own understanding of the micro and macro interface, perspectives on social development and change, sensitivity towards gender, communal, cultural, racial and caste issues. Having a balanced understanding of self helps in understanding others in a similar situation.

5. Training methods

Since participatory training focusses on knowledge, awareness and skill development, the methods used are consistent with the focus of learning. The methods used are lecture, group discussion, simulation, role play, case analysis and practice and other variations of these major methods. Besides giving centrality to focus of learning, there is also a need to

keep in mind the participant's sustained involvement valuing learners' experiences, sharing of experiences and group building of learners while choosing methods. Methods should contribute to learning, they should not be a bag of tricks and games used to entertain the learners. In fact, the entertainment value has become so over-popularised in recent times that it has made participatory training synonymous with fun and having a good time rather than with critical and liberating learning.

6. Training Design

'Developing an appropriate design for the learning objectives of a group of learners is one of the most creative and challenging first steps in any training. But many trainers feel that in participatory training one should not develop a pre-planned design. Such thinking only leads to a blurring of training objectives and lack of preparation on the part of the trainer. A participatory trainer ought to be familiar with the background and learning needs of the participants. The trainer should also be clear about the organisational and socio-economic context in which a particular training is organised. Based on this preliminary understanding, a training design is prepared which included articulation of training objectives, spelling out and sequencing the contents and selecting appropriate learning methods.

Once a design is prepared, the trainer can prepare for each session. But each design needs to be re-examined jointly with the participants, taking into account their learning needs as articulated by them and the and training objectives. The preparation of a design, stepwise, is as follows: learning needs identification objective setting content spell our sequencing method identification. This helps in avoiding preoccupations with methods and techniques which most trainers have.

7. Facilitation

In participatory training the trainer facilitates group learning, and at the same time facilitates individuals as well as the group to actively participate in developing their understanding and awareness.

In a training situation, an individual or the group as a whole may get stuck in arriving at the cognitive understanding or may show resistance in relating to the learning issues. In these situations, the trainer makes facultative interventions.

Small group facilitation does not have one single theory or conceptual basis. There is a diversity of approaches to and styles of small group facilitation.

However, one needs to understand various approaches to facilitation such as psychoanalytic theories, Esalen model, Rogerian model, etc. The individual models are very powerful and grass-root trainers may not develop competency to handle them. We have found that grass root workers find it easy to use a mix of styles in promoting collective learning.

All the above learning themes are carried out with the use of a variety of methods like analysis of experiences of participants, analysis of cases and analysis of simulated experiences with adequate input to sharpen the theoretical base. To learn from each others experiences, the purpose of understanding the value and strength of experimental learning is met. From the analysis of their own collective learning process, the participants derive insights into group processes. From the trainer's behaviour and facilitation, the participants derive insights into the role of trainer and facilitation skills. During the whole training, the trainer performs as a model learner, trainer and practitioner of participatory training. Besides the content of the programme, the process of training is very important. We have found that the participants learn more from the training process and trainers' behaviour than from the content per se.

Impact at the grassroots

Though we have not undertaken any formal study to assess the impact of training to build the trainer's competencies in participatory training, we have witnessed some of its use at the grass roots.

The first and foremost important change is that the grass root trainers have been able to understand why people do not participate and have come to realise the dangers of the 'imparting' model of educating people. There is an increased understanding in promoting learner-centered and interactive model of learning. It has helped them to promote participation in the programmes as well as deriving people's knowledge to make programmes people-centred and locally relevant.

The second nature of impact is increasing the grass-root worker's faith in people's knowledge. The practitioners see and value the wide range of knowledge and resources people have. This breaks the dependence on external resource-persons and experts. The trainers do value expert knowledge, but integrate it critically with people's knowledge, but integrate it critically with people's knowledge-base. This training enhances understanding and insight into development issues.

The third nature of impact is in terms of self-development. Development practitioners' examination, evaluation and assessment of their people-centered values in learning helps them to develop as individuals sensitive to poor people and their needs. The critical re-examination of social conditions also helps the practitioners to develop a concrete, practical, dynamic approach to social development. In sum, participatory training not only promotes people's participation, but creates alternatives to social development frameworks at the micro-level and helps to build development workers committed to the empowerment of the poor.