

Paulo Freire and Participatory Action Research

Introduction

This article links the ideas and practices of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, one of the most influential thinkers influencing the world of action research, with the theories and practices of Participatory action research (PAR). PAR can be defined as a process of research, education and action in which participants transform reality and transform themselves. Unlike traditional, expert model, top-down approaches to research, PAR gives community members a central role in the research process. This includes participation in the identification of the problem, the formulation of research questions, the collection, analysis and interpretation of data, the formulation and communication of conclusions, and the implementation of an action plan. This field has evolved from several traditions and has been influenced by different sources. Prominent among them are the contributions of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1921-1997).

Life and work of Paulo Freire

Paulo Freire, was a 20th century educator, writer, philosopher, public intellectual and political activist. He was seen as a myth in his own lifetime and arguably the most widely known educational theorist living at the time. Some might say that his educational thinking has had no parallels in the history of pedagogical ideas.

Freire's educational ideas cannot be isolated from his personal biography and from the geographical and historical context in which he lived. He was born and raised in one of the poorest and most unequal regions of the world. His family experienced economic hardship during his childhood, which helps to explain his sensitivity to issues of social inequality and his orientation towards social justice. Likewise, the different religious orientations espoused by his parents and his exposure to the liberation theology movement during his youth can explain his emphasis on diversity and his commitment to social equality and the emancipation of the poor. Moreover, the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America and elsewhere, explains his emphasis on the connections between education and social transformation.

Freire was born in 1921 in Northeast Brazil, the youngest of four children, from a church-oriented Catholic mother and a Spiritist father. From early childhood he adopted his mother's religion. His father, a police officer, respected that decision and even attended his communion ceremony. In examining his past, Freire said that with this and other similar gestures, his father taught him the importance of respecting the ideas of others even if he did not agree with them. Through conversations with his father, the young Paulo was introduced for the first time to information about social injustices and political struggles in Brazil. He learned from his parents to read and write at a very early age. They taught him literacy skills as a game, writing his own words on the earth with a stick. Interestingly, years later, Freire became famous for developing a literacy method that started with the vocabulary of the learners and not with words chosen by curriculum developers. During his youth, in the context of the economic crisis of the 1930s,

Freire's family struggled to make ends meet. The experience of living in poverty among poor rural families helped young Paulo to become more aware of the social world around him and to develop a sense of respect and solidarity for all human beings.

In his youth Freire studied philosophy, sociology of language, and law. Eventually he became a lawyer, but soon discovered that education was his true vocation. At that time he married Elza Oliveira, a teacher who provided Paulo enormous emotional and intellectual support and with whom he would have five children. Through their participation in the educational activities of Catholic Action movement, Paulo and Elza became involved with the incipient liberation theology movement and its "preferential option for the poor". He worked as a high school teacher and then as Director of Education and Culture of the Social Service of Industry (SESI), where he developed educational programs for workers and their families and developed a participatory governance system based on dialogue, self-management, and combination of study groups and action groups, which today could be seen as the seeds of Participatory Action Research. At SESI, Freire invited students and parents to participate in debates about education and society. He believed that social problems like malnutrition and child labor could be better addressed with the participation of parents and the community, and that this involvement could enable parents to participate in the design of school projects and eventually take part of decision-making processes regarding the curriculum. He also created "workers' clubs" in which members examine their problems and seek collective solutions.

A few years later, Freire became the first director of the University of Recife's Cultural Extension Service, which brought literacy programs to thousands of peasants. For Freire, the challenge was not just to teach literacy skills, but to give voice to the people so they could transit from a culture of silence to one of confidence and political participation in which they would become masters of their own destiny. Based on this conception, he developed a literacy method that started from the experience and words of participants, and surprised everyone when 300 sugarcane workers in the village of Angicos learned to read and write in only 45 days while engaging in a critical analysis of their own reality. As a result of this success, Freire was asked to implement a national literacy campaign. This work was abruptly interrupted in 1964 with the overthrow of the government of Joao Goulart by a military regime that sent Freire into exile for fifteen years. During this period, Freire established residence first in Santiago de Chile (where he continued his adult education work), then in Boston (where he worked as a visiting professor at Harvard University) and final in Geneva, Switzerland, where he served as educational advisor to the World Conference of Churches. As part of this work, Freire participated in educational programs in several developing countries, especially in Africa.

Freire's proposal for social transformation could be summarized in three concepts: education, politics and humanization. In other words, what Freire proposed is, fundamentally, a political-pedagogical project aimed at humanization. He became known for his method to teach adult literacy, but what he developed was not just a method. It was a political pedagogy predicated on critical reflection and collective transformative action in order to develop more democratic, just and happier societies. The triangle of transformation, then, embraces: a) the direction

of Freire's transformative project (humanization), b) the main social activity to move in that direction (education) and c) the recognition of the power dynamics and ideological struggles related to the social forces opposing and supporting those changes (politics). In this project, participatory action research plays an important role.

Freire's influence on PAR

Although Freire seldom used the concept 'Participatory Action Research' in his writings and talks, his proposals on knowledge creation, participation and action clearly inspired this research approach. Such influence is repeatedly acknowledged in the literature on this topic. The literature also makes a connection between Freire's educational efforts towards the development of a critical consciousness, which comes in part from the capacity to establish relationships among facts, and the capacities to establish such relationships developed through research activities. Having said that, it is pertinent to clarify that for Freire, awareness is not an end in itself. For him, what is important is its relationship to a project of social transformation, in which action and critical reflection are intertwined, and here is where his impact on PAR is particularly noticeable.

Freire's theoretical and methodological contributions have also inspired projects that nurtured relationships between cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) and the tradition of participatory action research oriented towards personal and social transformation. These projects are grounded on the assumptions that the two are strongly compatible and complementary, and that the Freirean school of PAR offers an orientation toward politics, ideology, and social justice that can help in connecting CHAT's emancipatory aims more fully to the problems faced by people in their everyday lives.

Hall and Fals Borda

This section explores the historical connections between Freire's contributions and the participatory action research movement. In this exploration, two simultaneous developments in different parts of the world during the early seventies were found to be particularly relevant. One was the work of the work of Budd Hall, currently a professor at the University of Victoria, Canada, who in the early seventies worked in Tanzania during the period of Julius Nyerere, and took a leadership role in the early years of the International Council of Adult Education (ICAE), and in 1976 organized an international participatory research network with nodes in Toronto, New Delhi, Dar-Es-Salaam, Amsterdam and Santiago. The other was the work of Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals-Borda (1925-2008), who in the early seventies involved peasant communities in research activities that were previously confined to trained researchers, and organized the first Participatory Action Research conference in 1977 in Cartagena, Colombia. While these two developments occurred relatively independently from each other, and whereas they approached the issue of participatory action research from different experiences and disciplinary perspectives (sociology and adult education, respectively), both Fals Borda and Hall were influenced by similar ideas that were in the air at that time, particularly the insights generated by Freire's writings and the incipient movement of popular education. In retrospective, it seems that in the seventies participatory action research was an idea whose time had come.

Hall was a young researcher in Tanzania in the early 1970s. He conducted a survey of adult education needs for the Ministry of Adult Education, obtaining poor results. He then realized that he gained more useful information about the learning interests of rural Tanzanians by listening to their stories in the village bar than through a seemingly scientific approach. Although he didn't experience a transformative shift at that particular moment, the combination of different experiences and influences eventually led him to think about knowledge creation in new ways. Prominent among those influences were his dialogues with Paulo Freire. As part of his functions, Hall coordinated Freire's visit to Tanzania in 1971. Hall had been exposed to Freire's ideas on research as engaged practice through the readings of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, particularly the section on 'thematic investigation'. Through the many conversations he shared with Freire at that time, Hall had the opportunity to start challenging his own assumptions about the research process. Gradually, he became in contact with colleagues who form different parts of the world who were thinking along the same lines, including Marja Liisa Swantz from Finland, Rajesh Tandon from India, and Francisco Vio Grossi from Chile. The culminating moment of that process was a conference that Hall organized in Dar Es Salaam in 1976, in which a call was made to learn and share experiences in participatory research.

Fals-Borda, after founding the first sociology faculty in Latin America in Bogotá and a period of teaching and research at Columbia University and at the U.N. in Geneva, returned to Colombia in 1970 to undertake independent research and activism in the impoverished Atlantic Coast Region. During those years, he started to involve the community in research activities. Fals-Borda recalls that at time he had access to the manuscript version of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was circulating through informal networks throughout Latin America before its publication by Continuum in New York. He also became familiar with Freire's work in Africa through the World Council of Churches. One of the elements of Freire's writings that influenced Fals-Borda was a humanistic approach based on the principles of solidarity, commitment, tolerance and pluralism. Another one was the integration of knowledge and political action, combining the collective study of reality with concrete interventions to change it through cycles of reflection and action. A third one was a profound and genuine respect for the knowledge and experiences of the oppressed. The culminating moment of these experiences was the the first international conference on Participatory Action Research that took place in Cartagena, Colombia, organized by Fals-Borda in 1976.

This conference attracted scholars and activists from all over the world, and gave worldwide recognition to PAR. After several years of working on parallel ideas and projects, Hall and Fals-Borda finally met at the Cartagena conference, which Hall remembers as one of the most impressive intellectual experiences of his life. At that time, Hall was using the term 'participatory research' and Fals-Borda was using the concept of 'action research'. Eventually, Fals-Borda was the first one to coin the term 'Participatory Action Research' .

Concluding remarks

In examining the historical evolution of PAR, it is evident that the theories, methodological approaches and practices of Paulo Freire have played an important role, particularly in the early stages of the field (1970-1976) that culminated in the Cartagena Conference. The main influence was probably the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was published in 1970. At least two ideas presented in that book had an impact on the epistemological challenge to traditional social research. First, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire talked about the ability of all people to be knowers and creators of their world where they are conscious of their oppression and have a commitment to end their oppression. He believed that individuals have the capacity for reflection, for conceptualizing, for critical thinking, for collective planning, for community organizing and for social transformation. A corollary of this proposition is that educators and researchers should have faith in people's capacities. Second, based on his experiences with literacy programs, he contended that research is not a neutral, objective endeavor, because knowledge and power are always intertwined, and research, like education, could be oriented towards the preservation of the social order or towards its transformation. In a world characterized by great inequalities, educators and researchers could opt to side with the oppressors or with the oppressed.

These two ideas, when combined, suggest that research can be part of an emancipatory educational project, and that people can participate actively in the definition of the problem, in the analysis of its causes, and in the actions to address it. By investigating their reality, people feel ownership of the process of knowing, and this, in turn, nurtures a confidence in their capacity that leads to community action. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, as well as in many other publications that followed it, Freire called for a research approach that is at the same time collaborative and liberating, that is, an approach that encourages the active participation of researchers and participants in the co-construction of knowledge, the promotion of critical awareness, and an orientation towards transformative action. As he said, it is about naming the world and changing the world. This is, in essence, the soul of PAR. In his own words, formulated at the end of his life, "those promoting PAR believe that people have a universal right to participate in the production of knowledge which is a disciplined process of personal and social transformation (Freire 1997:xi).

Further Reading

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