Research on Participatory Approaches to Adult Basic and Literacy Education

Although interest in using a participatory approach to adult basic education (including ESL and literacy) has been growing, many practitioners are unsure what exactly "participatory" means. One reason for this is that many different definitions of "participatory" have been suggested, some focusing on the relationship between teacher and student, and others on the relationship between work done in the classroom and efforts to enact change in students' lives outside the classroom. In addition, practitioners often suggest that, although participatory education sounds good in theory, it is hard to put into practice. This annotated bibliography highlights readings that speak to the problem of defining participatory education ("what is it?") and the methods for putting this theory into practice ("how do you do it?").

Auerbach, E. (2001). 'Yes, but…': Problematizing participatory ESL pedagogy. In P. Campbell & B. Burnaby (Eds.), *Participatory practices in adult education* (pp. 267-305). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Adult educators in a graduate course on participatory approaches to teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) identified challenges presented by students' ideas about language learning and democratic classroom environments. The course leader used a cycle of reflection-action-reflection to explore reported resistance to participatory methods on the part of adult students and found the graduate students had misconceptions about the Freirean approach to literacy instruction. This approach (based on the work of Paulo Freire—see note on page 4) uses participatory methods as means to help students from oppressed communities work towards self-empowerment and political emancipation. The adult educators in the course struggled with understanding the teacher's role in participatory education because of what they viewed as the inherent dilemmas and contradictions of the model. Three strategies for teacher education were developed: using teachers' own learning experiences to address teaching issues, conducting structured problem-posing activities, and having teachers-as-learners reread and respond to their own journals to see how their thinking might have changed. The adult educators taking the course came to the conclusion that becoming a participatory educator is an ongoing process.

Campbell, P. (2001). Participatory literacy practices: Exploring pedagogy. In P. Campbell & B. Burnaby (Eds.), *Participatory practices in adult education* (pp. 55-75). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

This study explored how learners and teachers experienced participatory literacy education in five programs in Alberta. By analyzing individual and group interviews, journals, photo-stories, and questionnaire responses, the researchers identified three themes: (1) *'To be' versus 'to do'*—The researchers found that learners were interested in a balance of both *being* (giving all a chance to speak, discussing ideas, involving everyone) and *doing* (learning activities such as field trips); (2) *'Top down' versus 'bottom up'*—Although all of the programs were identified as 'participatory,' the degree of learner participation in setting learning agendas varied; and (3) *Leadership*—Most learners had never held leadership positions and had to learn about the role and the process. Identified strategies for using participatory methods include (1) provide mentoring for students to increase their comfort level with participation, and (2) demystify facilitation skills and techniques by teaching them to students.

Cottingham, S., Metcalf, K., & Phnuyal, B. (1998). The REFLECT approach to literacy and social change: A gender perspective. *Gender & Development, 6*(2), 27-34.

REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques) is a participatory approach in which a literacy teacher facilitates discussion of issues of concern to the participants (e.g., the gendered division of labor). Participants use information-gathering and analysis tools such as maps and Venn diagrams to examine the focal issues. Literacy and numeracy skills are acquired through discussion and the use of graphic tools and group-generated texts. Evaluations of three pilot projects involving women in agriculture, health, and income generation revealed that 60-70 percent of those enrolled achieved basic levels of literacy and numeracy. The women experienced increased mobility, more family and community participation, and changes in the division of labor. Participatory methods allowed women's existing knowledge to be respected and drawn upon, while at the same time allowing women to acquire practical skills and status as literate people.

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Green, A. M. (1998). *Project-based learning: Moving students through the GED with meaningful learning.* (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED422 466).

This is a case study of an open-entry GED class for welfare recipients illustrating how learners mastered the skills required to pass the GED Tests through two projects: (1) producing a handbook to help students on public assistance feel more comfortable returning to school and obtaining funding to have it printed, and (2) speaking to middle school students about how dropping out of school had affected their lives. The instructor served as coach, facilitator, and sounding board for learner ideas. By working together to develop, critique, implement, and assess projects having relevance to their lives, learners developed the thought processes needed to assess and evaluate information on the GED Tests.

Hohn, M. D. (1997). *Empowerment health education in adult literacy: A guide for public health and adult literacy practitioners, policy makers and funders. Literacy Leaders Fellowship Program Reports, 3*(4), Part 1. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy. Retrieved December 29, 2004, from http://www.nifl.gov/ nifl/fellowship/reports/hohn/HOHN.HTM (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 425 342).

In this participatory action research project, adult learners and a facilitator sought to learn about embedding empowerment health education in adult literacy. A student action health team identified three issues to explore: (1) the difficulty level print materials provided to students (as clients) about health topics; (2) the inadequacy of appropriately written materials to promote active engagement with a health issue that could lead to behavior change; and (3) the inadequate preparation of health educators to teach low-literate audiences. Early detection of cancers and family violence were the focus of programs delivered in individual adult literacy classrooms. The cancer project was evaluated through observations, extensive reflection, and survey developed collaboratively using an affinity diagram. Personal interviews were used to evaluate the family violence project. The result was a model of partnering for empowerment health education in adult literacy that had the following components: (1) community relationships and processes that create and sustain power-sharing; (2) active learning in the physical, psychological-emotional, and cognitive realms; (3) a concern for voice, changing perceptions of self, and social actions emanating from the interactions of the active learning in an empowering environment; and (4) dialogues about health acting as catalysts for literacy development. The study demonstrated that people feel empowered when they are partners in the process of knowledge discovery and creation and when they are able to see change, both within themselves and in desired directions outside themselves. The power-sharing approach in the research project enabled the voices of the student action health team members and the students they served to be heard and acted on.

Horsman, J. (2001). 'Why would they listen to me?': Reflections on learner leadership activities. In P. Campbell & B. Burnaby (Eds.), *Participatory practices in adult education* (pp. 77-102). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Research indicates that the experience of trauma may have a negative impact on a student's ability to engage in participatory education, especially to take on a leadership role in the classroom. First, because trauma often entails issues of control (being controlled by others or being out of control), some learners have difficulty when asked to "take control." Second, experiences of violence sometimes cause dissociation, all-or-nothing thinking, or the inability to trust, any of which can hinder leadership. Literacy practitioners should recognize that leadership is not just about acquiring skills. They should reflect on and question the possibilities for learner leadership and envision new structures for power sharing in literacy programs.

Merrifield, J. (1997). Knowing, learning, doing: Participatory action research. *Focus on Basics, 1*(A), 23-26. Retrieved January 21, 2005 from http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/fob/1997/merrif.htm.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) challenges traditional models of research by having students (usually the subjects of educational research) take on the role of researcher. This short article presents summaries of two PAR projects connected to the Highlander Center, a school with a long history of working for social and economic justice in Appalachia and the South. Based on her experience, Merrifield highlights three features of PAR: (1) *PAR is participatory*—Research is conducted and/or directed by the people in the classroom and the community; (2) *PAR is defined by the need for action*—Research is initiated because there is an issue that a group of people or community needs to deal with, and the value of the research is determined by how useful the research is in this effort; and (3) *PAR creates knowledge, but not for the sake of knowledge alone*—PAR brings *knowing* and *doing* together. Merrifield also points out some of the tensions involved in conducting PAR. These include questions about how membership is determined (i.e., who gets to participate), and concerns about possible negative results. The reality is that, by becoming visible and active on sensitive topics, people may become vulnerable to a backlash (e.g., being fired, harassed or attacked). All PAR participants need to be aware of these risks before starting any project.

Nash, A. (Ed.) (1999). *Civic participation and community action sourcebook.* Boston, MA: The New England Literacy Resource Center.

This sourcebook reviews sample community action projects and details concrete steps that can be taken to engage adult education classes in civic participation. The sourcebook contains a number of accounts by teachers of the projects their classes worked on and what they felt were the lessons of the activities. Community action projects reviewed include a class's successful campaign for increased public transportation in their rural community, students learning about the history of welfare policy, meetings with local politicians, and students educating each other about breast cancer. The projects are discussed within the context of the Voter Education, Registration, and Action (VERA) Project and the Equipped for the Future (EFF) Initiative. Based on the responses of teachers, the editors of the sourcebook identify challenges regarding civic participation (e.g., students are cynical about taking action in the community) and specific strategies for addressing those concerns (e.g., students can read about what other classes have done, or examine as a class the reasons for cynicism).

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Research on Participatory Approaches to Adult Basic and Literacy Education

Nash, A. (2001). Participatory workplace education: Resisting fear-driven models. In P. Campbell & B. Burnaby (Eds.), *Participatory practices in adult education* (pp. 185-195). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

This report of case studies of participatory approaches in three workplace settings provides a critique of "fear-driven" models of worker training—those that blame the lack of decent jobs primarily on worker skill deficits. The projects included (1) a class in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) in a unionized manufacturing company that investigated how language draws distinctions between labor and management; (2) an ESOL class for hospital workers that explored issues surrounding shift work through role playing; and (3) a writing class for workers facing an impending merger that co-created a merger survival handbook. Implications for teachers using participatory practices in workplace literacy programs include the following: (1) explore questions about how the workplace runs and how it affects people's lives; (2) try to make connections with students and understand them better (e.g., thinking about the extent to which literacy teachers share the identity of marginalized workers); (3) use practices flexibly, focusing on purpose more than method; and (4) help learners recognize that these methods are helping them to acquire the skills they want.

Nash, A., Cason, A., Rhum, M., McGrail, L., & Gomez-Sanford, R. (1992). *Talking shop: A curriculum sourcebook for participatory adult ESL.* McHenry, IL: Delta Systems.

This is an account by five teachers who participated in the English Family Literacy Project of the University of Massachusetts-Boston, a project focused on the development of intergenerational literacy for immigrants and refugees. Because the project was participatory in nature, the teachers developed the curriculum by working with students to identify the students' own literacy needs and strengths. Participatory curriculum development also gave students the chance to deal with real world situations and concerns. The authors report that this collaboration between students and teachers pushed the class in unexpected directions, and meant that the organizing concept of the class (family literacy) had to be redefined. It is also important to note that this re-focusing of the class had to be done without straying too far from the intentions of the project's original funders. The authors present activities that they developed with their students, evaluate the success of the activities presented, and discuss relevant issues (e.g., Should teachers be open with their opinions or should they try to remain neutral? What sort of participation is expected of all students? Can participatory approaches work with low-level ESL students?).

Norton, M., & Horne, T. (1998). The wholeness of the individual: Linking literacy and health through participatory education. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 44*(2), 245-247. Retrieved December 29, 2004 from http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/pat/245_247/page245.htm.

An Edmonton (Alberta) adult learning center developed a participatory education program for low-income women that integrated literacy development with health promotion. Participants identified issues of concern and worked on program development. Objectives for the program included helping women (1) learn skills and strategies to access information and resources needed to make positive changes that can improve health; and (2) learn reading, writing, and related language strategies they can use to access, assess, and apply health information resources. Participants reported improved eating and exercise habits, lower stress levels, and positive support from other participants.

Norton, M., & Malicky, G. (Eds.). (2000). *Learning about participatory approaches in adult literacy education: Six research in practice studies.* Edmonton, Alberta: Learning at the Centre Press. Retrieved December 29, 2004 from http://www.nald.ca/ripal/resourcs/learning/learning.pdf.

In the Participatory Approaches in Adult Literacy Education/Research in Practice project, Alberta literacy educators initiated participatory approaches with groups of adult learners and conducted research about their use. Practitioners were trained in using participatory approaches in an interactive, Web-based course. Their research projects ranged on a continuum from practitioner-conducted to collaborative research with learners. Projects included the following: (1) literacy learners investigated the use of their center's computer lab, acquiring skills in research, group process, and computer use; (2) a practitioner investigated ways to relinquish the teacher's habitual leadership role in the classroom at appropriate times to allow students' voices to be heard; (3) members of a women's writing group in a literacy/life skills program explored ways to facilitate their own learning; and (4) learners participated in the development of curricula for young men and women currently or formerly incarcerated or involved with the criminal justice system. There was evidence that the project changed the relationship between facilitators and learners. Many learners acquired skills that enhanced their participation, and facilitators who found it difficult to share power were forced to rethink their roles as participatory educators. Among the implications for practice are the following: (1) the need for critical reflection, alone and with colleagues; (2) the need for professional development focused on group dynamics and group process; (3) the importance of collaboratively establishing group guidelines for participatory activities; and (4) the need to understand the environment and the barriers to facilitators of learner participation.

Purcell-Gates, V. & Waterman, R. (2000). *Now we read, we see, we speak: Portrait of literacy development in an adult Freirean-based class.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

This is an ethnographic case study of a women's literacy class in rural El Salvador that was taught by one of the co-authors (Waterman). The book includes classroom observations, selections from Waterman's teaching journals, an analysis of the teaching strategies utilized, and specific recommendations for practitioners interested in applying Freirean theory in their own classrooms and programs. A key finding of the study was the way in which the class evolved to include typical participatory practice (e.g., dialogue about a current event) as well as traditional pedagogical strategies (e.g., dictation). This occurred, in part, because students requested the dictation exercises. Waterman and Purcell-Gates identify ways in which students' expectations may not match their teacher's ideas about participatory education, and present examples of how long it sometimes takes for a

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student to feel confident enough to fully take part in participatory exercises. Waterman and Purcell-Gates also provide examples of how the process approach to writing and the use of authentic materials in the classroom create opportunities to balance work on social justice issues with skill instruction.

Shang, H. F. (2000). A comparative analysis on alternative approaches to literacy instruction. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 19*(4), 291-299.

This study provided a comparison of research findings about the rationale, design, use, and effectiveness of four approaches to literacy education: natural, whole language, learner-centered, and participatory. Participatory ESL literacy programs use the techniques of problem-posing, generation of texts through authentic dialogue, and communal problem-solving. Research indicates that the approach works best with learners who share a common language and culture. It may be less effective with groups of learners who do not share the same language and are not prepared to discuss social or personal issues in English. The four approaches complement each other in that they all incorporate learners' values, experiences, and active engagement in meaningful learning.

Stino, Z. H., & Palmer, B. C. (1999). Motivating women offenders through process-based witing in a literacy learning circle. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 43*(3), 282-291.

In a residential treatment center, ten women who had received court sentences for drug sales or alcohol abuse were engaged in a participatory literacy learning circle. Collaborative learning activities (emphasizing learner choice and responsibility) included process-based writing (journals, bibliotherapy, autobiography, poetry). Participants decided to write a handbook for new entrants to the residential facility. Questionnaire responses indicated that the majority experienced significant improvements in both writing skills and self-esteem, and most appreciated the woman-only group atmosphere. Analysis of GED essay scores indicated that seven of ten improved, two stayed same, and one decreased.

The changes project: Understanding the impact of welfare reform, immigration reform and the changing nature of work on adult learners in western Massachusetts. (2000). Holyoke, MA: Holyoke Community College. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED448 613).

The Changes Project was a participatory action research (PAR) project conducted by adult learners at five adult literacy programs in Western Massachusetts. Five teams examined the effects of welfare reform, immigration reform, and changing workplace requirements on adult literacy learners and ways in which program staff and policymakers can be responsive to these changes. The research teams, each composed of adult learners and a facilitator, used a PAR process of articulation of, and continued reflection on, assumptions and beliefs. The reflection moved from the local situation of the five teams to cross-site analysis of the whole project. Sharing knowledge was challenging because of the diverse literacy and schooling levels, languages, and cultures of participants. However, teams were committed to making the work accessible and they devised ways to communicate findings through visual images and theater techniques, as well as through

words. The results showed how adult learners are resilient and proactive in the face of often-challenging circumstances posed by these reforms and changes. Implications for the use of participatory research include the following: (1) involve students in investigation and action around issues they identify as important, which will help develop the confidence and skills necessary to manage these issues; (2) integrate information about these issues into the curriculum; and (3) conceptualize research as a process of learning, generating knowledge, building skills and capacities, and taking action.

Note

Paulo Freire and Liberatory Education

Participatory education is often associated with the liberatory pedagogy of Paulo Freire. The two concepts have a great deal in common, and people have struggled to articulate clear differences between the two. One way to make the distinction is to note the explicitly emancipatory goals of Freire's pedagogy. Freire believed that by becoming literate, the oppressed can realize their full humanity and liberate themselves. To achieve this transformation, learners cannot remain passive while teachers fill them up with information (what Freire called the "banking" model of education). Instead, students must actively participate in the production of knowledge. Participatory education also rejects the banking model and stresses the need for students to actively engage in the production of knowledge, but may not necessarily do so within a framework of emancipation.

Key Texts

Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education.* D. Macedo (Trans.). New York: Bergin & Garvey

Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom*. P. Clarke (Trans.). New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers

Mayo, P. (1999). *Gramsci, Freire and adult education.* New York: Zed Books

Shor, I. (Ed.) (1987). *Freire for the classroom: A sourcebook for liberatory teaching*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann

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