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Learning by doing to enhance local initiatives

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· Introduction

The 'Adult Education and Community Development Project' has helped to redefine and restructure the functions of the Faculty of Humanities at the Central American University (UCA) in Nicaragua as a centre for teaching, research and the promotion of social change. This support programme is being developed through an inter-university cooperation between the Catholic University of Nijmegen, the Free University of Amsterdam and the Central American University (UCA)¹.

In this paper some experiences with one department, the School of Social Work, are discussed. First the paper describes the development of a postgraduate course for professional workers entitled 'Social Research and Popular Participation'. The course was held at the Central American University (UCA) in Managua. Discovery learning was the main methodology applied. The second part of this paper describes experiences of using a combined approach of discovery learning and participatory action research in a fishing village on the Pacific Coast of Nicaragua.

· The background and methodology of the training programme

The Faculty's principle problem is that since its main focus is almost exclusively teaching, there are few academics with the necessary training to carry out research. Furthermore, a particular type of researcher was felt to be needed - someone with a broad perspective, who would be able to make research a tool in the hands of

the people, encouraging participation and a growth of grass roots awareness. In this context, research becomes a process of getting to know and interpreting social reality, with the aim of gathering sufficient knowledge to allow for the reproduction, transformation and induction of new processes in society. The people at the grass roots should be active and aware participants. Using their local knowledge they are in the best position to transform their own situation.

Taking into account this theoretical framework, it was decided to form and train a team of teachers, professionals and students, capable of planning and carrying out a strategy of Social Research and Popular Participation. The training methodology was based on the principles of discovery learning. In discovery learning, participants learn from their experiences. Much of the training is based on exchange, analysis and systematization of these experiences. Learning does not refer only to theory and facts but should also give due attention to values, commitments and relationships. Experience-based learning also means participants learning a lot from systematic reflection on what they do individually and inside the training group. These are essential skills for a participatory approach.

The course was held at weekly intervals and each session lasted eight hours. 25 professionals participated from 12 different institutions, mainly in the area of Education, Health, Social Welfare and Agriculture. Each had to be a professional, directly or indirectly linked to a popular organisation.

¹ The author was coordinator of this project between 1984 and 1988.

• The first cycle

The first cycle was divided into three phases:

- Diagnosis of practical experiences;
- Theorising on practical experiences; and,
- Development of a new form of action.

Diagnosis of practical experiences

In this first phase, we tried to build upon the practical experience of the participants. Throughout we made use of group techniques such as brainstorming, role play and 'newsprint', to promote the participation of the participants. To stimulate favourable learning conditions the emphasis was put on the development of an open atmosphere of mutual respect, trust and commitment within the group. We asked participants to describe and analyse their individual work experiences of social research. This was done by asking questions on their knowledge and ideas and by asking them to perform tasks which reflected their working experience. During the discussions the differences between ideas and reality made them aware of some of the contradictions in their day-to-day activities.

For the next part of this initial diagnosis, participants were asked to visualise their national political, social and economic context by creating a newspaper mural. At this point we stressed the importance of taking a global rather than a purely contemporary perspective.

Bearing in mind that the participants had little research experience, they were asked to draw up a research strategy. They were then encouraged to discuss the contradictions which might arise when putting this research into practice. In a forum-like role-play these research strategies were presented to the other groups who had previously prepared the following roles: research experts, senior representatives of the institutions involved and the subjects of the research. In a final synthesis each research team reflected on the experience. They realised that the strategies which they had drawn up were still too tied to traditional concepts of research, and did not allow for popular participation. This stimulated the need for further study to answer the question: how

does one relate social research to popular participation?

The process of theorising on practical experience

The initial findings of the above diagnosis did bring about a new level of awareness and a new interpretation amongst participants. In the next stage the theory of practical experience was introduced. This used additional theory and experiences from other sources (articles, lectures, slides) to enrich their knowledge.

One step involved integrating theory into a blueprint for a research project. For this purpose we used one of the strategies described above. The result was a redefinition of three fundamental stages in a research process:

- identifying the research question;
- the critical analysis of the problem, and,
- formulating action plans, involving the subjects of the research.

After this, we compared and discussed different models of participatory action research. This led to a new approach for social research and popular participation.

A high level of participation and interest was maintained by using various communication techniques, designed by the 'academic commission'. An example of such a technique was 'knowledge roulette'. This consisted of getting the groups to answer questions set by the 'croupiers'. They would give a definition, a concept or a sentence from the text for identification or completion. When they received the correct answer they would say 'Bingo!' The answers were then discussed by the group as a whole.

Coming full circle: a new form of action

At this point, we had finished reflecting and theorising. We now had to begin the action. First, a model of participatory action research had to be defined, relevant to Nicaragua and the work context. For this purpose we used a technique which we called 'elections'. This involved conducting something akin to an electoral campaign, for people to promote the virtues of the various models of research. Each group supported one particular research model

and had to organise campaign literature, meetings with their candidate, radio programmes, flyers, electoral alliances. The outcome of this whole enriching activity, which took place over a period of two sessions, was the majority election of the so-called 'PIPA' model. This was an alliance of three of the four different approaches to social research, combining the strong parts of each.

To get acquainted with this model, the coordinators designed different activities, such as an 'Action-Research Laboratory for the PIPA alliance programme'. This provided an opportunity to put the model into action and to test its coherence. Two teams were formed to carry out the experiment. Their task was to seek solutions to the problems of applying the PIPA model of research in two ministries: Health and Education. The members of each team were assigned roles (researchers, directors of research units, trade union representatives etc.) Then the teams went through all the various steps of the model, simulating the activities which applied to them in their particular roles, ending up with a feedback of the information which had been collected.

After this, each team prepared a paper, clearly setting out their theoretical framework, the way the experiment developed and their results. These papers were delivered to the 'Second Congress of the Latin American PIPA Network' which was programmed for the following week. In this simulated Congress, we had a fruitful discussion about the application of the research model, the need for participatory research techniques, the need to clarify the procedures of the model and, finally, the need to apply the model in a real life situation.

Three groups were formed and given the task of applying the PIPA model in a limited context with a time limit of six weeks. To this end, the model was put into practise and tested in three small research projects:

- With second year university students to improve the functioning of collective study groups.
- With the Syndicate of Technical and Administrative Staff to improve the syndicate's organisation and levels of participation.

- For training community health workers in the prevention of diarrhoea.

After six weeks the participants presented and evaluated the different projects, taking into account their participatory content and their practical results.

• **The second cycle**

The second cycle started in July 1986. In this phase, we took stock of the progress and results that had been achieved with the newly developed research model. When necessary, new research projects were defined for the institutions where the different participants were working. After a short training process, we started four different projects, three in poor neighbourhoods in Managua and one in the port area of Corinto at the Pacific Coast.

The aim of the research projects in the poor neighbourhoods was to start a joint training/research process together with the neighbourhood organizations to find out the most deeply felt problems affecting the community. Once this was achieved, a plan of action was made jointly with the representatives of the responsible government agencies. We also tried to give training to the neighbourhood committees so that, in future, they would be able to cope better with their problems themselves.

The other project involved a team working with the National Harbour Board. The aim was to develop a participatory training course for foremen stevedores. For this purpose, the team started a participatory research programme with the senior stevedores, to integrate their knowledge into a course plan in which they would be the course leaders. The research consisted of a number of different stages:

- getting acquainted with the community;
- putting together a mixed research team (professionals and members of the community);
- defining research topics; and,
- training the team and designing the methods and techniques to be used in executing the research, feeding the results back into the community and formulating action and evaluation.

In a 'creativity workshop' participants brainstormed participative techniques to be used in the different stages of the four research projects. Up to then we had been using a wide variety of techniques in the whole process of training. These techniques for training had to be adapted so that they could be used to get acquainted with local people in the research area, to organize groups, to select the issue to be investigated, to analyse the issue in depth and to discuss and give feedback on the information gathered in the different stages of the research.

• **Participatory research applied: fishermen in Masachapa**

A participatory action research project was carried out by researchers from the School of Social Work and students during 1986. It all started when the School of Social Work received a request for support from a villager from Masachapa. The villagers faced many problems, including bad drinking water, serious health problems, alcoholism, bad housing conditions, high mortality rates, prostitution and illiteracy. Was it possible at least to discuss with the newly formed team for community organisation what could be done? A plan was made for several meetings in which we would work on training and research to improve the community organisation and the participation of villagers in village development.

- The first meeting held in the village was in an open area near the harbour. All villagers who were willing to participate were invited. In the meeting villagers and 'outsiders' were introduced to one another, they played some group games and shared in a common community walk. The purpose was to create an atmosphere of friendliness and equality as well as to indicate the seriousness of the outsiders' willingness to learn.
- In a second meeting the identification of problems encountered and opportunities for development formed an important part of the group-assignments. The villagers (men and women) were allowed to show the outsiders how well they knew their village and the reasons for various practices. This gave a good idea of the physical environment of the village and established

the basis for the somewhat more difficult exercises that followed. After all the exercises, all presentations were made by the villagers in the open air, which allowed people who were not participating to see what was going on.

- In the next meeting the group of participating villagers was tripled. Research started on the fishery economy, on social stratification and family relations, on the history of the village and on the existence and functioning of social institutions. Villagers actively participated in all of these. At the same time the training meeting continued to analyse the problem of participation in community organisation, the identification of opportunities and planning of community actions by listing priorities and 'best bets'. People's roles and responsibilities were also defined. After the third meeting a group of villagers started their first action: they cleaned the village and the beach, and started to collect funds for a small brick road to the harbour. At the same time discussions were started to organise a fishermen's co-operative.

After six weeks it was time to evaluate what had happened and what had succeeded. Results of the analysis were presented to the community in a creative way at a village celebration meeting. Fishermen brought fish, women prepared a big meal and all the teams presented their outcomes, with the villagers participating in the role plays and feedback games. Results were discussed thoroughly and a good base was laid for further actions.

Prominent features of this project were its emphasis on the participation of villagers in their own development, and its active presence in the village not as benefactor, but as catalyst and partner in development. This was because the methods used did not merely diagnose and appraise, but went further by sharing analysis and understanding of the local situation. This in turn led to development activities that were creative, productive and sustainable. The methods evolved. There was plenty to learn from, with, and about fishermen and women and their situation. The discovery learning approach complemented and integrated well with a participatory action research approach

developed during the course in Managua and results of this have since been quite substantial.

Since 1988, we have been working on applying the developed methodology to a variety of situations. One example is social forestry. It aims at enhancing local initiatives from farmers and the development of participatory tools for social forestry. We train professionals to understand the importance of trees outside the forest, to appreciate the indigenous knowledge of farmers, to incorporate local knowledge in existing work practices, to develop and implement a participatory approach within their specific circumstances, to adapt the present working situation to new conditions, and to strengthen relevant existing local, regional and or national institutions.

- **Lessons learnt**

There have been several lessons. This research again showed us that villagers are often capable of collecting far more accurate information than outsiders. They were also able to correct it and order it. The analysis gave rise to a process of development. Their perceptions of their situation were critical for planning actions. We also came to understand that there is a general need to understand and appreciate traditional knowledge and systems of livelihood, and the way people feel, see, think, and act in these areas. With the methodology of joint training and participatory action research we could start a process of joint discovery and shared analysis. It enhanced both participation and the learning of all parties involved.

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