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Twenty-one tips for short PRA workshops with lots of people

Robert Chambers

• Introduction

One sort of PRA workshop can be for quite large numbers of people for a short time, such as a long afternoon, or one or two days. This can make sense:

- to familiarise officials, academics, people trapped in universities, cities and training centres etc., with some of the elements and methods of PRA;
- to enable a few people who already have the orientation to go off and get on with it; and,
- to bring together people who are interested in PRA so that they meet one another, and perhaps follow up together.

It is possible to conduct these 'dry' workshops with almost any number of people. The most to date is 180, and numbers over 60 have been quite common. Being prepared for any number of participants encourages hosts to invite others, from other organisations as well as their own, with a better hope of sharing and later networking. It is different with field experience workshops where numbers may have to be limited quite strictly, although even there the gains from extra participants, in my view, often exceed the costs.

• 21 tips

To make such a big one or two-day workshop participatory and a full learning experience, I suggest the following twenty-one tips.

Choosing a room

A large room with plenty of space (but not so big that a microphone is needed), and with lots of walls that can be used for sticking up flipchart sheets.

Preparing the room

Set it up the night before, or well in advance. If you rearrange seating, plaster the place with notices asking janitors to please NOT put the chairs back in line....

Arrange seating informally

For large numbers, chairs without tables are often best, in a muddled-up U shape. Or lots of small tables for small groups, especially threes. Never have a table between you and the participants. Sit undefended. Try to end on the floor (but not on your back!).

Expectations/hopes

Ask someone to intercept people as they arrive and invite them to write their hopes/expectations and post these up. Read them, and read out a few at the start. If necessary, change the balance of the programme.

Programme contract

Discuss how long people can stay, and the programme and agree (but only if necessary) to finish by a certain time. With a large group the easiest way to do this is by a show of hands for alternative finishing times. Videos can be optional extras outside the basic session

times, e.g. in an evening, for those who wish or can stay on.

Introductions

Individual introductions can take too long in a large group, unless everyone is strictly name and organisation. A quick method is to ask “*Who are we?*” with handraising for type of organisation, discipline/profession, countries or continents of origin or experience, etc. Ask people to look around for people they may want to talk to later. Ask: “*Who has been left out?*”. This gets everyone physically active early on, and most people find it really interesting to know the mix of professions etc. Usually there are a few laughs about those left out. Circulate a sheet for names and addresses with one person responsible for seeing that it gets round, and have it typed and distributed by the end.

Alternate plenary and small groups

Say at the outset that you will never talk for more than 10 minutes, and that after talking there will be buzzes so that everyone can discuss with neighbours what has just gone on. Plenary feedback is not always necessary from these quick buzzes, which can be anything from 20 seconds to five or even 10 minutes. These quick buzzes have several advantages - maintaining interest, encouraging active listening, allowing everyone to participate, and giving you a breather, a chance to regroup, and an opportunity to listen to what people are saying.

Identify and make use of experience in the group

Ask, for example, “*Who here has experience of RRA or PRA? Or of other participatory approaches?*”. The same can be asked about rural development tourism, questionnaire surveys etc. Then welcome the experience as a resource for the whole group. In buzzes, try to ensure that those with experience are well distributed so that all can benefit. This can be done easily by raising hands, and then forming groups around those with their hands up.

Also, whenever a topic comes up (e.g. participatory mapping) ask if anyone has facilitated it, and if they have, ask them to

share their experience. This can help enormously.

Can you guess it?

Have mystery problems or slides, where you put up a sum of money and give people 10 questions to guess something. The lesson is that people know things we do not.

Rapid group analysis

Give groups quick tasks of analysis to write and post up on flipchart papers. Three examples:

- semi-structured interviewing - dos and don'ts;
- advantages and problems of groups; and,
- participatory mapping: ground or paper? Advantages of each.

Then all participants stand and read the charts, and list key points their group did not get. A few can be specially mentioned.

Vary feedback methods

I have only gradually realised the range of ways for analysis, sharing analysis, and feedback. Various sequences can combine some of these:

- Individuals speak, nothing written up (Mark I participation);
- Before discussion, each participant makes a personal list;
- Individuals speak, remarks written up by facilitator;
- Groups discuss either same topic or different topic;
- Groups speak in turn, nothing written up;
- Groups speak in turn, remarks written up by facilitator;
- Small groups coalesce and compare notes;
- Groups send representatives to write on flipchart sheets simultaneously;
- Each group does its own flipchart (often best on the ground) and sticks it up; and,
- All stand, read, note, reflect on what has been put up.

Run variable activities into the breaks

When there is an activity which groups will finish at different times, run it into a break for tea/coffee/lunch etc. This can save time, pressurising only the very keen or slow coaches.

Instant plenary 'research'

Show how with a group it is possible to elicit quantitative information of high quality quickly. This can be done by handraising, by secret ballot, or by lining up (e.g. for seasonality of conception by making a circle with large cards for months and asking everyone to stand behind their month of birth).

Vary group sizes and compositions¹

This is much more of a skill than I used to realise. There must be lots of ways of doing it. I now tend to start with threes, amalgamate to sixes by putting tables together for group exercise, and then via *Fruit Salad* or *Jungle* get all tables to the walls, with random groups. For some purposes though, groups who know one another or who have common knowledge and interests are best. This may apply for example with matrix scoring, where it can save the groups time deciding what to do, and make it easier for all to participate. My general experience is that groups should be mixed up periodically, although some people who happen to be especially happy with their groups may not wish this.

Warn in advance

Tell people what the next practical is going to be, explaining the relevance of the build up to it (e.g. for slides of behaviour/attitudes before non-verbals, or for slides of participatory mapping before the group question: ground or paper, or slides of methods before dry practicals).

Unfreezing sequences

Start informally, and keep shifting towards greater informality in group interactions. I

usually try to get to the non-verbals exercise by the end of the first morning. This can be quite hard work with proper men and women. I am sure there are many ways of doing this. I try to get in these participatory unfreezes:

- Expectations;
- Who are we?;
- Introduce yourself to your neighbours (pre-buzz);
- Rural development tourism: sharing your experience;
- Questionnaire surveys: sharing experience, flipcharts of problems (at this stage, groups often amalgamate);
- Can you guess it?;
- How we see things;
- Buzzes on behaviour as we watch contrasting slides;
- Jungle (fruit salad) (involves clearing the centre of the room); and,
- Non-verbals (fairly dramatic unfreezer for some).

This leaves the room in decent chaos with a clear middle area for the afternoon. I realize that I am in danger of freezing on my own sequence. Perhaps I need shaking up! (see Tip 21).

Dry run exercises (not always so dry either)

There is a dilemma between rapid and slow. Rapid is fine for instant mapping of one's own neighbourhood (two minutes is enough), but for group exercises - matrix scoring, imaginary mapping and modelling, trend and change analysis, time use analysis, seasonal calendars, chapati diagramming etc. it is possible to put on strong time pressure so that groups draw and diagram in a matter of minutes - as little as ten minutes for some methods. People later complain about shortage of time but also comment that they did want a taste of all of them. Matrix scoring needs longer, but time can be shortened by suggesting one topic (e.g. development organisations), which also makes comparisons easy and interesting, while leaving it to groups to do something else if they wish.

Go outside and do it on the ground if possible.

¹ See Robert Chambers' paper: 'Twenty-One Ways of Forming Groups', no. 26 in this issue, for further ideas and definitions of terms.

For dry runs - chalks, seeds (several sorts), flip chart papers, pens, scissors, cellotape or masking tape are useful (with bluetack or gum as optional extras).

Use wall posters

Wall posters are better than overheads. They stay there. You can discuss some points but leave others which are self-explanatory. They can be copied out at leisure by participants if they wish. Wallposters with photographs can make a big impression.

List and avoid common mistakes

We all make boops, and have bad habits. Make your own personal list. Those I am at least dimly aware of include:

- Losing my cool with people before we start (especially criticising the convenors for the terrible room, hopeless tables, medieval slide projector, grotty OHP, inadequate screen, lack of wall space, horrible chalk, useless blackboard, curtains that don't black out.....you name it);
- Showing too many slides (limit them, have a purpose);
- Talking for more than 10 minutes at a time;
- Showing too much material on overheads;
- Letting a big talker talk big to the annoyance of others (solution: save your speech for the relevant buzz);
- Taking too long in the early stages of the day;
- Including too many practicals at the cost of reflection and discussion;
- Trying to make the breaks (coffee, tea etc.) too short;
- Mumbling;
- Preaching;
- Manic impatience, waving arms, tearing hair; and,
- Not allowing time for questions to be raised.

Evaluation

Given shortage of time (usually) four questions written up, and participants scribble replies anonymously:

- Were your expectations achieved?
- What did you find most useful?
- What did you find least useful?
- How could a workshop like this be improved?

Invent, experiment

Every time, try something new. And fail forwards.

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