



Learning and teaching participation in higher education in China

By LI XIAOYUN AND LI OU

Introduction

This paper reflects on the lessons learnt by, and the opportunities and challenges facing, institutions of higher education in China as they attempt to institutionalise participatory paradigms, approaches, and methodologies. The Centre for Integrated Agricultural Development (CIAD) based at China Agricultural University (CAU) has played a leading role in institutionalisation. In the mid-1990s, it pioneered the learning and teaching of participation (LTP) in higher education in China. The initiative was based on its extensive experience and knowledge gained through carrying out research, consulting, and training for over 100 internationally funded agricultural and rural development projects. It began with a graduate programme, and later an undergraduate programme in 1998 when the first College of Rural Development (CORD) was established, on the site of CIAD. This paper will discuss progress so far, lessons learned, and the challenges faced in this field due to rapid changes in urban, and especially rural, development in China.

Participation in the Chinese context

Participatory approaches and methodologies were introduced in China in the early 1990s through international projects. Instead of uncritically following and applying the

introduced model, CIAD's researchers tried to adapt it to fit the Chinese context and link it to the conceptualisations and understanding of Chinese stakeholders, both officials and farmers.

Participatory approaches or methodologies are not completely new to Chinese people. Mao Zedong applied various methods of interview and discussion in the 1920s and early 1930s in his survey to classify social groups in rural areas. In the 1940s and 1950s 'gaining ideas and information from the masses, and then feeding back the formulated scheme and policies to the masses again' became the guideline for party and government activities.

The experiences and innovations of 'model' farmers (e.g. multiple cropping patterns) were the main source of advanced technologies disseminated in the 1950s before agricultural research and extension systems were fully developed. During the commune period¹, especially in the 1960s, farmers also played an important role in the experimentation, demonstration and extension system for agricultural technologies. This system proved quite effective in disseminating new technologies.

Socially and politically, farmers have also played impor-

¹ Collective organisations existed from 1958–1984 in China. Within these, farmers had neither ownership nor use rights over arable land, fulfilling assigned manual work and getting grain food from the collective according to their labour contribution recorded.

tant roles in agricultural and rural development. The 'Household Responsibility System (HRS)² was created in 1977/8 by a group of farmers in a small village in Anhui Province when the commune system came to an end, leaving farmers in serious poverty. Deng Xiaoping and the other reformists discovered the farmers' practice and adopted it to cover all the rural areas of China.

However, farmers' participation has become more and more neglected since the 1970s. This exclusion was particularly pronounced after the green revolution when researchers and technicians succeeded in increasing production and became the dominant actors in agricultural research and development. The working guideline of 'from the masses, to the masses', pioneered in the 1940s and 1950s, has been neglected or rejected by most government leaders and officials, especially at local level. Local officials are accountable only to upper authorities and not to ordinary people.

The adaptation and application of participatory approaches and methodologies has helped farmers, ordinary technicians, and project staff to reclaim the traditional working style. It provides farmers with the chance to express their needs and knowledge, analyse their problems, and identify solutions through the use of PRA methods and tools. Its harmony with the Chinese cultural psychology is a key reason why actors around the country readily accept these new ideas and methods.

Teaching/learning participation in higher education in China

Through our experience of consultancy, research, and practice of rural development, we identified an urgent need to incorporate the theory, approach, and methodologies of participation into the higher education system. We believe this is necessary because:

- The education system in China, especially agricultural higher education, is dominated by paradigms which value scientists' knowledge and ideology over that of practitioners such as farmers. Therefore, it is difficult for educated project officials and line agency professionals to change their attitudes and behaviour enough to enable a development that is sustainable and accountable.
- Training only the existing government officials is not adequate to meet the needs of on-going economic and democratic reform in China. Human resources with new ideas and skills need to be developed.

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- As China merges into the globalising world, civil society organisations such as farmers' associations are growing rapidly and playing increasingly important roles. The higher education system in China should support these organisations.

Assisted by the Ford Foundation and the international advisory committee for the development of CORD, the undergraduate programme at CORD promotes LTP in several ways.

Identification of specialised programmes and curriculum development

The undergraduate programme was created bearing in mind the market demand for human resources in rural development and extension, and the experiences and skills of CORD staff in development research and practice. Two specialised undergraduate programmes were identified – rural development management, and agricultural extension and innovation management. Within these programmes, practical sessions in rural areas are arranged for the students, to expose them to the realities of farmers' livelihoods and rural life.

The development and application of participatory methodologies throughout the LTP process

CORD staff have a long history of introducing and adapting participatory training approaches and methodologies through the projects they have undertaken. It has proved both easy and effective for students to master and apply the methods and there is much evidence of changes in their attitudes and behaviour. The training itself turns into a learning process, and the trainers play the role of facilitators rather than 'teacher'. This has been welcomed by the students who were suffering a lot from traditional one-way teaching.

In order to contextualise theory and concepts, the lecturers employ actual case studies in their teaching. Most of the cases are drawn from their own research and consulting activities. Group discussions are held by the students to further their understanding of the concepts and ideas, using their own knowledge and experience. Exercises are also

² Under this system households received use rights over arable land by contracting it from the village collectives who owned the land. In turn, the households had to sell a quota of grain to the state, and pay taxes and levies.

“While all of the cases reveal the nuances of political process and determination of citizens to influence decisions that affect their lives, they also affirm that advocacy and citizen participation strategies do not come in a one-size-fits-all formula”

developed to illustrate the application of particular methods, with students from rural backgrounds (more than half of the student population) assuming the role of ‘key informants’ for the discussions and exercises. Teamwork is encouraged. These activities have proved to be very effective in preparing students for field exercises in rural areas. The students show readiness and confidence in applying PRA tools in the field.

Exposing the students to real development projects

CORD staff try to arrange field exercises and especially graduation internships/theses within their own projects, undertaken for organisations such as the World Bank, PLAN International, etc. This gives students the opportunity to interact closely with tutors, and familiarise themselves with the whole process of a development research or practice mission, from framework to methodologies. It is a great opportunity for them to apply holistically and comprehensively what they learned during their university studies.

Although CORD has made a lot of effort to institutionalise participation in higher education, there is still a long way to go. We are now conducting student evaluations in order to identify the challenges we are facing as we seek to improve our programme.

Student evaluation of the courses

Recently we conducted a questionnaire survey among the third and fourth (final) grade undergraduates, to evaluate the outcomes and impact of LTP. The questionnaire was divided into six sections:

- the degree of the student’s understanding or mastering of participatory development theory, research methodologies, and methodologies of development planning and project management;
- their usefulness to the student’s future employment and career;
- the factors influencing the degree of the student’s understanding/mastery;
- levels of interaction during teaching and learning, and

- student ranking of different teaching/learning methods;
- the advantages and disadvantages of participatory teaching/learning methods compared to traditional one-way teaching;
- general comments on further improvement.

Students’ understanding/mastery

Most students had understood or mastered the theory and methodologies of participation, with only 5.1% of the respondents claiming their achievement was ‘poor’. A high percentage of students rating their achievement as ‘poor’ (33.3%) in methodologies of development planning and project management was caused by the inclusion of third grade students who had not taken these courses but were asked to complete the questionnaire nonetheless. Fourth grade students tended to have a higher proportion of students with a good understanding and mastery of participatory development theory and research methodologies than the third grade students, but also a higher proportion of students assessing their understanding as ‘poor’. This may in part be due to differences between the teachers and students of different years in their teaching and learning capacity. Female students had better results than males in these two subjects.

Relevance to future employment

Eighty per cent or more of the total number of students considered the courses to be necessary for their future employment and career. Forty to fifty per cent considered the courses to be very useful or just useful. However, quite a high proportion of the final grade students (30–40%) considered what they had learnt to be basically useless. This shows that students have little confidence in finding jobs with such subject matter in today’s human resource market, which is undergoing rapid and dramatic changes. This provides a big challenge for our undergraduate programme.

Factors influencing degree of understanding/mastery

Table 1 shows that students were most likely to attribute negative outcomes to a shortage of practical knowledge and experiences. This was followed by the absence of relevant courses and lack of initiative due to unclearness on job prospects. Only 12.8% attributed it to the lack of a national enabling environment for participatory development. This suggests that practical knowledge and experiences are essential for a better understanding and mastering of participatory theory and methodologies, and that big efforts are needed to fill in these gaps.

Table 1: Ranking of factors influencing understanding/mastery by students of the rural development management programme (%)

Rank	1	2	3	4
Absence of subjects relevant to participatory development theory and methodology within curriculum	23.1	20.5	20.5	35.9
Students' lack of practical knowledge and experiences	41	28.2	17.9	12.8
Lack of initiative of learning due to unclearness on the importance of the subjects, and employment prospects	23.1	28.2	15.4	33.3
Lack of enabling environment for the participatory development approach	12.8	25.6	41	20.5

Ranking of LTP methods

The evaluation revealed that most students appreciated the interactive methods of LTP. It seems, however, to be more difficult to use interactive approaches for the teaching of theory than of methodologies.

Ranking of teaching/learning methods (Table 2) showed that the students most appreciated field exercises, especially for the teaching of methodologies (ranked first at 74.1%), followed closely (with regard to the teaching of theory) by the presentation of relevant cases studies. For LTP methodologies, group exercises (31.5%), presentation of case studies (27.8%), and group discussions (16.7%) were also popular. The low rank of lecturing suggests the need for further adaptation and improvement in this method of teaching. Plenary presentations also appear to need improving if they are to serve as opportunities for mutual learning, communication, reflection, and assessment.

Advantages/disadvantages of LTP methods

Comparing the outcomes of LTP methods with traditional 'one-way' teaching, 'fostering the team-work spirit and group dynamics' was selected by 44 students (77.2% of total 57 respondents); 'strengthening independent thinking' was chosen by 31 students (54.4%), and 25 students (43.9%) identified an 'increase in oral expression' ability.

Students identified the main comparative advantages of these participatory courses to be the opportunities to gain practical experience, and the proximity of the courses to social realities. Students also proposed that a more solid theoretical foundation be built, more specialised courses useful to development researchers and practitioners offered,

Table 2: Ranking of six LTP methods by students of the development and extension programme(%)

Rank		1	2	3	4	5	6
Lecturing	Theory Methods	13 3.7	11.1 9.3	13 9.3	16.7 18.5	16.7 22.2	29.6 37
Presentation of cases	Theory Methods	31.5 11.1	20.4 27.8	16.7 22.2	20.4 22.2	11.1 14.8	0 1.9
Group discussion	Theory Methods	3.7 5.6	20.4 16.7	33.3 24.1	25.9 29.6	13 16.7	3.7 7.4
Group exercise	Theory Methods	5.6 0	25.9 31.5	24.1 33.3	22.2 20.4	18.5 13	3.7 1.9
Plenary presentation	Theory Methods	0 3.7	0 3.7	7.4 5.6	7.4 7.4	35.2 27.8	50 51.9
Field exercise	Theory Methods	46.3 74.1	22.2 13	5.6 5.6	7.4 3.7	5.6 3.7	13 0

better linkages and coherence between courses developed, repetition avoided, more opportunities for field practice provided, and that teachers should set aside more of their time and energies for teaching.

Challenges and opportunities for CORD/COHD

The evaluation made by the students as well as the new trends of social, economic, and political development in China provide us with a number of challenges. These include better reflecting the interdisciplinary foundation of LTP in our courses, the according requirement for human resources, and the lack of incentives for teachers to devote time to teaching. Through our own research and practice, as well as communication with international scholars in the same field, we have achieved a deeper understanding of the interdisciplinary nature of participatory development. To consolidate the theoretical and methodological foundation of LTP, more subjects are needed in the undergraduate programmes, in addition to economics and sociology, for example, politics, social psychology, anthropology, etc. We do not yet offer these courses and need teachers to teach them. However, creating incentives for teaching staff is a challenge. The staff of CORD have significantly increased their income levels through the consulting activities of CIAD, and demand from clients is increasing due to the blossoming reputation of CIAD. However, these activities take a lot of time and compete with teaching. Although the college contributes a certain amount of money to the limited subsidy paid to staff for teaching, it is still not enough compared with the

economic and academic incentives of consulting and research activities.

Despite all of these challenges, the current reform and development of the economy, society, and political systems in China have really provided a lot of opportunities for our research and teaching, as well as for our graduate and undergraduate students. More holistic and comprehensive development, with better integration between urban and rural areas, has expanded our target areas geographically beyond the rural areas. Other changes, such as the presence of more and more laid-off workers, the growing population of impoverished urban citizens, and democratic development at the urban community level, e.g. civic participation in governance, also demand that we widen the geographic scope of our research and teaching and produce the

required researchers and practitioners.

As government undergoes further restructuring, good governance is becoming an increasingly important issue of development, not only for government agencies but also for civil society. Globalisation will become an increasingly important issue, although the negative impacts of entering WTO on agriculture, rural areas, and farmers have not yet emerged.. The environment for mainstreaming and institutionalising participation and gender and development is also becoming more favourable along with the deepening of economic and political reforms. These new developments demand that CORD adds new subjects and courses to its programmes, for example, governance, international trade, and finance. They will also provide more employment opportunities for CORD graduates.

CONTACT DETAILS

Dr. Li Xiaoyun and Dr. Li Ou
Centre for Integrated Agricultural Development (CIAD)
College of Human Sciences and Development (COHD)
China Agricultural University (West Campus)
100094 Beijing
PR China
Tel.: +86 (0)10 6289 3094
Fax: +86 (0)10 6289 1027
Email: xiaoyun@cau.edu.cn
Email: liouc@163bj.com