

LEARNING AND TEACHING PARTICIPATION IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

Learning and teaching participation in institutions of higher learning: overview

Initiating activities at the International Workshop on Teaching and Learning Participation in Higher Education, 2-4 April 2003, IDS, UK

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How is participation learned?

There is increasing global interest, by many actors engaged in development, in promoting the institutionalisation and spread of participation in society. From grassroots projects to voluntary organisations, and from governments to large funding agencies, 'participation' has been embraced as a way to build greater voice, accountability, and trust into relationships between people and institutions. Successful innovations and practice have resulted in participation being seen as a desirable end as well as a means, with the potential to reduce poverty and social injustice by strengthening citizen rights and voice, influencing policy making, enhancing local governance, and improving the accountability and responsiveness of institutions. Inherent in the idea of participation is that poor and marginalised people should take part in, and indeed drive, the decision-making processes that shape their lives. This involves the use of a range of approaches and methods, and requires changes in behaviour, attitudes, and power relationships by everyone involved.

Efforts are now being made to support organisational and institutional learning and change which will enhance the overall quality and impact of participation. In order to promote and increase participation effectively, and also ethically, there is a growing need for experienced and well-trained people who are active and open to its meaning,



Photo: IDS, UK

methods, and practice. Many institutions of higher learning (which include universities, schools, and colleges offering formal graduate and post-graduate programmes, as well as 'non-formal', governmental or sectoral institutions offering specialised training programmes for experienced professionals) have a role in developing the capacity of institutions and individuals to understand and practice participation. But how can they ensure that they deepen the quality and sustainability of participation in their learning programmes, whilst avoiding the promotion of simply 'more participation' of dubious quality? How may participation be *learned*, and how can institutions of higher learning facilitate this learning?

These fundamental questions have been exercising the minds of many development practitioners and theorists, in

Box 1: The LTP initiative

An international dialogue on learning and teaching participation (LTP) in institutions of higher learning was convened by the Participation Group of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, UK in April 2002. The original purpose of the dialogue was, through the sharing of experiences, to enable HL institutions to develop and deliver more effective education programmes and to contribute to a wider transformation of individuals, institutions, and society. The LTP global dialogue has gathered steadily in momentum. From the experimental contributions of the participants in the initial e-forum, through four subsequent e-fora, and an international workshop (April 2003), the initiative has become a truly globe-spanning network of people involved in teaching and learning participation, both through theory and in practice.

response to the belief that participation is not only an essential part of development, but a basic characteristic of human life. Yet, because of prevailing power structures, hierarchies, and forces at a global and a local level, participation of people in decision-making processes is often prevented, challenged, or opposed, especially in matters of access and use of resources. We believe that institutions of higher learning have a critical role in fostering and supporting participation. In April 2002, an international dialogue on learning and teaching participation (LTP) in institutions of higher learning (HL) was convened to explore the ways in which such institutions have been taking on this role (see Box 1). The rich vein of experiences and stories tapped through the dialogue suggest that the time is right to share some of the lessons learned even more widely, through this special theme section of *PLA Notes*.

Some key challenges and questions

The LTP dialogue is largely structured around sharing personal experiences and the lessons learnt from them in order to develop strategies for moving forward. Crucially, this also involves identifying key challenges and issues faced by individuals and groups as they seek to bring their initiatives from the margins to the centre of higher learning institutions. These include questions on issues such as:

- *how to negotiate power relations and hierarchies, especially those involving teachers, learners, and institutional managers?*
- *how to overcome structural constraints to learning and teaching participation, and promote and achieve an interdisciplinary approach to learning within institutions?*
- *how to change attitudes and behaviour, realising that emotions and beliefs play a vital part in the learning process?*
- *how to support and build capacity and competences in the use of participatory teaching and learning methodologies*

Workshop participants learn from each others' contexts



Photo: IDS, UK

such as PRA, action research, and experiential learning?

- *how to ensure that the participatory concepts, approaches, and methodologies we use are relevant to the particular culture and context in which we operate?*

While in many ways the LTP dialogue has brought to light more questions than answers, the identification of these challenges means that these important issues can be addressed and explored, and potential strategies proposed to overcome them. The papers in this edition seek to do just that.

The articles in this theme section

The articles presented in this special theme section of *PLA Notes* are drawn from a selection of papers prepared for the International Workshop on Learning and Teaching Participation in Higher Education in April 2003. We hope they will encourage more individuals and institutions to engage in thinking and practice of LTP, and further participation in the wider dialogue. The papers have been selected for their relevance to three key areas:

- participatory modes and programmes of teaching and learning;
- university-community partnerships; and,
- learning networks and methods for institutionalising and mainstreaming LTP.

Participatory modes and programmes of teaching and learning

This first area details participatory modes and programmes of teaching and learning that draw on experiential learning methods combined with critical reflection and conceptual exploration. As the International Workshop revealed, innovative examples of such participatory methods have been implemented in HL institutions across the world and span a wide array of disciplines and courses ranging from agriculture and rural development to social work and law.

'Persuasive' posters highlighting critical issues are presented to the workshop participants



Photo: IDS, UK

"A recurring theme throughout the dialogue has been that of how to teach students who are already 'experts' in their fields and who already 'do participation' "

University-community partnerships

The second area expands on the notions of experiential learning and social change by homing in on the practice of university-community partnerships. As illustrated by **Randy Stoecker's** experience in the US, the nature of these partnerships encompasses a whole spectrum of participatory and transformative potential, revealing varying purposes, modes of engagement, and scales of initiative. **Carlos Cortez Ruiz** then moves the discussion to the issue of constructing such partnerships within the context of a social movement. Using the example of Chiapas in Mexico, he reviews the collaboration of teachers, students, and graduates from different disciplines with communities, social organisations, and NGOs in different activities through the Interdisciplinary Research Programme on Human Development in Chiapas. He highlights the tension between the conventional academic assertion that knowledge is the key to change, and the belief of activists that real change comes only through action.

Learning networks and methods for institutionalising and mainstreaming LTP

The final area focuses on dynamic learning networks and methods for institutionalising and mainstreaming LTP. In the first of two papers, **Steffanie Scott and Truong Thi Kim Chuyen** consider the issue of co-learning processes around participatory planning within a collaborative university linkage programme in Vietnam. They show how methods of capacity building within HL have been established in order to enable institutions to contribute to participatory, localised poverty reduction through community-based projects and participatory curriculum development. **Chris Opondo and colleagues** then turn to an exploration of institutionalising participatory approaches through their experiences in national agricultural research systems and HL institutions in East Africa. Their work with the African Highlands Initiative exposes the challenges associated with attempting to transform organisational norms and instil a 'culture of learning' within such organisations.

A recurring theme throughout the dialogue has been that of how to teach students who are already 'experts' in their fields and who already 'do participation'. In answer to this question, several participants in the LTP dialogue emphasise the importance of working with the 'prior knowledge' of students and facilitating 'unlearning' to encourage personal transformation in student and teacher alike. **Nancy Grudens-Schuck** presents such a case from a course on participatory evaluation using quantitative enquiry, taught at Iowa State University in the US, while **Lydia Braakman's** experience as a facilitator for the Regional Community Forestry Training Centre with partners across Asia reveals 'the painful process of unlearning old habits and learning new ones'. **Jürgen Haggmann and Connie Almekinders** describe the findings from a workshop on curriculum development and transformation in rural development and natural resource management in the faculties of agriculture in eastern and southern African universities. They show that so-called 'soft skills' such as those of self-discovery and personal development are critical components within otherwise technical courses.

Sherry Joseph considers the complex relationship between teachers and students in a case study of participatory learning and teaching in a department of social work in India. He shows how participation enables learning on the part of 'teachers' and teaching on the part of 'learners'. The unique case of the development of 'proyección social del derecho' (social outreach of law) within a law faculty in Peru is then discussed by **Henry Armas** who shows how participatory methods can facilitate the linkage between personal development and social change. Finally, **Li Xiaoyun and Li Ou** present an experience from China, exploring the lessons learnt by the College of Rural Development and the challenges currently facing them as they attempt to implement programmes of LTP.

Participants share music, dances, stories and poems at an evening cultural event



Photo: IDS, UK

Sharing experience and stories – building the bridge between theory and practice

The LTP dialogue has highlighted the importance of participatory learning for individual, social, and institutional transformation. It even has implications for transformation of the discourse on learning, participation, development, and social change. This is because, by nature, learning and teaching participation means dealing with issues of power and equity. It also lends itself to an interdisciplinary approach within which theory and practice may be integrated, and rooted in local realities. It can provide valuable opportunities for collaborative learning through the establishment of active linkages between universities and communities, and the development of wider learning networks. There may be many institutional constraints to such an approach, but learning and teaching participation has the potential to penetrate the conventional heart of institutions of higher learning and be truly transformative.

A basic concept of learning and teaching participation is that individuals participate in generating their own personal theories which are relevant to their own context. These emerge through the experience of practice, and then go on to inform further practice. The relationship between theory and practice seems to work best when a variety of stakeholders are able to participate at different levels of the process, especially through the use of experiential learning methods and activities. Evidence suggests that many individuals and some institutions as a whole attempt to foster such an approach, but often the stories and experiences of how this was done and what happened as a result are not widely known.

Box 2: Personal experiences of learning and teaching participation

The sharing of methodologies has been a key success factor in the LTP dialogue. A wide range of ideas and practical suggestions on how to learn and teach participation in institutions of higher learning have been related from different contexts and regions of the world. Here are some examples of teaching practice, which seem to encourage participation.

- Begin a teaching programme by asking and giving space to learners to define what they want, and also what they can offer; then adapt the curriculum accordingly to demonstrate that what they can offer is valued.
- Use information as a means of challenging belief systems, as an opportunity to speak for 'different reasons' and as a response to differences in knowledge and experience between individuals.
- Provide structured opportunities for immersion by learners in 'real' situations and contexts; theory makes sense when combined with practice through a process of critical reflection and action.
- Alternate 'formal' and 'informal' exchanges, gradually increasing the group leadership and responsibility.
- Ask learners to define the way they see themselves in a particular context (e.g. their job or position) in relation to the rest of the world.
- Help learners reach understanding of the goals (both individual and collective) of a programme, and provide a structure, with clear steps (but not the method) by which learners can achieve these goals. The teacher thus provides 'an initial envelope around the process and acts as guarantor of the safety of the participants', through a structured transfer of responsibility from teacher to students.
- Provide informal interaction with groups, and individual coaching when needed.
- Provide support to groups, building relations of trust, ground rules, and understandings, which promote candidness, openness, acceptance, and offering of constructive criticism, building confidence that 'they' can do it.
- Avoid and break the habit of returning to the 'master teacher' mode and the use of banking, from which most teachers are only one lecture away.
- Use and facilitate evaluation processes based on an action-research approach, especially through the use of self and group evaluation techniques.
- Carry forward ideas and learning from previous groups and classes to help support and nurture new groups; at the same time, still allow each group its own 'space' to learn through experience and reflection.
- Develop and demonstrate respect and trust creating a climate which affirms the value and self-worth of the learner.

Source: Taylor and Fransman (forthcoming)

Methodologies for LTP

A discussion on methodologies for LTP has been a key aspect of the dialogue (see Box 2). Two cornerstones of transformative learning are experiential learning and critical reflection. Experiential learning, for example through community-based research, provides a methodology for increasing participation while prompting institutional change. It helps to incorporate

the practitioner into the academic realm by casting the practitioner as 'teacher' and the academic as 'learner'. Critical reflection is a complimentary practice to experiential learning. It contributes to transformation at the personal level through self evaluation, and through learning from experiences. It also helps to further break down traditional roles of students and teachers by involving fellow staff, students, and community practitioners in reflection and action. These methodologies highlight the powerful linkages between participation, learning, and transformation. The more those learners participate, the more they are empowered; the more they are empowered, the more they question previous assumptions. The more they transform at the personal level, the more this is likely to impact on institutional transformation (Taylor and Fransman, forthcoming).

Moving forward

One important outcome of the LTP dialogue has been the elaboration of a range of potential strategies that can support learning and teaching participation in HL institutions. These include:

- **a series of focused, thematic discussions** on different theoretical anchors for teaching and learning participation, the contribution made by this theory, and reflections on how we learn to theorise through a process of critical enquiry;

- **preparation and sharing of documentation related to LTP** including compiling useful materials for learning and teaching, shared through curricula, resource guides, annotated bibliographies, teaching methods, etc., and a compilation of links and references posted on the LTP website;
- **preparation of a book** on concepts, principles, theories, and practices of LTP;
- **documentation of case studies about institutional learning and change experiences** to demonstrate how learning and change have actually occurred within institutions, and what kind of strategies and approaches were used to bring this change about;
- **regional initiatives:** proposals for regional dialogue, e-forums, networking, and capacity-building;
- **virtual technologies:** innovative use of distance learning, open source models, and blended learning (virtual and face-to-face learning);
- **capacity-building:** exchanges and cross-visits, networking, workshops, and various influencing methods.

Several of these proposals are already being undertaken by 'champions' who have been willing to collaborate in pursuing the desire to bring learning and teaching participation from the margins of institutional life to the centre. Hopefully others will join the initiative and help to maintain the momentum of this rich and dynamic dialogue.

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