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Recommended Citation

Rodríguez, María del Carmen (2004). "Participation Training: A Model for Experiential Learning," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2004/papers/55>

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Participation Training: A Model for Experiential Learning

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Abstract: This paper introduces the principles of Participation Training (PT) within the frame of Freire's (1970) notion of Education for Liberation and presents implications for the development of adult education, theory, and practice.

Pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970) defines education for liberation as one that challenges the world's "givens" to enable learners to reflect on their experience historically in order to give their immediate reality not only a present but more importantly, a future (cited in Mackie, 1980). Leon McKenzie (1991) seems to share Freire's notion of liberation by stating that adult education "ideally helps adults develop and actualise their various potentialities to the end that the learners become more liberated [politically, economically, socially] as individuals, better capacitated to participate in the life of their communities and institutions, and empowered to create an authentic human future" (p. 129).

Stemming out of the need to take into account the adult status of learners as separate and different from traditional schooling practices, Participation Training (PT) is a model for experiential learning through discussion developed by Paul Bergevin and John McKinley in 1936 at Indiana University. This educational design helps learners become more aware of their own thought processes by enabling them to participate effectively in small group discussions and be responsible for self and others. Bergevin was co-developer of the Participation Training Institute, which trained clergy, nurses, literacy workers, military and government educators, and lay members of community and voluntary organizations. The development of this approach was his goal to enable adults to work together and to be responsible for self and others by training them to develop and use good communication skills and teaching them about the social, philosophical, and historical concepts that affect human interactions.

Basic Structure of Participation Training

This approach follows the central principles of group dynamics: That the group should work towards achieving balance in participation; that group members should build on others' suggestions; that everyone commits towards improving their listening skills; and to be respectful of others at all times.

Goals: This technique organizes learning behaviours and facilitates adult learning in small groups. Participation Training seeks to accomplish that participants learn:

- To plan and take part in discussion of topics they themselves have selected;
- To see themselves as they are seen by other members of the group and how their participation influences others;
- To help others in group learning situations;
- To engage in the disciplined expression of ideas;
- To distinguish, on the basis of experience, what helps or hinders group discussion; and
- To establish goals, identify discussion topics, and observe group processes (Mc Kenzie, 1991, p. 77). These goals are achieved by defining the roles and norms that guide the group process.

Roles: In the original design, Bergevin and McKinley suggested that volunteers should take on the roles of a discussion leader, a recorder and an observer at each session. These roles change with every session so that other group members can experience each role.

The discussion leader directs the meeting in terms of task maintenance and helps deal with the topic in order to achieve balanced member participation. The leader however, may not offer any

suggestions for the discussion, attempt to convince the group to adopt a particular idea, or dominate the discussion. The leader may only take on the following behaviours:

- * Guides group along lines of the discussion topic in an informal way
- * Helps group make necessary decisions and work towards their goal''
- * Ensures that suggestions are heard and considered and that members accept criticism of their ideas;
- * Assists group members with any difficulty in communication; and
- * Encourages cooperative effort.

The observer watches for subtle actions and reactions that affect the group process: sharing in the participation, support (or lack thereof) for ideas contributed, indicators of enthusiasm or repression, the quality of listening, and the general emotional atmosphere. Generally, the observer is concerned primarily with the group process itself. The observer may rely on sociograms to depict frequency and direction of communication. If the observer wants to offer a critique, he/she is obliged to emphasize that this is his or her observation of the group. This role demands that the volunteer observes and is prepared to comment on:

- The functional and dysfunctional behaviours that must be initiated and avoided at different stages: Initiation, maintenance, and post-session behaviours;
- Spontaneity and balanced participation;
- Emotional atmosphere;
- Communication difficulties and potential conflict and its management;
- Decision-making processes; and
- Dependency on discussion leader or on other group members.

The recorder, contrary to the observer's task, is concerned with the discussion and its content. He/she must keep a record of the discussion; this could be presented in point form or in brief comments. The leader may ask periodically for a report on the material covered or simply for clarification. The record does not have to be private; in fact, it is a good idea to use large sheets of newsprint as long as they do not divert the group's attention. The recorder may or may not contribute to the discussion. The recorder:

- Helps the discussion leader interpret and synthesize ideas for quick and brief recording;
- Records topics and ideas in an orderly fashion and in a logical sequence;
- Records only main points or highlights of group discussion;
- Is prepared to comment on content of discussion and its progress toward the group's stated goal.

The participants have responsibilities during the discussion. The level of participation and the extent to which the goal is achieved, depends primarily on the participants' maturity, skills to work independently, and ability to assist the discussion leader.

Norms: Within the principles of PT, the culture of the group and its norms is defined by five standards:

Shared Planning: All of the participants must share the planning of the discussion; the topics for discussion are based on consensus; each member agrees to pursue discussion of a particular issue; **Shared Appraisal:** All group members are responsible for the appraisal of the group performance; **Effective Listening:** It involves the effective recognition of the presence of others; **Voluntary Participation:** Participation within the group is voluntary and free; **Mutual Acceptance:** Affirm one another as persons; show signs of respect, tolerance, courtesy for the viewpoints of others.

Procedures: Three basic steps conform the structure of PT:

1. An agreed upon topic (the selection of a topic discussion must be stated as a question in order to encourage further exploration. This might constitute a challenge to the group as the task requires cooperation and tolerance on the part of the members and the discussion leader);
2. A measurable goal to work toward during that session (a first course of action that must be stated as an outcome from the discussion) and;
3. An outline (this is a detailed “path” for the discussion to inform participants how the goals will be achieved).

Implications for the development of adult education theory and practice

Understanding, knowledge, and dialogue are indispensable processes within the educational milieu. Education in the context of adulthood is often confined to systematized modes of learning where teachers forget the dynamic interactions and therefore, the growth that occurs with/in the learners. Shared power or mutual empowerment in learning is exercised in shared management of the curriculum, its contents and methods, and over the coordination of all learning activities. Participation Training provides a forum for learners to exert control over their learning, while also providing space for the development of those skills and competencies to exercise power responsibly and attain critical consciousness through Conscientization. This process involves identifying contradictions in experience through dialogue and becoming part of the process of changing the world.

Freire (1973) suggests three stages by which critical consciousness is accomplished. The first of these stages is **Semi-intransitive consciousness**: the state of those whose sphere of perception is limited, whose interests centre almost totally around matters of survival, and who are impermeable to challenges situated outside the demands of biological necessity. When these individuals increase their capacity to enter into dialogue not only with others but with their own world, their consciousness becomes "transitive."

The second stage of consciousness is "**naive transitivity**". Freire characterizes this stage of consciousness by an over-simplification of problems, nostalgia for the past, an underestimation of ordinary people, a strong tendency to gregariousness, a disinterest in investigation, a fascination with fanciful explanations of reality, and by the practice of polemics rather than dialogue. Naive transitivity is never totally and irrevocably surpassed; for all who enter the learning process, this remains a lifelong task. The third and final stage is "**critical transitivity**". This stage is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems, by testing one's own findings and openness to revision and reconstruction, by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them, by rejecting passivity, by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics, by receptivity to the new without rejecting the old, and by permeable, interrogative, restless, and dialogical forms of life. Freire (1970) suggested that in order to create learning communities and encourage participation, dialogue should exist. He calls these bonds “cultural circles” and defines them as “...a live and creative dialogue in which everyone knows some things and does not know others, in which all seek together to know more” (Freire, cited in Shor, 1987; p. 41). It is through dialogue that knowledge is constructed; and dialogue, say Mc Carthy and Ingram (1996), begins with individuals’ own personal experiences where they are exposed to other peoples’ viewpoints, experiences and interpretations that might differ from their own. Within the approach of Participation Training, adult educators ought to be prepared to utilize such experiences on a daily basis in order to encourage transformation by challenging established “knowledges” and

enabling learners to move beyond their own comfort zones and question what other cultural frameworks they bring to their own understandings and experiences of the world.

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