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# Extension and Grassroots Educators' Approaches to Participatory Education: Interrelationships among Training, Worldview, and Institutional Support

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**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on development of adult educators' commitment to participatory education through the presentation of empirical results from a study of a Canadian sustainable agriculture program. The author argues for an account of professional development that integrates institutional and historical dimensions.*

The renewed commitment of powerful institutions to participatory adult education raises hopes. Increased support from governments and development agencies in the area of sustainable development, in particular, has allowed participatory initiatives to bloom in some parts of the world (Cassara, 1995; Röling and Wagemakers, 1998). However, alongside hope rides anxiety. Collectively, we seem to know so little. Too few practitioners discriminate among even basic dimensions of participation, such as who may provide leadership for participation, how participation emerges, and what participation looks like when it has succeeded (Chambers, 1997; Heron, 1989). Worse, some scholars claim that participatory approaches attract problems like flies to honey. Development professionals describe frustration and co-optation in integrated conservation projects (Gezon, 1997); negative impacts of participatory development (Pigozzi, 1982); and illusory gains in community-based conservation (Western, Wright and Strum, 1994).

Despite challenges, participation continues to interest adult educators because the right forms are anticipated to improve adult education individually and collectively. Participatory approaches to program planning are grounded in theories of democratic education advanced by John Dewey (1938) and Paulo Freire (1970). When participation is authentic, local knowledge of insiders and outsiders can be combined in ways that attain superior results and build the capacity of community members to solve complex problems (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Participation may also indicate engagement of people at the margins of society working toward social justice. Moreover, participation is sought as a crucial outcome, a collective habit that makes democratic life possible (Welton, 1998). Facilitators

are the people who are most directly involved in catalyzing participation. They are crucial members of a social movement for democratic and participatory sustainable development (Chambers, 1997). Between the urgency of the environmental crisis and the passion of the participatory movement, however, lies the practical matter of training. This paper presents results from an empirical study that investigated, among other issues, development of a participatory ethic and skills by extension and grassroots educators who offered programs to farmers in a complex institutional environment. Theorizing about the role of professional development in nurturing commitment to participatory adult education was important to the research. The research findings are based on a 3-year study of a \$10 million sustainable agriculture program in Canada called Ontario Environmental Farm Plan.

## Theoretical Framework

Participation is an important element of sustainable agricultural education. Sustainable development in the absence of participation falls dramatically short of its potential (Chambers, 1997). Participation in adult education may be considered to be authentic when adult educators and planners systematically encourage people at many levels to negotiate program development through dialogue and shared decision-making (Cervero & Wilson, 1994; Heron, 1989). In North America, participation in agricultural development connects to a history of land-grant and extension systems, and to a strong tradition of farm organizations (Blackburn, 1994).

Boud and Miller (1998) argued at the 1998 AERC conference that we have paid relatively less attention to facilitators than to learners, to the detriment of the field. I intend to spotlight issues of training and development of participatory educa-

tors, a task to which I am dedicated in my extension and teaching practice in a university department of agricultural education. Specifically, this paper explores the tensions revealed in professional development programs for facilitators. For example, a program may express tensions related to administrators' analyses of competencies needed by grassroots facilitators. Heron (1989) encourages facilitators to understand psychological theories through human relations training. Chambers (1997) highlights transformation of attitudes toward greater openness, enthusiasm, respect, and humility. Additionally, program planners build assumptions about instruction, including sequence and venue, into program design. Jiggins and Röling (1994), for example, contest the common belief that participatory approaches can only be learned in the field. Boud and Miller (1998) address the issue of training across contexts through development of the concept of animation. Central to their thesis is the idea that educators should dissolve expectations that techniques guarantee success. Instead, Boud and Miller suggest meditation upon context, identity, negotiation, and consent as a basis for action. Cervero and Wilson (1994) echo Boud, pointing out more directly the ways in which program planners bring organizational and personal interests to program design. It is within this political dimension that we can situate certification and "brand name" programs, and other forms of standardization and quality control. Boud, and Cervero and Wilson, argue for a more historical and political view, one which can meet the "explosion of new learning desires and needs which cannot be met in conventional ways" (Boud & Miller, 1998, p. 5).

### *Background*

The Ontario Environmental Farm Plan program was proposed, designed and managed by a coalition of farm organizations (Ontario Farm Environmental Coalition {OFEC}, 1991/1995). Farm Plan encouraged the participation of adult learners (farmers) at multiple levels of the program, including program planning and evaluation. This voluntary, provincial-wide program served 12,000 farmers from 1993-1998 through Canada's Green Plan program. Farm Plan served farmers' social, political and environmental needs as mainstream farm leaders defined them. The leadership of mainstream farmers for Farm Plan was a sharp contrast to defensive maneuvers of farming organizations prior to the pro-

gram. Farm Plan was about mainstream farmers confronting each other about the environment rather than being exhorted to change their ways (unsuccessfully) by environmentalists, ecological farmers, or government (Grudens-Schuck, 1998). The program fulfilled its goals through policy changes on the provincial level; a participatory education workshop series; and the creation of an environmental farm planning system. The program also offered a financial incentive of \$1,500 CDN, modest by U.S. farm subsidy standards. Two types of staff shared program responsibilities: Grassroots program representatives and ministry extension staff. Grassroots educators were men and women employed part-time by a farm organization. Frequently, they were farmers themselves. Many had no prior experience with adult education. Grassroots educators were responsible for participatory facilitation during workshops. Facilitation consisted of: (a) critical reflection sessions directed toward discussion of environmental issues and the political economy farming and environment; (b) goal setting for coverage of technical topics; and (c) group exercises that solicited farmers' local knowledge of environment and agriculture.

Extension educators, on the other hand, were men and women who worked for the Ontario agricultural ministry full-time, adding Farm Plan responsibilities to their work day. Extension staff were specialists from among a variety of technical fields, such as agronomy or fruit production. Extension staff were directed to address "technical only" issues during workshops. Some were seasoned staff and others were newly graduated from university. Both grassroots and extension educators learned participative techniques through a workshop series offered by the Ontario Agricultural Training Institute {OATI}. Grassroots educators, but not extension staff, were required to attend as part of their employment. The workshops were neither theoretical nor ideological. In fact, the workshops had a vocational twist: the training was originally intended for supervisors of agricultural field hands.

### **Methods**

The study used cultural anthropology and participatory action research to produce an ethnography for dissertation research (Grudens-Schuck, 1998). This qualitative approach emphasized interpretive methods, which assist the researcher to attend closely to language, behavior, and the setting

(Geertz, 1973; Lincoln and Denzin, 1994). The research was also intended as an intervention, through participatory action research (PAR), to assist program staff to advance their understanding of democratic features of participatory education, improve professional practice, and test new ideas during the period of the research (Greenwood and Levin, 1998). Ethnographic research methods featured thirty-six interviews as well as participant observation, resulting in fifty-three distinct events over 256 hours of study on farms and at organizational events. I also observed 13 educators in 8 counties deliver Farm Plan workshops to farmers. I used PAR ideas to convene a 5-member research-planning group whose members made selection decisions, gathered data at a PAR session for local and regional staff, interpreted data, planned reports, and participated in the doctoral defense. The research planning group was an effective, compelling, and at times, frustrating, working group. Our discussions put all of us on the spot regarding deeply held beliefs about grassroots education; professionalism; survival in bureaucracies; and the role of hierarchy in organizations.

### Findings

This section highlights development of distinct participatory worldviews among grassroots educators and extension staff. Foremost, training made an important difference. Among all interviews and observations in a three-year period, only educators who had completed the OATI workshops used participatory techniques and were able to talk about the concepts knowledgeably. Second, participatory practice varied by organization (e.g., extension or grassroots), but not exclusively. A first group (mainly grassroots facilitators) endorsed participatory educational strategies and used them frequently and consistently. Members of this first group catalyzed lively group dynamics among farmers in their workshops, strategically and to good effect. Facilitators who succeeded at participatory education discussed the role of authentic participation of farmers. An example of this type of dialogue is from an interview with John (not his real name), a quiet grassroots educator who also farmed full-time.

*It's not my workshop. It's these people's workshop. It's my job to facilitate it. And that's why I do shut up. They do the talking. All I do is encourage them to do the talking. That's the start of it. Then you go*

*into the next exercise, and they talk some more. It gets more pointed at why they're here, and their reasons for being here . . . They're learning from each other.*

Some educators used their farming identity to ease defensiveness. One grassroots educator, Elliot, said his farm was an “environmental disaster” – worse than any of them in the room. In an interview, I asked Elliot about this statement, which had catalyzed cathartic laughter. He said,

*Well, {I am} worse than any of them would admit! The difference is that I am quite ready and willing to admit it. . . I want to get that message across loud and clear. . . I don't feel at risk. I want them to get that feeling.*

Elliot's strategy was to make himself vulnerable so that participants could talk about hazards associated with modern farming practices. A farmer on Elliot's local Farm Plan committee remarked about Elliot's actions, “Psychologically, I think it's important because you are asking people around the table to put things down {on their farm plan} that they don't really feel comfortable about.” Moreover, when individuals in the first group used participatory approaches, their discussions and actions challenged existing power relationships, particularly passivity and dependency of farmers on scientists and government. The research also clarified that it was not always the outgoing personalities who succeeded with participatory education, and that a diversity of types of people succeeded with the process. John, the facilitator quoted earlier said,

*I wasn't very comfortable with doing this type of workshop for a while. In fact, the first couple of years I wondered why I was there. Now I think I do the important part of the workshop. But it's not something that comes natural. . . . I absolutely hated it {at first}.*

For John, practice made the difference. Commitment developed later. Why did John stay with participatory facilitation despite his discomfort? He said it was because he was hired to do it.

A second group of facilitators (mainly extension staff) used participatory education rarely and tentatively. Moreover, individuals in this group intended effects different from members of the first group,

preferring metaphors such as “breaking the ice.” One extension educator said she doubted the utility of participative education because “I’m not convinced that the retention value is any higher.” Members of this first groups were more likely to be uncomfortable with affective dimensions of participatory education. This same staff person elaborated her concerns about facilitating participation, “I don’t want a bragging and complaining session. . . .” She imagined participatory education to be both unpleasant and unproductive.

### Reflections

The findings lead me to reflect upon three aspects of the case relevant to enhancing use of participatory education worldwide. First, worldviews and practices differed as a set. Research findings suggest that individuals in the first group, composed mainly of grassroots educators, intended to challenge existing power relationships among farmers, government and scientists through participatory education. Moreover, they were technically proficient in leading small group work, and successfully challenged participants to take responsibility for their learning (and for the learning of other farmers in the room) (Heron, 1989). In contrast, it appears that individuals in the second group intended that the purpose of participative education was to prepare learners to receive, rather than create, knowledge in the “banking” model of adult education (Freire, 1970). It would seem that individuals in this second group, composed mainly of extension educators, declined to move participatory techniques out of the dominant theory of extension education, the transfer of technology model (see Röling & Wagemakers, 1998).

Second, worldviews differed despite participation in identical OATI training. As an educator who teaches participatory workshops, this finding is thought-provoking. The comparative data lead me to reflect on the rightness of Boud and Miller’s (1998) thesis, which avoids isolating facilitation from historical and contextual factors. For Farm Plan, frequent practice and steady organizational support for participative education were the institutional and political factors that affected persistence and dedication. Recall that it was a specific job requirement for grassroots educators to use participatory education within the context of a program that was self-consciously *farmer-led* and *farmer-driven*. On the other hand, extension educators were

discouraged from using participatory facilitation because this was the agreed-upon “split” between ministry and farmer organizations (extension staff were “technical only”). Although later relaxed, extension educators were effectively told that participatory education was the territory of non governmental organizations, not government. As individual educators walked divergent paths, grassroots educators persisted and blossomed; extension educators let go. It is plausible that better workshops (e.g., more theoretical, more intensive) for extension staff would have been tangential and even an affront in the face of institutional pressures. Moreover, better workshops may have made little difference to grassroots educators’ competency and commitment. The ironic twist is the fact that success of non governmental organization (NGO) initiative may have been instrumental in dampening, rather than accelerating, dedication to participation among government staff.

Third, the data suggest the importance of mastery of participatory techniques, with some indication that although intertwined, educators do not enact theories of participatory education without developing a set of specific skills that resonate with less hierarchical forms of instruction. Practice seems essential, even as practice does not guarantee a change of worldview. In the adult education literature, there is an inclination to display impatience with tool-centered pedagogy. I, too, have railed against “technicist” approaches in facilitators and in my students. Heron (1989) and Boud and Miller (1998), for example, suggests that educators should dissolve expectations that techniques, or conformity to a particular role, will guarantee success with adult learners. I like these ideas, John’s grassroots’ experience above stands in contrast to how these scholars’ ideas point to action. John was the grassroots educator who succeeded instrumentally first; conceptually, a far second.

In conclusion, I would like to underscore the utility of focusing on structural analysis of professional development because it moves the spotlight from the individual educator to the system in which people create programs. The effect is palliative, softening the individualistic conception of facilitators implicit in this common sentiment, “participative planning and action require, first of all, changes in the thinking of development workers themselves” (Lozare, 1994, p. 238). If this were the only path, the field would be lost indeed. Moreover, the belief

prevalent in sustainable development literature may unwittingly pressure individual facilitators to enter practice later than is necessary. A focus on instructors is beneficial, but not to the extent that it argues for purity. The last thing we would want to do it to let organizations and adult learners off the hook, denying them their power and responsibilities. A more democratic strain within participatory education would value diversity of pathways. It would resist erecting roadblocks to the development of participatory adult educators who will teach in a future unknown.

*Post note:* Additional portions of this study will be published as a book, *Participatory Education for Sustainable Agriculture: A North American Perspective*, by Nancy Grudens-Schuck (Bergin & Garvey, Greenwood Publishing).

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