

# Negotiating Curriculum in a Critical Pedagogy

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## **Negotiating Curriculum in a Critical Pedagogy**

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**Abstract: Through critical reflection and dialog on experiences in participatory planning, curricula that values participatory democracy can be fostered. An empirical study, using participatory research, demonstrates that students and faculty can move toward a more critical and inclusive pedagogy by reflecting on cultural diversity.**

### **Purpose of the Study**

This case study of participatory planning involves adult learners and diverse stakeholders in the design of a graduate program in adult education and community development. The planning process and the resulting curriculum are informed by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1996; Cunningham, 1993; Shugurensky, 1998) and participatory research (Hall, 1982; Tandon, 1988; Park et al, 1993). I examine the political nature and the practical effects of participatory planning from the perspective of the planners themselves (Forester, 1989). The context is compelling. Participants are planning the curriculum for an entire graduate program in adult education and community development. Stakeholders are from a diverse group of educational institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and prospective employers with varied cultures and expectations. The curriculum adapts a critical pedagogy, within formal higher education institutions, highlighting particular structural issues and power dynamics.

This research takes place in the Philippines. A new training consortium of seminaries, NGOs, and church organizations is forming to help local congregations integrate social action with more traditional spiritual ministry. Historically, seminaries and churches have employed hierarchical and somewhat authoritarian structures. Including NGOs, whose organizational culture is typically more democratic, creates space for dialogue helping to confront limiting structures and assumptions that support them.

More collaborative and participatory approaches to planning are being mainstreamed in many institutions. This sometimes avoids difficult power dynamics, masking structural barriers to meaningful democratic change. The planning process we used enabled participants to articulate these dynamics and examine barriers to critical pedagogy. In this regard, the outcomes fell short but produced more satisfying relationships among participants and a greater appreciation for the negotiation and compromise that is possible among learners, teachers, and administrators.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature**

People in positions of power determine what is valid knowledge and therefore control what is acceptable action (Flood, 1999). Participatory Action Research (PAR) processes seek to be fairer

by engaging people affected by a problem in the generation of knowledge-knowledge that informs their actions enabling them to take more control over their lives (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Whether structured or informal, PAR processes involve action planning and the evaluation of actions taken.

Techno-rational approaches to planning fail to adequately address social, political, and affective dimensions of program design. It is not enough to acknowledge these dimensions-in practice we must develop rituals for deliberation, negotiation, and dialogue that foster a nurturing environment for the same (Forester, 1999). Creating environments where interests of marginalized individuals are well represented is a significant challenge (Cervero and Wilson, 1994). At some point typically "undiscussable" issues of ethics, power, and "who benefits" must enter into the negotiation process. Leaving power off the agenda insures the reproduction of privilege (Cunningham, 1996). Moving from many perspectives to points of action is a messy process. The postmodern critique allows for more comfort with emergent processes that lack predetermined means and ends. It also permits planners (and PAR practitioners) to retain theoretical sensitivity outside the bondage of a limiting theoretical orthodoxy.

### **Research Design**

To understand participatory planning well, we examined the experience of planning from the perspectives of the planners themselves. In participatory planning the planner is not an individual designated to plan for the organization or program, but a diverse group of stakeholders with varied interests and experience. A number of research questions guided the inquiry:

- How do faculty and learners negotiate their interests in a participatory planning process?
- How willing are participants to examine existing power structure and authority within educational institutions? What are the barriers to doing so?
- What impact did involvement in a participatory planning process have on learner's reflections on their educational institution?
- Is it possible to design a curriculum based on critical pedagogy and participatory research? How far can/should an advance planning process go?
- What potential and limitations does participatory planning have for graduate programs in adult education?

The case study (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998) presented draws from the oral and written narratives of these stakeholders as they are in the midst of a planning process. Data come from several sources: a) Semi-structured interviews with learners, faculty, administrators, and NGO leaders; b) adult learners own reflective writing around the participatory planning process; c) participatory research reports generated by teams of learners; and d) videotapes, interviews, and observations of a search conference.

Search Conference (Emery & Purser, 1996) planning retreats involved forty people intensively over three-day weekends. Three separate conferences were held over a ten-month period, one for strategic planning at the seminary, a second for the formation of a broader training consortium, and the third for a major curriculum revision at the seminary. This planning method intentionally sought to create democratic space for planning (if only a temporary space). By bringing together

different people in small groups to dream about the future and critically reflect on the past and present enough common ground and mutual respect were generated as a basis to initiate joint action.

*A composite dialog* (Malvicini, 1998) approach to qualitative data was used to present diverse perspectives while preserving elements of context and affect often lost in conventional qualitative approaches. The dialogs constructed in this research are drawn from the transcripts of fifteen semi-structured interviews. The words of the participants are preserved verbatim and edited only for length and clarity. The participants include seminary faculty, students, and non-governmental organization [NGO] staff involved in the new training consortium. The approach highlights action arenas and opportunities that arise when different perspectives are juxtaposed. Excerpts from a composite dialog are presented [Boxes 1 and 2].

### Findings

The dialog presents the findings through two dialogic positions: *Maris* and *Ed*. Together these two voices tell the stories of the fifteen participants interviewed at this stage of the research. Maris presents a more confident voice, while Ed's is emerging and at times tentative. The positions for this dialog are better viewed as complementary rather than competing. Each contribution builds on the prior. Because the dialogs are constructed from the original transcripts, the flow is sometimes awkward.

#### Box 1

Section of a Dialog: How does this kind of participation compare to your past experiences?

#### Diverse Voices

Maris: I think it was very helpful to put up together, . . . people of different inputs so that everybody has the opportunity to express their opinion and insights. (NGO)

When you look at a bigger perspective . . . minds of different people, with different nationalities, with different culture, with different experiences. (NGO)

Ed: Some of them are not eager to give the opportunity for the staff . . . because, the attitude is, "what does a janitor know about theological education?" and, I am quoting what was said in this process, "and why do you involve them?" and, "what do they know?" (faculty)

The major difference is the composition of the people. I mean, in the past, planning is always done by the leaders. . . . How will we have this process where you have these janitors, and then the faculty, and the experts. . . . I do not know whether this really [will] work specially among Filipinos. It's more difficult if a janitor will be with the faculty members. For example the janitors [will] not be able to [participate] . . . they will just listen. . . . [I was] surprise[d], . . . specially there was one janitor there who was very vocal . . . and he would be articulate. He even agreed to report to the whole group. I was really impressed. I felt so good seeing these people

participated. I'm quite excited what they are doing. (faculty)

Maris: . . . extracting what is best to one another . . . applying, coming out to the objective, and different angles . . . the drawing [out] of what is the . . . understanding of each and everyone and then defining, looking forward into what would be the implications after this . . . That's the best thing . . . then the alignment of that, that particular ideas drawn from every participants, . . . the streamlining of it, then each and everyone will be able to agree . . .(NGO)

Ed: My classmates here in CD [Community Development] have noticed that . . . during the first course, I'm very, very silent. I don't want to speak. I don't want to share . . . . What if my opinion is not valid or what if my idea is not . . . good? But this time [it's different]. (student)

Maris: I have learned the power of listening . . . [it] has been an incredible lesson . . . to really go out and try to collect . . . from a wide variety of constituents, both internal and external. . . . We have to take the harsh voices truly into account. . . . I think we have to take all the voices and not ignore any of the voices, even though they may even [feel as] though they may not be heard. (faculty)

Ed: My goal in the whole process, must be to . . . avoid consensus decision-making, but to . . . to see if it is possible to work with inclusiveness. Even if there are different viewpoints to have all of those viewpoints stressed, and then to see if we cannot use something, but from all of the different viewpoints, and come out with solution/agreement, . . . which is not [from only] one of the viewpoints but has something better. Even something completely different. (faculty)

### *Diverse Voices*

Box 1 presents a section of dialog dealing with the diverse voices present during participatory curriculum planning. Diversity is presented as both a strength of the planning process and a concern on the part of the planners. Participants in the planning ranged from custodial staff to members of the board of trustees. In an institution where class and position have traditionally carried majority power, the inclusion of the "janitors" in strategic planning for the school was a strong statement of belief in the ability of each participant to contribute meaningfully to the process. An additional dialog (not presented here) relates the feelings of "empowerment" on the part of office staff and students who have felt left out of past decision-making processes.

### *Cultural Barriers*

Carrying the discussion of diversity forward, Box 2 describes the "culture of silence" that forms based on nationality, ethnicity, class, position, education, gender, and a complex web of interpersonal debts requiring loyalty on those who have received past favors. In the institutional framework this affects the relationship between junior and senior as well as expatriate and national faculty significantly.

## **Box 2**

Section of a Dialog: What are the barriers to effective participation?

## Cultural Barriers

Ed: In this context, the first barrier is cultural. And it worked both ways . . . Status, position is very important here and [if] someone is in a higher position than others or . . . perceived as higher because of his or her age, . . . they may feel it difficult to freely express themselves, to openly express themselves, because they tend to, they have to defer to that [person's] position. And it took a long time . . . for participants to begin to speak out in the open, even in the presence of their senior and superior . . . To some extent, it's deep but I am thinking because of cultural influence, the way that the people behave or felt. One of the problems that Filipinos have [is] many of them were students of some of the expat faculty and that deep [loyalty] to some extent, creates a problem in that . . . the Filipino faculty did not always used [to feel] free to speak out or to express themselves. Sometimes, they did not speak out because they feel that they can't. . . the teacher or expat faculty knows more . . . they [should just] listen in and learn from them. (faculty)

Maris: Well, I think there have been the barriers of a culture . . . the way things work in the Philippines. . . . I think, from the very beginning, reluctance on the part of the staff to really be honest. Although they have been honest, as we have pulled it out of them, . . . it's not been easy, and I'm still not sure that we have thoroughly changed things. (faculty)

Ed: The *hiya* [shame] thing . . . the cultural, especially Filipinos . . . (student)

Maris: Like, those who are . . . employed in the offices where their responsibility and the role is not as dynamic as others . . . directives. . . . if one person is not open to giving directives, but just receiving [that's a problem] . . . . [If] we are in a multi-racial meeting, . . . and the educational background also applies. Maybe because representatives . . . they're so silent. They're sent as a representative, not expecting much to what they are able to bring or what they are going to contribute. [NGO]

. . . Filipino faculty had been reluctant to let their voice emerge fully . . . although that [is] slowly happening. (faculty)

Ed: . . . there were different viewpoints . . . during meetings of faculty or teams, . . . mutual differences come out. . . . they [conflicts] were under the surface of . . . . because this is not a conflict society, [this is] the culture where people are actually avoiding conflict. So, many strong conflict or disagreements remain under the surface . . . I sometimes try at least to . . . facilitate a meeting in such a way that the different viewpoints are at least expressed and . . . brought out into the open and so that they know what all of the others are thinking, and if it could be . . . resolved. (faculty)

favors. In the institutional framework this affects the relationship between junior and senior as well as expatriate and national faculty significantly.

### *Disengagement, Changing Perspectives and Practices*

Additional dialogs (not included here) express the pain caused by "non-negotiable voices,"

people who have chosen to withdraw from the planning process. This disengagement is particularly difficult in a cultural context that highly values "smooth interpersonal relationships."

Another dialog discusses the affect that participating in the planning process had on people's assumptions and practice. For some, participation had a "revolutionary" impact on their views of who should be included in such planning processes. Students and NGO staff were more likely to transfer the lessons learned in planning to their own planning contexts in their organizations and ministry settings, while faculty saw a direct relationship between participatory planning and changes in instructional practice. Several professors, from traditions where instruction has been primarily lecture-based, have migrated to inductive approaches with a far higher degree of student engagement. Others are experimenting with greater student control over content, process, and syllabus-moving toward critical pedagogy.

### **Conclusions**

During participatory planning stakeholders created their own norms of negotiation. In the Philippines, differences in age and position required a degree of respect sometimes mistaken for deference-it was possible to politely express disagreement, though often indirectly. In some cases participants remained self-critical avoiding direct criticism of others and not acknowledging their own strengths or successes. But when things go badly, one often shifts responsibility to another. The knowledge-power dynamic may be expressed by withholding important or relevant information-concealing data maintains a position of power while "revealing ones cards" compromises it. For some participants their norms, histories, and routines were previously unchallenged. Through deliberation they discovered the rationale for many limiting practices was lost-some practices only continued by virtue of their inertia. Planners expressed feelings of initial discomfort with more open participatory processes. Some processes felt forced, unnatural. Others feared that processes would not move forward leaving participants frustrated. For most, with notable exceptions, discomfort yielded to satisfaction as the group was able to work through ideas and move towards productive action plans.

The importance of context vis-à-vis participatory planning came through clearly (Wilson, 2000). Support from those with power is needed to create more open environments. Beyond support, those with power must model honest participation and a degree of vulnerability or the power of their presence alone may continue to stifle more productive dialogue.

#### *Quality Through Diversity, Authenticity, and Action*

The purpose of composite dialogs is to catalyze action. The method avoids a bland "boiled-down" consensus or flat description of categories in favor of retaining much of the diversity present in the original interviews. After their construction, the dialogs were presented back to participants of the original interviews for a member check. The readers validated the authenticity of the dialogs as being not only plausible but a fair unforced representation of their perspectives. Most importantly the participants, particularly faculty, recount that dialogs motivate further reflection and action toward greater equity and democratic participation.

Critical researchers may hold assumptions about seminaries and churches. This research shows that such contexts hold significant potential for change and can be places to create more open

spaces. Rather than dismissing these sites, more research is needed in these challenging contexts. Additionally, more research is needed on the participation of adult learners in larger curriculum decisions that occur before they enter the formal classroom. Critical pedagogy demands a negotiated curriculum. The demands of such a process on teachers, learners, and administrators explain why it is so rare.

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