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Twenty-First Century Community Education: Using Web-Based Tools To Build On Horton’s Legacy

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Abstract: This qualitative, participatory paper focuses on the use of participatory research to facilitate the teaching/learning experience in a formal online academic environment while enabling positive social action in two very real target communities.

Participatory Research

Participatory action research as used in adult education is the largely self-directed use of accepted social science research techniques by participants in grassroots organizing to implement and evaluate self-defined objectives (Cadena, 1984, Conchelos, 1983; Conti, Counter, Cadena, 1981, Cunningham, 1993; Fals-Borda, 1984; Fernandez and Tandon, 1981, Hall, 1975; Horton and Zacharakis-Jutz, 1987; Jacobsen, Pruitt-Chapin, and Rugeley, 2009; Loh, 1989; Mayoux and R. Chambers, 2005; McKnight, 1995; McTaggert, 1991; Newell and South, 2009; Parjuli and Enslin, 1990; Perez and Tredwell, 2009; Vella, 1994)

The participatory research paradigm as it is used in adult education was first articulated by Bud Hall (1975) and is based on the idea that the control of knowledge is an important form of power. Hall (1975) noted that in many poor countries (referred to at the time as the “third world”) community development research, planning, and implementation were largely the prerogative of members of privileged “first world” consultants. In some ways this is still the case. (Hayward, Simpson, and Ward, 2004; Mayoux and Chambers, 2008; Pain and Francis, 2003).

Most of the money and all of the prestige associated with community development were flowing to educated, privileged outsiders rather than to those most in need. Ironically, many of these plans and implementation schemes had (have) little to do with the actual needs or desires of the target populations (Hall, 1975). After reflection on these contradictions Hall (1975) proposed that the typical applied research paradigm be “turned on its ear” and that real people be taught to identify their own problems, pose research questions, identify needed data, use accepted research methods to collect data, consolidate and interpret information, and use the information to develop, plan, initiate, and continuously reflectively evaluate initiatives with minimal help from academic or applied researchers.

The participatory research paradigm has grown and changed in the more than thirty years since it was first proposed by Hall (1975). It has been used and adapted to many circumstances throughout the world, but its defining characteristic is that it still turns the accepted applied research paradigm “on its ear” and transfers power from outside experts to the people themselves. (Cadena, 1984, Conchelos, 1983; Conti, Counter, Cadena, 1981, Cunningham, 1993; Fals-Borda, 1984; Fernandez and Tandon, 1981, Hall, 1975; Horton and Zacharakis-Jutz, 1987; Jacobsen, Pruitt-Chapin, and Rugeley, 2009; Loh, 1989; Mayoux and R. Chambers, 2005; McKnight, 1995; McTaggert, 1991; Newell and South, 2009; Parjuli and Enslin, 1990; Perez and Tredwell, 2009; Vella, 1994)
The Highlander Model

I was first introduced to participatory research and popular education in a summer seminar with Phyllis Cunningham at Penn State in 1985 and have been attempting to apply its principles to my research and practice ever since. Along the way, I encountered the work and writings of Myles Horton of the Highlander Folk School (Adams, 1975; Horton, 1989; Horton and Freire, 1990). Myles Horton was primarily a “do-er” rather than a writer/researcher but rather late in his long, eventful life, he reflected on the educational processes used at Highlander (Horton, 1989; Horton and Freire, 1990). Highlander does not do direct community organizing. It provides a space and resources for motivated community people to make their own social action plans and pursue their own dreams. Highlander provides the space and the participants themselves do the work. (Adams, 1975, Horton, 1989, Horton and Freire, 1990; View from the Hill: Highlander Research and Education Center, 2009) Horton said of the “classic” Highlander approach:

“There were no given answers to the problems we dealt with and we didn’t pretend to give any. They have to be worked out in the process of struggling with the problem. The knowledge needed for the solution has to be created. The Highlander workshop is part of a continuum of identifying a problem and finding other people who are willing to deal with it. The people who come to the workshops have a lot of knowledge that they don’t know they have. Highlander gives them a chance to explore what they know and what some people we bring in as resources can share with them. Then they may go back home and test what they learn in action. If they have learned anything useful they can teach others because it is now part of their knowledge and not something merely handed to them. Highlander has been a stop in the continuum of defining and trying to solve an important problem, a place to think, plan, and share knowledge.” (Horton, 1989, p.148)

Taking the Highlander Model On-line

In 2003 when I became Academic Area Coordinator for Community and Human Services at the Center for Distance Learning of SUNY/Empire State College I resolved to experiment with developing ways of adapting Highlander principles to a web-based learning environment. I asked myself how best to give my students, all of whom are adults and most of who are first generation college students, the opportunity to have a chance to explore what they know about the realities they encounter in their own communities, learn from the resources the college and I can provide, and then go back home and test what they learn in action. I hoped to give them “a stop in the continuum of defining and trying to solve an important problem, a place to think, plan, and share knowledge” (Horton, 1989) only in a virtual environment. In short I dreamed of developing an online version of Highlander.

The result has been a continuously evolving course based in action and reflection that is now in its fifth year, two extensive community projects based on pre-existing grassroots initiatives, and an evolving “online retreat center”. The upper level undergraduate online course has two major parts: a theoretical component in which students apply a variety of community organizing and community education techniques to initiatives of their own choosing and a “virtual-real” component in which students work with community residents and me in one of two real communities: Hadley-Lake Luzerne, NY a rural community in the Adirondacks or the Vale neighborhood in inner city Schenectady, NY. The real communities were chosen intentionally because the majority of my students hail from either struggling rural communities or struggling inner city communities and because I have natural connections to both places. The choice of focal areas gives students an opportunity to link the work being done in the focal communities with their hopes and dreams for their own. An added bonus has been that many times the students’ experiences in their own communities have resonated with the needs of the target
communities in an unpredictable but rewarding networking process. Participants in these “virtual-real” meet on a weekly basis in an online chat room. Until recently the chat room has been within the online course platform and has, therefore, been relatively inaccessible to outsiders because of confidentiality issues. However, one of the current students has made room for a private chat space on his server. This has opened up the opportunity for current students, past students, and community members to join together in real time to conduct participatory research projects together, and the beginnings of an “online retreat”. While folks are encouraged to join together on a weekly basis, the realities of adulthood for both the online and community participants sometimes prevent weekly participation. Since some of the online students live as far away as India and are unable to participate synchronously because of time differences, all of the online conversations are logged so that students can read them and add comments if they wish.

The course as originally conceived had strenuous requirements. The students wrote bi-weekly papers on individual projects in their own communities using accepted participatory research techniques as well as being expected to participate in the “virtual-real” community projects on a weekly basis. The cries of students and my own perspective as an adult educator convinced me that students needed to be given some freedom to design their own learning. Students now have three options. They can concentrate on individual community-based projects and only “visit” one of the virtual-real communities a few times during the semester. They can concentrate on one of the “virtual-real communities”, attend almost every online meeting, and use the virtual community as a focus for their papers and final project, or they can do a combination of both. Their choices have been interesting. Last semester, for instance, one student who lived in California decided to do her project (an advocacy based initiative focused on returning school nurses to their posts) independently while another student who lived in Spokane Washington became very involved in the Schenectady project. Both asserted that they had learned what they had hoped to learn from participation.

“We Make the Road by Walking”

I have always found the title of the Horton-Freire dialogues (1990) evocative because it succinctly defines my interior experience of over forty years of community organizing and community education. The students, community folks, and I are “making the road by walking” as we work together in the process of “virtual-real” community building.

In rural, Hadley-Lake Luzerne in rural upstate New York a broad community scan showed four areas of need: cooperation among towns and across socio-economic barriers in a rural school district that spans four New York towns and parts of two counties; economic development that provides a high quality of life for everyone while preserving the environment; services for an increasing aging population; and connection with increasingly discouraged teens and young adults. The students have chosen to work with the needs of teens in part because many of them have identified similar issues in their own home communities and frankly, teens are more interesting than sewers. There have been at least two false starts. An initial proposal from a community leader for a brick and mortar teen center failed when the prime site, an abandoned bowling alley, was donated to the Town to be used as a new town hall and much needed senior housing. A second attempt by my students to use the popular MySpace site as a “virtual teen center” was aborted when we discovered that we just could not overcome the many negatives of the MySpace environment itself. As of this writing, we have been able to successfully engage local people, current students, and former students in developing a “Teen
Connection” a teen-center- without- walls in which teens will plan activities and events and an adult support team composed of local people and some of my adult students and former students will assist them. Communication in this project is a mix of online chat and face-to-face meetings. The teen component will have a web-site donated by one of the online students and regular meetings during the activity period at the local school. In addition to meeting the needs of Hadley/Lake Luzerne the project has spun off at least six similar projects in the communities represented by the adult college students.

The Vale project in inner city Schenectady is more complex because the social and cultural reality is more varied. The Vale project is a semester behind the work in Hadley/Lake Luzerne. The Vale project has a similar design in that adult students who wish to focus on the needs of their inner city neighborhoods are linked with community activists. The project is primarily connected to the Vale Community Organization (VCO), an Alinsky-style project that was very successful in the late 1990’s but for various reasons lost its energy in the early 2000’s. Vale became one of the “virtual-real” communities through the efforts of one of the students who is a resident there and is now a driving force in the resurrection of the Vale Community Organization. Currently, work centers on transitioning leadership within the VCO and the development of an effective block club structure.

Participatory research is important in both “virtual real” communities and both communities have the same multi-level communication as the online students and those in the target communities contribute ideas to each others projects and to the focal places. Both communities are in a constant state of kaleidoscopic change so that this research is a work in progress that relies on a process of action and reflection mostly mediated by the online environment.

**Challenges and Rewards**

The students, community members, and I periodically reflect on both the process and concrete accomplishments. The current consensus seems to be that the major challenge in the online component is “making it real” for everyone. Even though the course space provides photographs of the target communities, links to various web-sites, a variety of documents that have been generated, online from community members and occasional face-to-face visits by students to the target communities, it is still hard for the online students to truly visualize the “real” communities. Likewise, it is hard for the community participants to visualize adult students who care about them, but may live many thousands of miles away. As the facilitator, I am the major link among everyone and yet, I strive at all times to use the Highlander model. Through the college and the internet, I provide resources, expert consultants, and a virtual space for decision making as well as some of the logistical arrangements for both projects, but like Myles Horton I make every attempt not to actually do anything except provide tools and “space”. The students do the rest in their own projects and the community people do the rest in the “real” communities.

It seems to be working. Although I sometimes long for the rustic mountaintop comfort of Highlander, the weekly online chats can be equally comforting and have the advantage of enabling people to participate who might never be able to leave their homes to travel. For instance, one young mother made our Wednesday night meetings “cuddle time” for her four year old. She would settle in a big chair at her computer, gather her son close, and chat with the rest of us online. She made extremely valuable contributions to the teen project and was able to bond with her son at the same time. She told us that they would both miss “mommy’s meeting”.

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Students have made friends among themselves. Students have joined with the community residents beyond the confines of the course. Community people are beginning to know the students and I get to know everyone! Both communities are improving their quality of life and almost everyone involved has experienced a re-birth of hope. It will be interesting to see what evolves as we continue to “make the road by walking” and will be equally interesting to hear your feedback at this conference.

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