Features of Participatory Learning[1]

There are different empowering learning approaches that help people to ask questions, discover new truths, and practice solving real life problems. Freire spoke about popular education as a participatory process of action-reflection-action. While popular education has spawned a myriad of participatory learning methods, the basic process always involves problem identification, analysis, and the pursuit of solutions through dialogue, self-awareness, and organizing.

Some of the features and assumptions of participatory learning methodologies are described below.

The Political Nature of Education

No education is neutral. *How* one learns is linked to *what* is learned. Education can teach people how to conform or it can encourage independent thinking and creative change. A learning process that validates what learners know and challenges them to examine their ideas more deeply can empower them to think independently, seek information, and act on their knowledge.

Relevance

People absorb and act on information that is directly related to their daily lives. Relevance is vital to motivation.

Linked to Problem-Solving

Adults often learn faster when the information they gain addresses the problems they face directly.

Dialogue and Mutual Learning

Dialogue can ensure that the learner's concerns are the focus of the educational process. By promoting a more equal educator/learner relationship, dialogue involves joint discovery and helps learners to gain confidence in their own ability.

Recognizes Differences among People While Seeking Common Ground

The same power imbalances that generate conflict in society are present in groups brought together to learn, plan, and act. Naming these differences and adjusting for power dynamics is a vital starting point for empowerment. The approach contrasts with the tendency to see marginalized groups as homogenous, and to ignore the power differences between educators/organizers and "people from the community."

[1] From "A New Weave of Power, People and Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation" by Lisa Veneklasen with Valerie Miller, World Neighbors, 2002.

Problem-posing and Open-ended Learning

One of the facilitator's roles is to ask questions that assist learners to examine their own situation and deepen their understanding of the problems they face. The facilitator also introduces new ideas and information to supplement and broaden the analysis.

An Iterative Process without Predictable Steps and Outcomes

Although participatory learning methods use a certain set of techniques, the process is not linear. Because the facilitator cannot anticipate how learners will think and interact, he or she must listen and engage in the process. There are no mechanical formulas for developing an empowering learning process.

Moves from the Concrete to the Abstract and Back

Traditional education, especially at higher levels, usually begins with theory and then tests the theory against reality. This is why some highly educated NGO leaders may be uncomfortable beginning analysis with a concrete description of a problem (e.g., women's health is poor due to too many children and inadequate nutrition) rather than an abstract explanation (e.g., reproductive health needs). When trainers start with a theoretical explanation, they can derail the empowering effect of analyzing and discovering things for oneself.

The Dialogue Process

Some educators refer to problem-posing in participatory learning as the "but why?" method. The facilitator's questions encourage learners to ask why problems exist and so probe their social, economic, cultural, and political roots.

Stimulating discussion with adults who are not used to speaking up in public can be difficult. Even people who are more comfortable speaking publicly may not have much experience with critical questioning. The problems people face may be so threatening that they find it impossible to talk about them. For this reason, it may be helpful to begin discussion with relevant examples rather than asking directly about problems. Some distance allows people to get comfortable with a topic, and after discussion, they may be able to relate the analysis to their own lives more readily. For this purpose, participatory learning approaches often use "codes" to start the reflection process.

Tips for Outside Facilitators

- Know the group you are working with. Prior research and observation will give you a sense of the problems facing this particular group. Use examples familiar to them to stimulate discussion.
- Remember that political analysis involves making connections between the past and the present as well as examining how privilege, power, and disadvantage mold real-life problems.
- Give people ample time to discuss a thorny topic with each other. A participant, rather than the facilitator, can sometimes more easily challenge misinformation or stereotypes.

Codes: Opening Discussion on Difficult Problems

A code can be a drawing, role play, game, skit, song, or story that presents a familiar problem in a concrete way. Usually, it does not provide answers, solutions, or morals. It simply depicts a situation that then becomes the focus of dialogue. The development of a

suitable code requires observation and consultation. A code is especially helpful for dealing with personally sensitive problems such as rape, domestic violence, and AIDS.

Discussing Codes

The steps listed on the next page can help facilitators to guide dialogue around codes. They do not always follow a predictable sequence. Rather, the facilitator is responsible for guiding the spiraling process that takes people from the personal to the concrete to the abstract and back again.

Steps in the Dialogue Process

Introductory Step: Self-Analysis and Affirmation

Dialogue requires confidence and trust-building. If participants have not developed a sense of group solidarity, encourage them to introduce themselves and get to know others. Questions like "What inspires me?" or "What are my hopes and fears for myself, my family, my community?" can help build trust and affirm the importance of everyone's contribution. The idea of beginning the dialogue process with personal analysis and affirmation was added to Freire's original process by activists working with women. This is an important step because values and self-esteem are central to the way we learn and interact with the world.

Step 1: Description of what you see happening in this picture (skit, code, etc.)

Using the code, encourage participants to carefully describe what is happening—something that may be a daily occurrence for them. Often more schooled people use shorthand terminology to describe situations, such as "gender violence" or "conflict." This step tries to avoid such abstraction by talking about concrete details.

Step 2: First Analysis—Why is this happening?

Begin to ask why people are doing what they are doing in the picture or skit. Keep asking why so that participants question as well as describe. Take advantage of the comfort people may feel in probing a situation that is not directly related to their own lives. It is useful for the facilitator to know enough about the issue to be able to formulate questions that help people analyze and that challenge myths, stereotypes, or misinformation.

Step 3: Real Life Comparison—Does this happen in your community? In your life?

Encourage people to give examples of how the situation in the code happens in their lives.

Step 4: Related Problems—What problems does this lead to?

This step looks at the consequences of the problem. Again in this step, the facilitator can provide additional information to supplement what participants contribute.

Step 5: Deeper Analysis—What are the root causes of these problems?

This step encourages learners to probe deeper into problems. Why does this happen? Once learners have had sufficient time, the facilitator can expand with additional information. The facilitator should also challenge simplistic explanations.

Step 6: Alternatives and Action—What can we do about it?

Linking education to action is essential for empowerment and effective advocacy. How will people use their new knowledge to change their situation? In this step, information about policies, law reform, budgets, and basic rights can assist people in defining what they can do. Step 6 can start by asking "What can we do to address this problem here in our community?" and "How can we bring about policy change to obtain more resources or better protection?". Local solutions, such as setting up community committees to monitor water use, are as important as solutions at the national or international levels. This step can serve as an initial brainstorming for a group that then can lead to further analysis and organizing.