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Learning Participation – a proposal for dialogue

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The problem to be addressed: how is participation learned?

Inherent in the idea of participation is that poor and marginalised people should take part in, and indeed drive, the decision-making processes that shape their lives. This involves the use of a range of approaches and methods, and requires changes in behaviour, attitudes and power relationships by everyone involved. There is increasing global interest, by many actors engaged in development, in promoting the institutionalisation and spread of participation in society. From grassroots projects to voluntary organisations, and from governments to large funding agencies, “participation” has been embraced as a way to build greater voice, accountability and trust into relationships between people and institutions. Successful innovations and practice have resulted in participation being seen as a desirable end as well as a means, with the potential to reduce poverty and social injustice by strengthening citizen rights and voice, influencing policy making, enhancing local governance, and improving the accountability and responsiveness of institutions.

Efforts are now being made to support organisational and institutional learning and change which will enhance the overall quality and impact of participation. Many development theorists and practitioners are concerned, however, that the momentum towards “scaling-up” of participation may lead to its “dumbing-down”, where the principles and theory underpinning approaches such as PRA and PLA are being diluted. There is a growing fear that lip-service is being paid to participation simply out of deference to fashion or the current jargon of development aid. In order to promote and increase participation effectively, and also ethically, there is a growing need for experienced and well-trained people who are active and open to its meaning, methods and practice. Many institutions of higher learning (including universities, schools and colleges offering formal graduate and post-graduate programmes, as well as “non-formal”, governmental or sectoral institutions offering specialised training programmes for experienced professionals) have a role in developing the capacity of institutions and individuals to understand and practice participation. But how can they ensure that they deepen the quality and sustainability of participation in their learning programmes, whilst avoiding the promotion of simply “more participation” of dubious quality? How may participation be *learned*, and how can institutions of higher learning facilitate this learning?

Teaching participation and participatory teaching: what are the challenges for institutions of higher learning?

There is considerable evidence that institutions of higher learning have made great strides in facilitating learning of participation. Cumulative experience of participatory and educational practice has been described, documented and debated by many theorists and practitioners, including the following areas:

- community-based learning
- participatory curriculum development
- popular education
- experiential learning
- distance learning
- initiatives which address access to education

Visions, concepts, principles, methods and techniques which facilitate teaching and learning have been identified and articulated. A growing number of institutions around the world have encouraged participatory teaching and learning processes, especially through the introduction of experiential learning processes and strategies. These have been witnessed in areas such as natural resource management, nutrition, literacy, social work, public administration and other applied aspects of development. Many institutions of higher learning have successfully forged active and constructive links with communities, both local and distant. Some have even incorporated curriculum components (topics, short courses, modules) which draw on participatory approaches and which teach elements of the participatory process. Examples of success and good practice provide an excellent opportunity for collaborative learning and sharing of experiences. Lessons can also be learned from limitations and challenges, however, of which two categories seem relevant.

- (a) *Limits to teaching participation*: in higher learning institutions, participation seems rarely to have been used as the basis for systemic learning through the development of an entire learning programme dedicated to participation, or used explicitly as an underlying and integrating principle for multidisciplinary learning programmes. Participation has been given scant attention as a focus for curriculum development.
- (b) *Limits to participatory teaching and learning*: even where participation is on the educational agenda, many teaching and training institutions do not facilitate learning effectively. Thousands of “qualified” development professionals emerge from education institutions annually and globally, having undergone a learning process where the prevailing paradigm is based on the belief that teaching and transmission of “one knowledge” brings about learning. Institutions have been given the authority to determine, approve and validate this knowledge, according to a set of predetermined standards and criteria which are then translated into a content-oriented course of teaching, delivered to passive learners. The context in which learning takes place is often ignored, as are the existing and emerging attitudes and beliefs of teachers, students and other stakeholders. In many institutions, subjects in the curriculum are not interconnected or integrated, whilst learning processes and outcomes are guided, interpreted and examined according to the dominant perception of what is “right”, rather than what is “real”. Students and teachers are rarely considered as co-learners in a joint and collaborative journey. “Practice”, such as it occurs in many higher level courses, often involves extractive activities whereby students gather information from “informants” and may even be used as vehicles for extending information. Learners are rarely guided, consciously, to position new

experiences systemically within a wider learning process in relation to their prior knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and values.

Seize the opportunity or suffer the consequences?

The reality of life in educational institutions is often messy and complex, revealing both excellent practice but also severe limitations to effective teaching and learning. If effective participation in teaching and learning is a desirable goal, its achievement may be influenced more by the perspectives and ambitions of individuals than by consensus or a common vision of organisational development. It is tempting, therefore, for educators to feel satisfied with the *status quo* when weighed against the difficulties of change. But is this response adequate? The effect of organisational culture on learning and behaviour is so profound that there is much to gain institutionally, professionally, and individually, by embarking on a process of improvement and growth. Teachers and trainers who work in an empowering, participatory and facilitatory way will have an enormous impact on the learning of participation. After years of exposure to concepts, methods and techniques of development and participation, new professionals tend to propagate the ways of their own teachers. When graduates of higher level courses take up employment, they bring the beliefs and attitudes which they have learned during their own educational experience to their working approach with individuals and communities. An inadequate educational experience is likely to have dire consequences for participation in society, with a legacy of poor understanding, and misdirected practice.

The rationale for sharing relevant concerns and stories

How widespread are the successes and limitations described in this paper, and why do they persist? Where have innovations in participation been carried out, and what results and lessons have been learned? Are institutions of higher learning reluctant to fully embrace participatory approaches and programmes at a fundamental level? Do they face too many constraints, or are they basically disinterested? Why are success stories of institutional learning not replicated more widely? If individual and institutional reflection on questions such as these is required, a wider sharing and exchange of experiences can have a powerful and positive effect on the learning process. There are institutional and individual successes to be shared, learned from and built upon before these stories are forgotten and passed over. The time seems right to share the lessons and experiences of institutions of higher learning in the south and north where attempts have been made to teach participation, and facilitate participatory learning. By embarking on a process of learning together, individuals in education institutions can debate, challenge and improve innovations and interventions in participation. A dialogue can lead to promotion and a qualitative improvement in the use of participation as an element of teaching programmes, and as a learning and teaching approach. The intention of this paper, and the following initial questions, is to stimulate and open up such a dialogue.

1. What are the learning needs for participation?

What are the experiences of institutions of higher learning in identifying and articulating learning needs in participation? What societal and development needs in society should learning programmes in participation address? Who are the professionals who need to learn "participation"? Should or indeed *can* participation be taught? What key knowledge and skills are needed by development professionals who practice and promote participation? When considering programmes of teaching and learning in development studies, and in "participation", what key behaviours and attitudes of stakeholders need to be addressed in the overall learning process? What

differentiates the current behaviours and attitudes of teachers and students in development studies learning programmes, and how can improvement and congruence be achieved?

2. How should teaching programmes address participation?

What are the experiences in institutions of higher learning of developing teaching and learning programmes in participation? How do existing development studies programmes relate to identified learning needs for a greater quality of participation? What should be the nature of a learning programme in participation? What modes of learning are most appropriate and/or effective (e.g. distance mode, individual/group, etc.)? What are the key elements of philosophy, theory, methods and practice of participation which should be included in such a learning programme? How can participation provide a medium for promotion of multi-disciplinarity in development-related learning programmes? How, and by whom, can learning programmes in participation, and participatory learning experiences be examined and assessed?

3. What kinds of processes are needed?

What approaches can be used to promote participation in teaching programmes in universities? How can equitable/participatory links between universities and communities be enhanced? How can learning institutions collaborate more openly and effectively in the design, delivery and evaluation of their learning programmes? How can different stakeholders, particularly poor and marginalised groups, be involved effectively and meaningfully in the learning process? How have participatory approaches been introduced into teaching and learning processes? How can learning institutions collaborate more openly and effectively in the design, delivery and evaluation of their learning programmes? What activities, learning experiences, methods and materials have been introduced into programmes where participation is a key component. How has participatory teaching and teaching participation been monitored and evaluated? What has worked already, and what has not?

4. How are outcomes of learning programmes defined, achieved and evaluated?

Should the outcomes of teaching and learning in participation be predetermined, and if so, how? What alternative approaches can be used to consider outcomes of a learning programme in participation? How does participatory teaching contribute to the effectiveness of teaching participation? How can processes of joint learning between teachers and students be achieved, with participation both as process and as product? What participatory approaches have been used to evaluate outcomes and impact of participation in teaching and learning programmes? What lessons have been learned about the outcomes and impact of teaching participation and participatory teaching in development-related teaching and learning programmes.

Organising the dialogue

The process by which this dialogue takes place will depend largely on the level and nature of the interest and response elicited by this concept note, and should emerge through an interactive process, although both distant and face-to-face discussions are envisaged. Small meetings may be organised in the north and the south according to the interest and availability of participants in the dialogue. A key milestone in the process is likely to be an international workshop towards the end of 2002, providing an opportunity for a more substantive discussion on key themes arising from the dialogue, and helping

to set an agenda and framework for further collaboration and action. All individuals and institutional representatives with an interest and experience in the above issues are invited to join this initiative.

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