

# Learning more about participation: things to look out for

*notes from Nick Wilding*

*There is now a large range of books, websites, and training courses available about participation. This sheet is intended to catalyse some good questions when you are thinking about what kinds of training and resources to invest time, money and energy in:*

## 1. *Practice*

It's easy enough to read up on 'tool', but it is difficult to learn participatory ways of working without practice. The best training courses are 'experiential', meaning that the way the course runs models the kinds of learning it is teaching. This should include practice by participants - on each other, or working in teams in real-life situations (on the job!).

## 2. *Power*

Power dynamics are at the heart of every community. They influence who has a voice, how people relate to each other, and the success of participation. Some participation approaches which emphasis transformation or liberation (such as *popular education*) in service of a socially just society place power at the centre of their trainings, often through theatre, role-plays, and simulations.

## 3. *Timing*

It's very difficult to attend a training session, and then go back to an existing context and apply everything that's learned. In reality, it takes time to create opportunities to apply the learning. It's best to get extra support at the time the support is needed - ie, when it's relevant. The best 'trainers' are not delivering a standard 'toolkit' but tailor their help to your context. In this way, they *facilitate* your learning, rather than 'delivering' information.

## 4. *Teamwork*

Finally, the best way to learn is to work with a team, building trust with your co-workers and learning together. It's very hard on your own to maintain a new way of doing things, especially when this involves changing an organisational culture and working structures / systems.

## 5. *Creativity!*

There is no right way or wrong way... no patented approach to getting things right. Robert Chambers, pioneer of 'participatory appraisal', coined the term 'New Professionalism' to mean professionals who were prepared to take risks, make mistakes, and learn by doing (among other things). Don't spend hours searching through books or the internet for a 'tool' if you can invent something yourself to do the trick. 'Thinking on your feet' is a skill that comes with practice and means 'tuning in' to a group and changing the plan half way through if that is what's needed. Have a few tools up your sleeve to use if needs be. Innovate - as long as you're learning, you're doing it right!



## *Participation: where's that tool from?*

If we imagine 'participation' as a map, it would be very large – with mountains, oceans, lakes, woods, deserts. Participatory approaches have been evolving globally over a long time. This makes sense when we remember that since humans started telling stories to each others, and making cave art, we have been involved in community-building communication.

'Participation' is now a global phenomena, with a myriad of different approaches. The Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were debating ways of mobilising 'the masses' prior to the Russian Revolution in 1917. More recently, since the Earth Summit in 1992, local governments worldwide have been developing participatory approaches to connect environment, society and economy. The issue is always the same: how can 'bottom-up' agendas and democratisation dialogue effectively with (or in some cases attempt to overthrow) 'top-down' structures?

From the World Bank to Easterhouse; from South Africa to Battleby, participation is on the agenda, and the tools being used often have roots in justice struggles stretching back decades.

For example, the *liberation theology* movement in Latin America that inspired the Sandanista resistance to the US-funded Contras in Nicaragua found educational theory in Paulo Freire, which has become known as 'popular education' and has been introduced into by people like Gerry Kirkwood of the Adult Learning Project (Edinburgh) in the 60s and 70s, inviting Freire himself to Scotland. This is a radical and rich tradition with a long pedigree. Today, *Training for Transformation* is a set of three books by Sally Hope and Anne Timmel containing a huge variety of popular education tools developed in Africa in the 70s and 80s, many of which speak directly to the poorest people in Scotland. *Community Education* has tended to lose its radical edge as councils have seen Com. Ed. As a way of 'delivering training' in IT, etc. but the roots are similar.

There are many connections with *community (learning and) development*, a tradition starting with left-wing political organising earlier in this century, that now finds itself an ally of (for example) government agencies now participation is mainstream - see The Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) website at [www.scdc.org.uk](http://www.scdc.org.uk).

In the *health sector*, community health has a long established participatory tradition. For example, Aine Kennedy of *Celtic Health Connection* introduced *Story Dialogue* process, developed in Canada by Ron Labonte, at last year's *The Participant* gathering. Story Dialogue was, itself, developed from Freirian ideas.

*Management Learning* is another field where participation practice is well development. For example, Action Research is an academic field often found in Management Schools, whose roots start with Human Relations theory and Developmental Psychology – but are now arriving at a similar conclusion to the liberation theologians. See <http://www.batb.ac.uk/carpp/papers.htm>

In the world of *international development*, 'Participatory Appraisal' developed in the 1960s and has been introduced to Scotland since the mid-1990s. See the International Institute for Environment and Development 'Participatory Learning and Action' site for a huge amount of articles on participation in practice from all over the world, in particular the developing world. It's a real eye opener as to how much there is for us (in the 'North') to learn from practice in the 'South': [http://www.iied.org/sarl/pla\\_notes/whatispla.html](http://www.iied.org/sarl/pla_notes/whatispla.html)

*Town planning and architecture* similarly have been wrestling with participation issues – and Planning for Real and Village Mapping are approaches from this tradition. See <http://www.communityplanning.net/> for these and many, may more.

**Nick Wilding** is a facilitator, action researcher and culture change consultant.  
Email [nick@nickwilding.com](mailto:nick@nickwilding.com) if you'd like to get in touch or phone 01337 857863

