

## TEACHING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: A HUNGARIAN EXPERIENCE

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*Participatory Action Research was offered as an elective course for graduate students of sociology by the Environmental Social Science Research Group (ESSRG) at the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary. Participants were fascinated by fieldwork, however classwork activity and end of course feedback was contradictory which raised several dilemmas, extending from how PAR classwork activities and fieldwork should be balanced, through how much freedom should be given to students during fieldwork, to how the PAR course could be adapted to a specific university culture. The aim of this paper is to share our personal reflections upon the first PAR elective course in Hungary in the light of the PAR literature on teaching and learning integrated into the wider context of Hungarian higher education system.*

### Introduction

Participatory action research, a methodology incorporating subjects in the research and evaluation, results to transformation in the lives of those involved. The approach is gaining recognition in academic circles but is usually limited to specialised learning environments (Levin, M. – Greenwood, D. 2001). One semester's experience teaching this approach for human ecologists and sociologists are described, focusing on challenges encountered in planning PAR courses.

Traditional forms of classroom education and academic research are in change. Teachers/researchers (as doers) and students/stakeholders (as subjects) are getting closer and sharing roles, as it is being recognized that better understanding of phenomena necessitates discovering and grasping the different perspectives (Roth W-M. et al. 2002; Felt et al. 2004). Critical and action oriented approach gains growing importance in both education and research, and under the umbrella of Participatory Action Research, these two strands can be integrated. Teaching action researchers acknowledge that "the road to action research also required changes in our teaching practices" (Brydon-

Miller, M. et al, 2003. p. 19) in order to disseminate the core values and assumptions of this methodology; and in the same time applying PAR methodology in higher education can transform universities into real learning organizations in contradiction to recent teaching structures based on one-way communication and separation between teachers and students (Levin, M. – Greenwood, D. 2001).

This paper presents the first attempt of a Hungarian research group (ESSRG) on teaching PAR – the methodology to which researchers are committed to using during their fieldwork. The aim is to share and discuss the reflections of the lecturer team upon the course in order to provide useful experiences to others interested in the topic and simultaneously to improve our teaching activity. The first part of the paper presents the Hungarian traditions of participatory research and its recent situation in the higher education system. In the second part, we describe the methodology of the course, which is followed by a short summary on how the semester passed. The third part of the paper discusses the most important questions raised by the semester, while in conclusion we attempt to connect our experiences to the special characteristics of Hungarian higher education system.

### Hungarian context: traditions and recent changes

Central European societies always fostered a specific approach in understanding social life or depicting society and this persistent feature of Central European culture could often and easily be identified as an exotic flavour by Western social science. The insistence on the difference of social experience, as Wessely claims, was the social problem-oriented pursuit of social science which did not let a discipline prescribe the problems and acceptable methods of research, but attempted to respond to the challenges that reached it from the social environment (Wessely, A. 1996).

During the socialist regime facilitating a solution to social problems was an exclusive reserve of politics without any chance of public participation. The ruling party attempted to use social science to contribute to the renovation of socialism, thus scholarly effort focused on alternative problem definitions. The PAR approach was not possible in Hungary or in the socialist countries, since the political system tried to hide the

weaknesses of its programs and to repress public participation. The regime change facilitated the adoption of Western paradigms and research patterns, but did not require the wholesale redefinition of the social sciences (Némedi, D. – Róbert, 2002).

Fifteen years after the system transformation it appears that the breakthrough for action research in Hungary is yet to come: starting points are sporadic, thematic orientation is narrow and the funding for a decisive institutionalization is not available. Oriented towards academic or business excellence the structures of Hungarian higher education are still rather exclusive and rigid, favouring a conservative pedagogical culture, lacking social responsibility, thus participatory action research is rarely available in Hungarian higher education as an elective course. A recent review of the literature on the Hungarian Higher Education system revealed that there is very little relevant information, or observation on service learning, action research, or community-based learning in this literature (Kozma J. – Galambos, R. 2005).

The structural changes in the Hungarian higher education system attempting to modernise and adapt to the changing social and economic environment (mass education, financial problems, and the privatization and internationalization of higher education) resulted in an expansion (the number of students in higher education has doubled, and new higher education institutions and programs were developed). Still, within this changing socio-economic and cultural environment there remained several favourable factors within the Hungarian higher education initiating an action research and learning environment (Kozma J. – Galambos, R. 2005):

- there is a growing awareness of new *collaborations between universities and social actors in their surroundings* which provides possibilities for students to engage in community based or action research activities (volunteering and civil activities of students);
- this is more and more often realized through *new higher educational programs* especially in the social science education (Migration Studies, Action Anthropology, Cultural Anthropological Gypsy Studies, Environmental Social Science) with a curriculum focusing on learning by doing and reflective action learning;
- courses use previously lacking *effective teaching methods* (such as action-oriented approaches, problem-based learning, experiential learning, active learning, etc.) in professional education and training.

Against this background the course offered in the social science faculty of the Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary aimed at engaging students of the human ecology educational program in a commu-

nity based research project with a strong experiential learning approach in developing the knowledge and skills required to be an effective action researcher. The shared expertise of teachers (with a background in economics, sociology, history) and students coming from diverse disciplines (from sociology, economics, political science, through human ecology, biology, to media studies) required a special balance in experiential and lecturing presentation as well as the mix of training to academic analytical requirements and to the use of experiential learning and self-development exercises. The next section presenting our teaching methodology built on classroom exercises (research skills, interview techniques) and fieldwork exercises (developing self- and other-awareness) attempts to offer some valuable insights for teachers of action research.

### Teaching methodology

Participatory Action Research was offered as an elective course for graduate students of sociology within the Human Ecology Major at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest by members of ESSRG research group as visiting lecturers. The lecturing team consisted of one senior lecturer and four Ph.D. students from which two were men and three women. All members are experienced (although to a different extent) in field research and engaged in participatory methods. The diversity of the lecturing team offered good opportunity for co-teaching through which daily tasks were shared and continuous (self) reflection became possible.

The initial structure of the seminar was designed in a way that matches researchers' professional commitment to the characteristics of the faculty and the university. As being visiting lecturers at a research seminar, we could choose the methodology to teach – this means that there was not a specific need for participatory, critical research, but the subject of the course (PAR) was only our choice. The main goal of the course was to introduce students into participatory research in order to widen the palette of known methods of beginner sociologists/researchers and thus to offer them the possibility to apply a different approach than usual. Adapting to the university culture and curriculum, we did not want to omit the theoretical background for research methodology, the preparing for fieldwork by discussing techniques and the fieldwork itself and the possibility for reflection. However, we had to divide these activities into two semesters because of the shortness of time.

Based on these principles the structure of the seminar was initially designed as follows. The course started with the discussion of the main concepts of and philosophy behind the PAR methods (e.g. participation, deliberation, community studies). This was followed by developing a toolbox for participatory research –

techniques for collecting, recording and analyzing data (observation, interviews especially appreciative inquiry, field diary and interview summary, coding etc.) – and by discussing the traditions and limits of the methodology. In the third part, students were offered to take part in a real PAR process on community development in a marginalized small region of rural West-Hungary. This part of the course was designed in a way that in the first phase students do desk research in teams exploring the ecological, economic and social characteristics of the site, present their results and engage in class discussions in order to participate in designing the research project. In the second phase, after the desk research, two weekends were offered to students to go to the research area and conduct interviews. During their fieldwork, students worked in pairs and they were asked to make notes and interview summaries as inputs for data analysis. Because of the shortness of the semester, two restrictions were applied. The first two parts of the course (discussing concepts and developing a research toolbox) and research itself ran in parallel to some extent; while the next phases of fieldwork (planning and organizing community forums in the site after analyzing data) remained to the next semester. This also means that the spiral of learning could not be fully completed during the first semester as students and teachers did not have the opportunity to see the results and reflect upon the whole research process.

Teaching methods and techniques were selected in a manner that provides possibility for participation and empowerment of students. The course was designed to create a learning community in the class by decreasing the distance between (traditionally separated) student and teacher roles. Various teaching techniques were applied. Students were encouraged to actively participate in class debates, work in groups and share reflections on their work. Although some short blocks of lectures were built in the course, theoretical immersion was offered through readings. Members of the lecturer team provided also the possibility for continuous consultation.

### **How the semester ran...**

During the semester, the lecturer team had to continuously adapt to the given situation and change the structure of the course according to feedback from students and personal self-reflection of lecturers.

Students seemed to be interested in the topic and eager to take part in a participatory research from the beginning of the semester. However, it became clear soon that they had only little time to prepare for class and even to come regularly and in time. During the class, they were quite inactive, and encouraging them to participate in class debates or group work was difficult. As neither home readings nor class engage-

ment achieved their initial function, the proportion of lectures has to be risen (instead of discussions) in order to provide students the most important concepts and techniques. We also tried to figure out playful exercises (such as mock interviews in pairwork) to motivate them to actively contribute to the class. Nevertheless, for this modification the course lost its originally planned character of decreasing the distance between lecturers and students.

The relatively weak interest shown by students in theoretical questions motivated us to emphasize more the practical side of the subject. This change in the proportion of conceptual and practical issues was also reasonable from the aspect of students' preparedness: as students came from different specialties and years (from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> years at university), their research experience and skills varied largely, which required balancing the knowledge level of the group.

During the desk research, it also became clear that students were not accustomed to working in teams. To explore the present economic, social and ecological situation of the field and to find interconnections between particular problems, they were asked to form three groups (one for the economic, the social and the ecological analysis), to study the relevant literature and to present the results of their desk research in the class. Every group had a personal consultant from the lecturer team, who provided the basic literature for the group. However, students were unable to share the tasks equally, to manage time and to form a common standpoint on the topic – the groupwork ended in partial results and personal frustration on how to punish free riders and reward hard-workers at group level.

These experiences about students' engagement forced us to continuously reduce class requirements on the one hand, and make the fieldwork optional on the other (initially fieldwork was included in the end of term evaluation). Although we think the most important part of the semester is the field research through which students can undergo experiential learning, we believed also that successful participatory research necessitates commitment and taking responsibility on behalf of the researchers. Hence, the option to skip fieldwork functioned as a filter: only those students could come who assumed to work on weekends and to cover a small part of the costs (that is, made sacrifices for participate in the research process).

Students who participated in field research were completely fascinated by that. Long discussions started every evening during our stay in the site that referred to the local problems, the interviewees, the used methods (appreciative enquiry) and the role of the researchers. Students were enthusiastic not only in the field but also in the class after the weekends spent by interviewing – they were ready to share their experiences with others who had not come, which gave the opportunity for real self-reflection.

After these good experiences on field research and the former difficulties in discussing conceptual issues, students' end of term feedback was quite surprising, as they missed the theoretical introduction and the grounded exposition of the used methodology. Among other reasons this forced the lecturer team to redesign the course to the next semester – to focus on theoretical background and take away fieldwork from the class (make it completely optional and independent from course attendance and offered only committed students), to reduce the lecturer staff, and to strengthen further the role of community learning.

### **Raised dilemmas**

In order to improve our teaching skills we have to go further in self-reflection and try to understand the reasons for the dilemmas raised by the course. In this section, we mainly focus on issues closely related to teaching practices instead of personal questions.

### **Teaching efficiency**

For the research team this was the first occasion when five of us collaborated in a course. This situation had many advantages like sharing tasks, being flexible consultants, designing classes together or reflecting upon every lesson, however we also had to develop an adequate division of labour. We hope to have avoided the danger of confusing students through unclear roles by defining one senior lecturer while naming the others supporters. Nevertheless, one question remained open: to what extent the course can be efficient – that is, whether the energy input of five lecturers is used efficiently. Our semester resulted in four committed students (from appr. fifteen), which does not seem to be an outstanding proportion – this was the reason for reducing the lecturer staff to two person in the following semester. However, in general the answer to this question must be context dependent.

### **Motivating students**

The description of the course indicates that motivating students was a central question during the whole semester. We experienced already from the very beginning that students had a completely different culture of work (always being late, free riding, cramming etc.) which stemmed from the characteristics of the faculty and the university (no community places in the university building, chaotic schedule, disappointed professors). It is not surprising, that students embedded in this environment could not utilize the possibility for challenging authorities provided by participatory teaching methods because at the same time they should have taken responsibility for their own learning and also the quality of their knowledge (Levin M. –

Greenwood, D. 2001), which is an unfamiliar phenomenon in this system. We think that the extent of students' involvement depends on their personal interest and critical approach towards existing structures, and that those students who live an active civil life are more responsive to the PAR methodology than others are.

### **Freedom of students**

The question of students' independence in class/research decisions refers to the former topic on motivation. Without taking responsibility for their own learning we cannot expect them to be responsible for others (e.g. locals) participating in the same action research process. Nevertheless, in a field research conducted in a small marginalized rural community researchers play the important role of initiators and mediators, thus the success of the action (in our case a community forum) but sometimes complete relationships depend on them. When students do not seem to participate in former discussion of research design and show only a few signs of awareness, a much stricter monitoring of their fieldwork (for example interviewing in pair with a supporter) can assure the quality of the research process.

### **Adaptation to the education system**

We also had to cope with the dilemma of how to adapt our PAR course to the specific Hungarian education system and university culture. During the semester, we faced the difficulty that fieldwork is basically unknown in gradual sociology education, students did not develop a rudimentary knowledge on qualitative research methods, and are socialized to the traditional formal teaching system (professors on the pulpit). In these circumstances lecturers really have to "expect the unexpected" (Glanz, 2003 – cited by Dick, B. 2004. pp. 433) and to be ready for continuously modifying the curriculum. It is clear that theory, techniques and fieldwork cannot be condensed into one semester and that the recent education system does not really support continuity in courses. However, every small change in teaching methods can contribute to the slow transformation of the higher education system through changing students' attitudes.

### **Ethics standards**

In a participatory action research process consecutive steps of the research cannot be fully planned as a wide range of surprises can arise in any moment. Therefore, it is hard to create an overall code of ethics and standards that contains solutions to every problem (Collins, S. 2004). Based on this idea, we determined only the major principles to pursue during the semester: challenging the traditional roles of teachers and

students (giving the possibility of contributing to the whole research process through independent decisions); learning by doing (students' active participation in field research); reciprocity (each party can contribute to the learning process and gains different proceeds); and create an open atmosphere to encourage community learning. However, the above described unexpected events and involuntary changes in the curriculum made difficult to follow these principles. It was hard – and remained an unsolved question – to redefine power relations between students and teachers as most of the students focussed on end of term credit scores instead of real learning, and as we did not recognize that by becoming mentors or coaches (which would have been possible as five of us participated in the course) we may have solved this problem.

## Conclusion

We conclude that the presented PAR course was successful in using the experiential approach for teaching the people side of action research. Of course, the lecturer team could not redeem the world during the semester, but could achieve personal changes and action learning with a small group of graduate students. Four committed students from the class applied for new courses in the spring semester led by members of the ESSRG team. Two of the graduate students participated in the field research further on, which indicates their engagement in participatory research and acknowledgment of participatory teaching methods. In this sense, our PAR course seems to comply with one of the most important aim of participatory research and learning – the empowerment of participants (even if just a few of them). However, this also implies that teaching PAR – at least in Hungary – can be built on mainly individuals' special abilities.

Members of the lecturer team have the impression that teaching PAR methodology effectively in the chosen university was a bit premature. The contextual factors strengthening this assumption can be grouped in four:

1. The context of higher education in Hungary: institutional frames of teaching participatory methodology using participatory teaching methods are not yet formed;
2. The context of the chosen university: there are significant differences between Hungarian universities in teaching social science methodology, but some are unexpectedly conservative in their pedagogical culture without recognizing its failures;
3. The teacher/lecturer team: without the commitment of teachers nothing could happen in the teaching system, however teachers in themselves

are not enough for transforming universities into reflective learning communities;

4. The graduate students: can well afford to engage into a community based or action research if they take responsibility for attending the class, if not, teachers will fail in applying participatory teaching methods.

Teachers and students together can be the initiators of participatory learning at universities, while the higher education structure and the university itself can make this kind of bottom-up reform only more difficult, if not impossible.

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