

Participatory Action Research Steps

Similar to popular education, participatory action research is a process of collective inquiry to reach a deeper understanding of the context and causes of a problem impacting a community. As with popular education, the ultimate goal of participatory action research is to inform actions to bring change in one's community. Instead of being studied by outside expert researchers, a community or group of people control the research process themselves by determining what problem they want to study, the information they need to find, where they will find the answers, and ultimately, what they will do with the information uncovered. Participatory action research confronts the elite monopoly on research and information about poor, marginalized and often-over-studied people by proposing a process of generating collective knowledge, of the people for the people, to change a specific social condition impacting the most marginalized members of society (Fals-Borda, 1998; Fine, 2001).

Research Steps

I. Problem Identification

- o What are we concerned about?
- o Define the context of the problem

II. Exploring and Defining the Topic

- o What is happening?
- o What makes the problem exist?
- o Our own ideas (hypothesis) about the problem and ways to promote change

III. Question Development

- o What do we need to find out to address this problem?

IV. Planning

- Engage your learning group in the research planning
- Where are we going to find the information?
- Who do we need to talk to?
- What skills do we need?
- Learning group divides the work of interviewing
- Set a time line for completion
- Inform community of assessment effort

V. Research Tools

- Questionnaires, one-on-one meetings, on-site observation, focus groups, etc.



Principles

- Collective study and mutual learning to build one's own knowledge
- Cooperative study happens among the people
- Learning leads to ACTION: We don't know if things work unless we take actions on things



Tips

- When developing the questions, keep the main question of your research in mind
- More questions are not better; it's best to use fewer questions that are more relevant
- Develop a realistic timeline that works for the group; do not make the process too rigorous

References

- The Theory Behind Our Work Tool
- What is a Learning Group Tool



- Documentation tools: notes, recording, photos
- Team conducts outreach interviews

VI. After the Interviews

- Learning group brings back information
- Is more information needed?
- What patterns are emerging?
- Analyze the most relevant findings
- Write up findings
- How should the information be presented to community?
- How can we share what we learned through culture and art expression?

VII. Actions

- How can we use the information to develop strategies to take actions towards addressing the problem/issue we studied?

Where to Find Information on Participatory Action Research

The list provided in this tool was compiled by the fellows of the Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program

WHERE WE FIND INFORMATION FOR OUR RESEARCH

To find information about our own culture and language (reclaiming, maintaining and enhancing), we have had positive results with the following resources:

- Our own communities (here and in our homeland)
- Elders
- Churches, temples, mosques
- Gatherings
- Religious books
- Books
- Internet
- Newspapers
- Community centers
- Organizations
- Cultural institutions
- Our families
- Celebrations
- Markets
- Schools
- Historians

To find information about involvement in public life and struggles, we have had positive results with the following resources:

- Local teachers
- Community members
- Local representatives
- Newspapers
- Meetings of coalitions, groups
- Colleges
- All the groups we already know (One by One)
- Observe forums
- Libraries



Principles

- **People work collectively (in groups), share experiences, and encourage participation**
This only works if the same group of people go through the process of working with individuals interested in collective learning, engaging others and forming groups of people
- **Collective study, mutual learning to build knowledge**
The ideas of cooperative study and mutual learning allows participants to develop their own knowledge and that of the group

Tips

- See list of tips indicated in the tool

References

- The Theory Behind Our Work booklet
- Documentation Tool

Participatory Action Research Frequently Asked Questions

What is participatory action research?

- Participatory action research is the community engaging in a process to address their concerns. It involves looking for resources needed to begin the process and engaging community members who represent those that will benefit from it. Participants maintain control of the process with the guidance of outsiders.

What is the difference between “traditional” research and participatory action research?

- Participatory action research is geared towards solving a social or economic problem of “disadvantaged” (for lack of a better word) people. Its goal is to engage “ordinary” people in the process of improving the lives of the “disadvantaged” group.
- Traditional research rests in the hands of academicians and professionals.

How do you distinguish between participatory action research and popular education?

- There is no real core difference; one can see participatory research as popular education in process. However, popular education can be more insulated and only occur within a community, whereas participatory action research involves coalitions or alliances with outside organizations and entities.
- It depends on which term you decide to use. The purpose of the activity determines whether you use the term “participatory action research” or “popular education.”
- The term “participatory action research” is more susceptible to academicians, foundations, researchers, etc.
- In participatory action research, there is no gap between the researcher and those that are being researched. These two entities are one in the same. In traditional research, there is an obvious gap between those who research and those who are researched.

What are some of the challenges of doing participatory action research?

- Getting people to validate their own knowledge and experiences.
- Defining the problem/issue as it may be difficult to identify an issue that is representative of all the communities involved.



Principles

- Knowledge built informs and leads to acting and addressing the pressing issues and problems a community faces.



Tips

- People entering into this collaborative knowledge-building effort should have a clear understanding of the difference of participatory action research and traditional research.

References

- The Theory Behind Our Work brochure
- Participatory Action Research Steps Tool



- Relationships with outside entities. When outsiders get involved, participants tend to look to them for knowledge, and in some cases, these outsiders may assume the leadership role and take over the process, affecting the process and results.
- When outsiders (academicians) are not part of the process, the results and value of the research is seen as less credible in the eyes of outside institutions, organizations, entities, etc.
- Good communication between participants is necessary, as is the realization that all forms of knowledge and expertise are valuable.

An Example of Participatory Action Research

In 2007, a group of immigrant and refugee women embarked on participatory action research project to answer three pressing questions: 1) Does culture play a role in supporting or preventing immigrants from becoming civically engaged? 2) What are the positive and negative cultural transformations immigrants and refugees experience in a new country? 3. What are the challenges of embracing a new identity?

Through a series of conversations and 60 interviews, a key finding was that **immigrants and refugees face challenges building a sense of belonging and a sense of place in the Valley.**

This is due to systems of dis-belonging that:

- portrays immigrant and refugees as a social and economic burden
- makes them feel they don't contribute or get civically engaged
- makes indigenous communities believe that their cultures and languages are inferior
- portrays immigrants negatively in the mainstream media

The conclusions the women drew from analysis of their interviews were:

- Immigrants and refugees believe that building a sense of belonging is important to be more effectively engaged in political and civic life
- Holding on to their culture does not mean they are not "Americans"
- New American identities are emerging and being formed by the cultures immigrants bring with them
- It is their right to speak their language as it is tied to their identity and culture and is unique to who they are
- Knowing your roots – who you are – makes you a better person
- When you know and appreciate your own culture, it helps you better know and appreciate other cultures
- Ignorance of your heritage does not help you become a better American, but knowledge will
- Having the spaces and freedom for cultural expression and practice will positively impact the lives of people in the Valley



Principles

Knowledge is built upon experience, not information simply doled out by experts

Tips

- Go back to the community to share your findings
- Participatory action research can be a long process and you might lose people along the way
- Be flexible with the methodology
- Value and trust people's knowledge

References

- The Theory Behind Our Work booklet
- Building a Sense of Belonging Tool
- Cultural Organizing tool



Recommendations:

- Forming one community where many cultures live together should be a responsibility for all citizens
- Parents should take a more active role in passing on their traditions and culture to their children, while also teaching their children an appreciation for other cultures
- Schools, libraries and other institutions should welcome immigrant contributions and offer spaces for cultural learning, in addition to providing tools and resources to help children find or strengthen their cultural identities
- Schools should work with parents and children to bridge the generation gap

“Through our journey, we learned about ourselves, our cultures, our roots. It brought us closer to the day-to-day struggles that immigrants and refugees face in the Central Valley, not only in trying to provide for their families, learn English and access education, but in trying to adjust to the cultural, social and political life in a new country. Nothing has become clearer to us than the belief that we have the right to be ourselves. Culture is a right. It is our culture that defines who we are.”