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## Transformative Learning: An Approach to Understand Participatory Action Research

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## Transformative Learning: An Approach to Understand Participatory Action Research

### Cover Page Footnote

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## **Abstract**

Transformative learning is to observe one's experience that makes one conscious of one's knowledge and one's changing view in the learning community. This paper presents reflection on transformation in learning both the theory and practice of participatory action research as experienced through field visits and interacting with the participants. Critical reflective journal entries and discussions on workshops provided source of data. The purpose of this paper is to provide understanding of participatory action research from traditional conventional research and how reflection helped unfold the ideologies of participatory action research. Following the cycle of participatory action research, authors explored the need of the participation of all the members of this study. Through collaborative learning, social constructive learning, experiential learning as well as transformative learning, this paper explains ideologies of participatory action research, which are co-construction of knowledge, change in attitude to bring transformation in practice, and empowerment of participants.

*Keywords:* Participatory Action Research, transformative learning, co-construction of knowledge

## **Transformative learning: An approach to understand participatory action research**

### **Introduction**

Participatory action research (PAR) is an ecosystem of its own kind because it follows an iterative cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection (Walker, 1993) that brings change in both the researcher and the researched. For this reason, participatory action research is open inquiry that involves not only the researcher in the process of inquiry but also the participants to find problems and to take action to solve the problem. With an inquiry of understanding PAR, authors dwelled into doing PAR trying to learn and improve one's practice of doing participatory research which brought transformation within.

To bring change in the quality of education in the public schools of Dapcha, Kavre under RAAA (which means transformation) project and to accomplish the fourth goal of *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* which is to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunity” (United Nations, 2015, p. 21), this project looks after five schools of Namobuddha Municipality, Nepal. Moreover, the vision of RAAA is to bring change in education, health and livelihood of the school community. Based on Taylor and Cranton (2012), the research questions that guided this paper are “how am I building and refuting the transformative theory?” and “what transformation occurred in the researcher during the exploration of the participatory action research?”

Thus, this paper presents reflection on transformative learning, transformation in doing research from traditional academic research to participatory action research; transformation in understanding theory of PAR and how to practice PAR in the field; and learning through experience gained from field visits, interacting with participants, colleagues and workshops. The purpose of this paper is to criticize positivistic view of academic research and to explore

changing view from doing traditional research to doing participatory action research. This paper contributes to the literature by providing evidences of transformation of researchers and co-researchers by practicing participatory action research that revealed ideologies of *participatory action research*. This paper presents three aspects: transformative learning process; exploration of academic research versus participatory action research; and ideologies of PAR that evolved.

### **Transformative learning**

Learning depends on one's existence as well as experience perceived from the interaction of individual with the environment and interaction between individuals. Mezirow (2009) explains transformative learning as "a metacognitive process of *reassessing reasons* supporting our problematic meaning perspectives" (p. 96). The purpose of transformative learning is to bring change in the perspective to allow individual to participate in critical reflective discourses to acquire reflective judgment. For instance, during one of the initial workshops that RAAA conducted, the teachers' participation was superficial and seemed forceful on the first few days. Getting into the issues of school practice and challenging the teachers in school's practical issues was one way to get teachers involved in reflective discourse. One of issues that teachers faced was not conducting extra-curricular activities in the school. Based on evidences from the previous year, the teachers discussed the reasons for not having extra-curricular activities in the school. When the teachers were involved in the practical issues, they started looking for resources that can solve those issues. Identifying enough resources, finally the teachers decided to do extra-curricular activities and prepared a plan of conducting such extra-curricular activities every Friday, which is evident on their calendar. Even though the workshop was initiated by the researchers, the decision of doing extra-curricular activities was purely voluntary through reflective judgment based on the context, subjectivity, variety of sources, as well as reasonable

inquiry (King & Kitchener, 2004), which is still in effect as the teachers felt accountable for conducting such activities.

One's prior knowledge plays an important role in transformation. By becoming conscious of one's own understanding and evaluating one's own prior knowledge, one changes views. The steps that Mezirow (1997) explained for transformative learning are elaboration of existing point of view, establishment of new point of view, transform the point of view, and becoming aware and critically reflecting biases that one has. Even though learning is not linear and does not follow this linear path, Mezirow's principles of transformative learning helped unfold transformation. For instance, in the previous example, the workshop helped participants and researchers elaborate existing point of view by getting involved in discussion that established new point of view. When participants and researchers added new schemas through discourse, becoming aware of one's bias and critically reflecting on one's bias, transformation of the existing point of view occurred. From Mezirow's point of view, for the transformation to happen, there is a need to shift in the frame of reference, which does not happen until and unless, one is comfortable in one's comfort zone. This workshop provided evidence that participatory action research is a kind of research that brings change when co-researchers (the participants) are involved. This event brought transformation not only in the participants but also on researchers. The researchers had the understanding that participation of the teachers in action makes participants accountable of their *action*, which makes *the action* a success.

Even though transformative learning is individualistic in nature that interprets one's own transformation through self-realization, supporting and refuting one's own frame of reference and habit of mind, transformation also happens through discourses, outsider provoking one's understanding, and challenging one's existing point of view. By becoming conscious of one's

own knowledge and of one's changing view, one can experience transformation. Transformative learning differs from individual to individual as experience that one has, critical reflection that one does, capacity to engage in dialogue, and context are different for every person (Taylor, 2012). This experience that transforms a life is even different when the researcher is a woman (English & Irving, 2012) as the circumstances are different for different gender. Mezirow (1997) further explained "self-reflection can lead to significant personal transformations" (p.7). Transformation in frames of reference takes place through critical reflection and transformation of habit of mind, or they may result from an accretion of transformations in points of view. In short, transformation needs to come from within.

### **Change in Attitude: Academic Research versus Participatory Action Research**

With the term 'research', one has an understanding that it is done in the universities where researchers are experts in their field. A positivist researcher conducts research with some hypothesis, testify the hypothesis with numbers and come to a conclusion based on the numbers that signifies on knowledge driven by facts. Whereas non-positivist studies people, acknowledging their experiences, culture, norms and values, and thus gathers information from the people to generate theory. For such, researchers go to the field, gather information by observing the participants, asking questions, taking pictures and conducting experiments. Heron and Reason (2001) refer such kind of research as *research 'on' people rather than research 'with' people* where the participants are viewed as information providers, which create hierarchy of power between participants and the researchers.

Academicians usually have such views on conducting research and transformation of such views is one of the focuses of this paper. Researchers' previously held beliefs about research are usually rooted through academia, where researchers decides the problem as well as

on methods based on literature, which is purely “theoretical rather than practical” (Heron & Reason, 2001, p. 179). With a thought *participatory action research is just another kind of research*, I (first author) started doing research through RAAA project. With first few visits to the field, authors planned out not only the problems of the research but also interventions to make the public school a better one by introducing ICT training, integrating technology in the classroom, planting trees around the school and so on. At the end, the vision of academic research is to publish articles in profitable journals that focus on production of subject-oriented result that never reach the participants.

As university academician, the glass that one wears controls one’s thinking which creates a gap between researcher and the participants creating hierarchy. However, after being involved in the field and practicing participatory approach to research, it became clear that the conventional research does not help local people understand the problem and bring change in their context. Participatory action research is not doing research on the people but with the people involving them on research, deciding about the content, problems, methods as well as interventions. Exploring participatory action research, authors became aware of the misconceptions and beliefs that I (first author) have on *research*. Becoming aware of the misconceptions is the first step of transformation; reflecting critically on the misconceptions is the second step; based on this reflection, stepping back is another step; and through another step that is changing one’s action as well as praxis brought transformation, which unfolded the ideologies of *participatory action research* PAR, which are stated below.

## **Ideologies of Participatory Action Research**

Exploring through collaboration with the participants, gaining personal experience, changing one's view by interacting with the participants and the environment through social constructive learning, and critically reflecting on one's own action, experience and learning, some of the ideologies of participatory action research that stood out are: i) As much as interaction is important, rapport building is equally important to get into the community of practice; ii) indigenous knowledge that participants bring make them experts; iii) researchers and participants are co-researchers without anyone of which, the bicycle of PAR does not go long distance; iv) knowledge is co-constructed by interacting with the co-researchers; v) it empowers participants by breaking the power dynamics; vi) and participatory action is dialectical in nature.

The first thing that was evident was the importance of rapport building with the participants. In due course, researchers mimicked the life-style of the school community. For instance, we stayed in a health center; we walked to the school. On the way to the school, we walked with the local people, talked with them; stopped by local tea-shops and drank tea with them. This helped understand the local environment as well as it helped build rapport with the community. Even before the start of the research, we went to the school and stayed in the school premises to make ourselves familiar with the teachers and the school environment and to make them familiar with us. This is unlike academic research, where one does not need to understand the needs of the participants whereas in participatory action research, one cannot know the need of the participants without knowing the participants. Without building trust with the participants, without knowing the environment and without being in the shoes of the participants, intervention was out of question.

Being naïve in the field of *participatory action research*, we were looking for problems that could be corrected through intervention. In other words, we were looking for weakness of the school community. Participants have been living in the community and utilizing local resources and knew the resources of the community. They have been benefitting from their local knowledge from a long time. Realization that participants are the experts of the community came to us in a long run. Thus, being involved in participatory action research, we learned to respect indigenous people and their wisdom (Rahnema, 1990). It also became evident that doing participatory action research means doing research and intervention being culturally responsive and acknowledging local wisdom.

In due course, during one of the workshops, researchers and teachers came together to discuss strengths, weaknesses, needs and issues. Talking about weaknesses brought discomfort among the participants as no one wants to disclose weaknesses. We came to know that the best way to involve people into action is to engage them in their own inquiry. The beauty of PAR revealed was that it challenges the participants to think beyond the boundary to find not only the problems or weaknesses, but also the solutions to the problem through mutual collaboration. PAR helped share power with participants as the participants got involved in finding problems, identify resources in their surrounding, produce knowledge, empower themselves and involve in finding solutions to their problems (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006), which also increased the researcher's knowledge directly (Chesler, 1991). Thus, learning from each other, PAR encouraged the researched (participants) to become the researcher or co-researcher.

Furthermore, PAR is dialectical in nature which means reality is understood in contradiction of two opposite views. Being dialectic with the participants provided space for both the researcher and the participants (researched) to view the problem not in isolation but as a

part of the whole (Roberts, 2003). Through collaborative discussion, the participants expressed themselves and got involved in the research, thus became co-researchers. By acknowledging the views of the co-researchers, they felt their voices being heard, which also empowered the co-researchers. By getting involved in the PAR, the participants became not only valuable audiences but eventually experts. For example, many teachers did not know how to use the computer. However, after getting involved in PAR, teachers felt the need of using the resources they have; they learned to use the computer from few teachers who knew how to use it. Now, the teachers use computer lab and posted pictures in the Facebook.

During these periods of field visit and being engaged with the co-researcher, I (the first author) learned to back up and not impose my understanding to the participants. I challenged their thinking, triggered their thoughts, guided them but I did not provide solutions to the problem. During one of the workshops, teachers formed two groups: one group involved in preparing activity for the teachers and one group for the students. They prepared activity for students and teachers. Being involved in PAR and having an understanding that the activity was not applicable to their context, I could not directly tell them nor could I tell them what to do. My other option was to inquire to make the teachers think realistically where I had to challenge them, not provide solution but guide. My role changed from an academic solution provider to a facilitator and I became a part of field (Chesler, 1991). Thus, teachers got focused on practical aspect and prepared activity that was relevant to them and one of the activities was learning to use computer, which eventually happened in the initiation of the teachers. Being a teacher, an educator, we tend to correct the mistakes of the students, provide solutions to the students to develop skills and insight. By not imposing my thoughts or solutions to the problems and being a

part of the field, my point of view changed that brought transformation on my research practice. PAR brought change in my role from an academic researcher to a facilitator.

In the process of finding problems and solutions to the problems, the participants were involved in dialogue. Coming into consensus, co-researchers agree on solutions and thus co-construct knowledge. Through participation of both the researcher and the researched and both becoming equally engaged in the research, production of knowledge is possible through continuous dialogue between the researcher and the researched (Kong, 2017). Thus the participants and the researchers became the coauthors of knowledge produced. PAR disrupts the professional monopoly in knowledge creation process and helps in knowledge creation through co-construction of knowledge. Through constant interaction with the co-researchers and reflecting on the action, the strength of PAR is to co-construct knowledge and empowerment of the co-researchers.

Participation is the key to participatory action research. By participating the object/researched in the process of action research in the meaning making process, PAR blurs the line of researcher and researched, empowering the researched. This further disrupts the conventional power hierarchy between the researcher and the researched. The participants when involved PAR, transformation of co-researchers is the ultimatum. By following bottom-up approach, PAR empowers the participants.

Cutting through the power dynamics in this turmoil of researcher versus researched was the hardest. A university degree differentiates researcher and researched providing power to the researcher as knowledge is power, which creates hierarchy between the researcher and the researched. When university graduates identify problems of the community, the participants believe it to be their problem (Rahnema, 1990). Because of the cultural lens that one wears,

sometimes it is hard to notice this hegemony. When the indigenous people's knowledge is acknowledged and accepted, it provides power to the participants to co-construct knowledge, which ultimately breaks the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched.

### **Conclusions**

The PAR is a complex system as a human body with different organs working simultaneously for the proper functioning of the body. Looking at each fragment separately does not give full picture of the whole system; however, different components provide strength to the PAR. The holistic approach is what makes PAR a complete and complex system.

Through constant interaction with the participants with whom collaborative study is done, through self-reflection as well as critiques from my colleagues and exploring through dialogues there was a shift in the habit of mind or frame of reference. Furthermore, through collaboration with community of practice (in the field), sharing knowledge with colleagues, transformation happened.

In conclusion, this transformative learning helped me unfold my prior beliefs about research and some ideologies of PAR. The participation of both the researcher and the researched, getting involved in the dialogue, critiquing oneself brought transformation (Kong, 2017). PAR disrupts conventional power hierarchy, empowers co-researchers which happened as a result of collaborative learning. PAR allowed me and my participants to socially construct knowledge, which I learned through experience. However, there are more ideologies to be discovered and more transformation to happen as the petals of PAR unravel to bloom into a beautiful flower.

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