

Principles of Participatory Practice

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In 2001 an Australian research consultancy conducted a national survey to inquire into the meaning of participation for individuals who had experience in participatory approaches to research, evaluation and learning. Thirty-three telephone interviews were held with participants from the three tiers of government as well as community, academic and small business sectors. The core business activities of participants included primary industries, social services, environmental management and moral campaigns. The survey results told a fascinating story about the emergence, valuation and application of participatory approaches in Australia. Three generic principles were identified: equity, transparency and inclusion. They were proposed as core to a generally held idea as to how to recognise “participatory practices” at work and as being necessary for authentic participation to manifest in any change strategy. The consultants compiled the information into a report, which was returned to survey participants. Having the benefit now of five years of application in a variety of contracts, these principles are discussed both as a model and as a case study. The paper concludes with a brief reflection on the practical implications of participatory practices that use realise these principles.

1. Background

1.1. Participatory practice

The term “participatory practice” is unfamiliar to many, even though an idea of participation as “consultation”, “decision-making”, “engagement” or “community development”, for example, is approaching the commonplace. The actual practices necessary for participation to take place are somewhat muddled into specific disciplines as their proponents question traditional approaches to expertise, authority and the reification of forms of knowing from everyday life. For example; environmental education which was once preoccupied in educating others from an environmental science-based stance, is increasingly practiced in appreciating and augmenting what people already know about their local ecosystems; and crime prevention is as interested in working with a community’s history, culture and social networks as imposing policing, target hardening and surveillance technologies. If we stand back and consider “participation” across the various disciplines, a “trans-disciplinary” pattern of participation emerges, recognisable to all and modifiable by each. It is this pattern in the form of “principles” and their inter-relationships in the hands of those who create the means by which participation takes place, that we understand “participatory practice” to mean, and which we are enthusiastically promoting for the benefits that participation offers.

1.2. Practical concerns

In our experience, the lack of a recognized participatory practice as a paradoxically generic kind of specialisation means that workers, organisations and schools of thought are re-inventing their cognitive wheels unnecessarily, slowing down urgently needed reforms, collaborations and innovations. We do not argue against the value of learning from the ground up as a way of building local capacity for participation and enriching what we understand about it. We maintain a *principled* approach to participation allows learning and capacity building to take place with greater efficiency and communicative resonance, strengthening practice quality and the democratic qualities of our daily lives in the process of realizing a participatory outcome.

Participation is still establishing itself somewhere between pilot project, managerial system, philosophy of knowing and assumed societal right and responsibility. As practitioners navigating these delicate variations in specific sites we can waste precious resources in walking backwards from a strategic starting point, unlearning what is assumed to be true before moving forward with a shared understanding of participation. In participatory projects, resources are generally slim for the depth of work that needs to be done, so this recasting of knowledge, action, practice and development within a participatory frame can be an expensive double task for participants and practitioners.

For example, a participatory approach to issues related to family violence, not only needs to address the specific issues of abuse participatively, but to also recast a host of related issues and approaches such as forms of therapeutic intervention, organizational management, inter-agency collaboration, legal, criminological and even feminist and community development principles.

The scale of such a task is impossible in the capacity of any “pilot project” or “independent research” contract. When faced with such systemic challenges, determinations need to be made as to which and how many frame shifts take place and importantly, who is involved in such determinations.

How do we make such choices? Our proposition is that the three principles of participation can guide us through these turning points while also providing a kind of weather-check for the quality of participation that we are enabling through our practice.

Let us first revisit the survey so that the origin of the principles can be appreciated.

2. The survey

An eighteen-question interview protocol, of mostly open-ended questions was designed and trialled prior to contacting potential contributors. Respondents were sourced through our own business networks or ethical investment publications, and initially contacted via phone to seek their interest in being involved. Thirty-three telephone interviews were held with participants from the three tiers of government, community, academic and small business sectors. The core business activities of the participants included primary industries, social services, environmental management and moral campaigns. Table 1 below presents the range of contributors to the survey.

Commonwealth	State Gov	Local Gov	Industry	Academic	Consultancies	Community
1 rep each of 2 departments	1 rep each of: 6 departments in Q, 1 in SA, 1 in WA	1 rep each of 2 councils in Q, 1 in NSW, 1 in WA	1 rep each of 3 corporate interests: mining, petroleum and communications technologies	5 reps of 4 units in Sydney; 1 regional NSW TAFE; 1 uni in Victoria	3 Sydney consultancies 2 Brisbane consultancies	1 Victorian charity, 1 environmental organisation in NSW, 1 ACT charity, 1 moral campaigner in NSW, 1 moral campaigner Q

During interviews we refrained from prompting, only intervening for clarification’s sake and recording key ideas in notes as we listened. When the interviewing process was complete, raw data was reviewed and organised into themes and categories of our own making, that we recognised as being “participatory”.

Table 1 *The contributors to the survey*

2.1 A summary of findings

Participatory practices were described as being associated with decision-making by a broad spectrum of people with primary stake holding in the matter being addressed. Decision-making processes were associated with democracy, learning and human rights. Information about the meaning of participatory practices suggested that certain principles could be used knowingly to set the conditions, and characterise the actual environment for participatory practices to be introduced and nurtured.

All sectors reported mixed levels of familiarity with the term ‘participatory practices’. For a few the term was entirely new, but not necessarily the practices themselves. Beyond that there was general familiarity and comfort with the term, and a view that, even if it was not used, there was some level of “buy in” to the concept somewhere in each respondent’s organisation.

Respondents saw participatory practices being applied in three domains: within an organisation (internal), in the organisation’s stake holding groups/networks (external), and in between the two (bridging between and organisation and its “constituency”). Key constraints to the application of participation included issues around resources for participation and personal preferences of particular approaches to strategy and practice.

Contributors’ descriptions of the emergence of participatory practices over the past 10 years reflected changes in the following four areas: thinking, including the ways we have been thinking, and thinking about thinking; valuing the community as a source of expertise rather than trouble makers; the developing culture of business practice and diversification of how core business was being accomplished; and an increasing range of resources available for the development of participatory practices.

Benefits of the application of participatory practices were described in terms of credibility, social worth, strategy and resource sustainability, and kudos. Risks were described in terms of personal and organisational risks of working in this way

when the majority of a work place culture was unfamiliar or uncomfortable with participatory principles.

Five main directions for the future of participatory practices were identified. In developmental sequence these were: building awareness of participatory practice; building or developing systems and structures for participation; finding ways of augmenting the benefits of participation; increasing the resources for participation; and strategising the agenda for participatory practices. These future steps appeared to us as a good blueprint for any systemic development towards participatory approaches that an organisation or even a particular strategy might want to take.

3. The participatory principles model (PPM)

3.1. The participatory principles

When we asked questions about what principles were at work in participatory practices, three generic values kept occurring throughout the data. The idea of “Inclusivity” was common to most respondents’ views. By this we mean that participatory practices, by definition, enable people to be included in particular activities. Almost without exception, the concept of Inclusivity implies the inclusion of people who in the past have been overlooked or excluded from the named activities. Thus Inclusivity centres on the ideas of “insiders and outsiders”, decision-making and relevance.

Two other strongly convergent values evident in the data and associated with participatory practices were “Transparency” and “Equity”. From this convergence we proposed that when engaging people in processes of decision-making about matters that they see as directly affecting them and that they have not previously engaged with formally, then “transparency” and “equity” are critically important to the efficiency and effectiveness of the process of broadening boundaries and inviting people into new terrains of responsibility. These qualities open up the governing world to its internal and external stakeholders, be that world an organisation, institutional power, defined community or network.

By such disclosure the principles of Transparency and Equity operate as means of information sharing, building trust and self-confidence, as well as introducing stakeholders to the subtle realities that underpin the issues being addressed. In short, Transparency and Equity enable learning for participation to take place once an individual or group is Included in the participatory opportunity.

Spontaneously, many contributors also described what they felt participatory practice to be and what it was not; they began to create boundaries around a recognisable “field” of practice. These ideas are assembled In Table 2.

3.2. A model

The three principles spell a three-bodied schema (see Figure 1 below) where each principle interacts with the other, focussing the practitioner’s attention on specific tasks to establish a participatory environment and sustain its integrity throughout an initiative’s life cycle. The primary responsibility of a practitioner is to attend to the emergence, balance, qualities and consequences of these principles at work. Such attention draws us into boundary-making, strategic design, mediation and negotia-

Participatory practice is not	Participatory practice is
Lip service, rhetoric	Listening, Valuing, Developmental ways of working, Participatory validation of claims
Isolated, formal consultation events	Key stakeholder and task sensitive approaches. Carrying out participatory action, research and learning ¹
Becoming embroiled in reactivity	Co-mentoring, Reflection, Critical reflection, Using outcomes from reflection in participatory action
Self interest and individualism	Team work, Partnership work using clear criteria for participatory practices, Collaborative learning and personal development
Closed, directorial action	Making policy and recommendations for participation, Reflecting on participation, Participatory facilitation and facilitation of participation

Subsequent to conducting this research we developed a model of participatory practice deploying the three generic principles of Equity, Transparency and Inclusion. We have used the model in a variety of research, learning and evaluation strategies or environments; presented it at professional and network events, seen others using it and received a variety of local and international responses to both the report and model. It is with this developmental history behind us that we present this model for more general access.

Table 2 *Some recognisable boundaries of participation (opportunities for intervention)*

tion of rights and responsibilities to participate. It involves the active development of relationships between individuals and entities - including language, practices, identities and theories.

This practitioner focus frees participants to co-create their own means and benefits of participation so that their means of transition more closely reflect and develop their local context, while still growing from the three interacting and generic principles. All principles will do this if they are used in practice, but the specific nature of principles, the way they interact and are manifested in practice, the ways they are recognised by participants and authority and tracked for their presence in the multiple dimensions of interactive work, all these variants makes a difference to what comes about. We learned that good practice is not about doing the principles “to” others in an ideological manner. It is about realising them within ourselves as qualities of attitude and behaviour as much as principles for designing strategy or evaluating outcomes. We learned to create a principled environment with people; to bring them as a bare minimum that was both evocative and also left plenty of room for others to contribute their resource to the participatory entity; and to pause and pay attention to what is going on (or coming about) when the principles are having effect. Imbalances, invisible exclusions and hidden truths demand careful work.

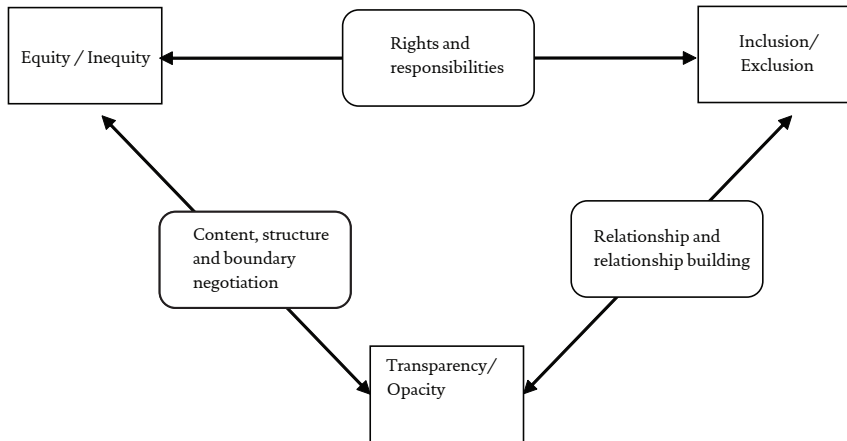


Figure 1 *The three participatory principles and core practice skills that they generate*

As the schema shows, to assist with its appreciation, we present a counter-state of a non-participatory context in each principle’s domain. When we see the antithesis of participation at work in a local context we have an indication of the possible limit of an initiative’s influence, or the boundaries at which participatory intervention may be desirable. We came to understand that participation is never a fixed, ideal or definable state so much as the valuing of something that may otherwise be invisible; a movement between relative participatory potentials that any given system can foster or inhibit at different moments of participatory engagement. In short, participatory practice is an ongoing inquiry into the participatory potential of any aspect of practice, relationship, system or knowledge structure. These three principles are a guide towards understanding what this means and how to accomplish such work.

We move on to illustrate the principles at work in an evaluation strategy, where the practitioner created a participatory environment with the principles in relationship with the co-participants. In turn, the co-created the opportunity and means with which the participants designed their own evaluation framework, implemented it, determined the learning outcomes and evaluated the evaluation approach. In so doing, the evaluation created an outcome that reflected the participants’ experiences and relationships, while also creating optimum conditions for individual learning and strategic development.

4. Application

4.1. Case study

The evaluand for this case study was a Commonwealth funded capacity building strategy working across select services in regional and remote Queensland to provide Primary Health Care services to their local communities. Examples of the emergence of the participatory principles - Inclusivity, Transparency and Equity - are considered at three points across the evaluation strategy, then discussed more generally with respect to the facilitators’ developing understandings

about their participatory practice.

4.2. Emergence of the Participatory Principles Model (PPM)

4.2.1. Key Event 1: Stakeholder Meeting 1

An initial face-to-face stakeholder meeting was held between the evaluation funding and auspicing organisations' representatives and the contracted evaluators¹. The purpose of the initial meeting was to negotiate broad terms and conditions for the evaluation strategy's approach and scope, including the three principles. This meeting resulted in agreement on a participatory form of evaluation; however, the voices of participating services' were not included in this initial decision-making. The exclusion of these critical voices raised a participatory practice tension, in that those most affected by an initiative needed to have Equity in making decisions about the strategy that would affect them (eg: Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Wadsworth 1989; Hart and Bond, 1995). The evaluation facilitator made individual calls to service representatives to set up a collaborative workshop with all stakeholder groups to co-design the evaluation framework. Simultaneously, the Transparency principle transpired by means of the participants creating a structured communication system between stakeholders engaged with the initiative at this early point in time.

4.2.2. Key Event 2: Stakeholder Workshop 1

A one-day face-to-face collaborative workshop with all stakeholder groups co-designed the evaluation framework. The Inclusivity principle guided the facilitator's negotiations about what to include in the framework's broad structure. For example, participants' previous evaluation experiences, their expressed values for collaboration, their evaluation questions and criteria, data collection and analysis methods, and reporting processes were all important elements with which to construct the framework so that it could be used by them to produce evaluative outcomes that were relevant to them. The Transparency principle was alive in these deliberations and enabled participants to discuss and learn about their own and others' interests and needs with respect to the evaluation. This event was also effective in realising the Equity principle in the inter-relationships between the workshop participants; but as the workshop found, the broader service stakeholder voices at the community level were still missing from the evaluation.

4.2.3. Key Event 3: Regional Service Onsite Workshops

Onsite workshops were held in each of the participating services' communities to implement the evaluation framework. This involved the evaluation facilitator using the tools that had been generated and endorsed by participants in previous stages to collect and interpret evaluation data. This event engaged the broader range of stakeholders at the service level, which was a tension that the Inclusion principle illuminated earlier. It also provided the opportunity for the facilitator to explore with this broader service level (rather than management level) stakeholder group their understandings and experiences of the strategy being evaluated - an action that is direct-

¹ Contracted evaluators we refer to as "evaluation facilitators" because in a participatory environment, it is the participants who do the evaluation; the participatory facilitator provides the means for this to be done in ways that are recognised as trustworthy and reliable evaluation.

ly related to the Transparency principle. The application of the evaluation tools at workshops to collect evaluation data illuminated the Equity principle, in that the data represented the stake holding group most affected by the evaluand.

4.3. General discussion points in reference to participation and personal practice

The explicit application of the three participatory principles within and across these key events, and others in the evaluation strategy, worked to provide both very broad and specific guidance on the facilitator's participatory practice. At the broad level they provided a "back brain" participatory model to reflect iteratively on:

- The voices and interests that were or were not present - Inclusivity
- The levels and reaches of input from stakeholders into decisions about the evaluation's critical components - Equity
- The systems for ensuring opportunities for stakeholders' access to the evaluation's processes, outputs and outcomes - Transparency

This broader guidance simultaneously enabled the evaluation facilitator to identify participatory practice tensions at a micro level (specific to a particular moment as compared to overall structure) and subsequently to devise the means for navigating their resolve. In this way the principles worked to enable transition within and across the evaluation's key events, and between ongoing cycles of unknowing (complexity) and knowing (pattern). The flexibility and interdependency of the three principles in action was evident in the way each principle emerged and interacted with others differently at different points in time. For example, at the micro level of practice and pending the nature of the tension, a principle would emerge as the leading principle and at the same time be dependent on the co-emergence of the other two principles to work through the tension. Consistently, the Equity principle emerged as an outcome whilst the principles of Inclusivity and Transparency emerged as both processes and outcomes upon which the experience of Equity was dependent.

5. Conclusion

In our view, the opportunities within the evaluation strategy that enabled participation to be realised included:

- Stakeholder participation in the design and implementation of an evaluation and the interpretation of evaluation data, including generation of recommendations
- Face-to-face interactions with stakeholders to work through the evaluation process and direct its course iteratively
- Faithful use of participant values in the design and implementation of the strategy and tools as made evident through the foundational use of the three participatory principles

- Faithful document management to ensure balanced stake holding of information and outcomes

Unless there is some cynical interest at work, participatory approaches to any form of work are drawn from a commitment to finding new ways of functioning that both support and enable a more prosperous future. When we refer to “prosperity” we do so in full recognition of the all-too-familiar systemic problems such as the rich are getting richer and poor are getting poorer, our being habitually and structurally wedded to old baggage (individual and global), and our being trapped in and even unwilling perpetrators of social and political systems that are not meeting the needs of those who are a part of them or who feel their consequences. It is our experience, cautionary notes stuck to our foreheads, that participatory approaches value the human condition and the environment in which we live as they enable recognition and valuing of local human and non human resources. That is what we mean by “prosperity”.

The three principles are straightforward, easily recognisable in a participatory endeavour that builds the boat as it sails, and structurally conducive to co-evolve with a local community’s way of doing, knowing and being in any mutual responsibility. As our case study shows, they allow for systemic dynamics of complexity, self-organisation and regeneration to come about, without need for any one particular form of authority to exert itself and save the day by replicating old ways of doing. They are conducive to transformation.

The participatory principles certainly perturb old systems, but this is necessary when old systems fail to meet their responsibilities or adapt to new conditions. These particular principles have the following effects within an initiative:

- Redistribute traditional power structures according to current or perceived needs
- Accordingly require and create different decision making processes and generate different consequences and responsibilities in any participatory setting
- Involve transgression (at personal, inter-personal and systemic levels) that is the source of learning
- Identify divergences by continually monitoring equity/inequity
- Use divergence as a medium for moving on by building in inclusion and transparency when divergence comes about
- Create and manage risk by enabling sensitivity to shifts and deploying them into open-ended and softly-bounded development scenarios
- Work with chaos, emergent pattern, rhythm and transformation
- Reveal hidden assumptions for exploration and incorporation, modification or abandonment
- Provide for public accountability in reasoned and comprehensible ways
- Create the basic building blocks for rigour in any mode of knowledge generation (research, evaluation, learning, design etc)

- Value people's real life experiences and how they know them as the basis for social development
- Purposefully generate new knowledge for change at individual, collective and systemic scales, and
- Provide a "safe house" for change to seed, be learned of, establish and mature.

For us perhaps their most exciting attribute is that they are simple and easy to make our own in practice. In your hands, let them generate unique forms of participation that still resonate with qualities that the field recognises as authentic, without capitulating to either external orthodoxies or internal conservatism, both of which while useful tensions can if not recast by such a model, get in the way of participatory systems taking form.

References

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Notes

[1] Since 2001 many other modes and discipline-based forms of participation have been developed