

In: (Participatory) Action Research

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Chapter 4

TEACHING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: THE SEARCH FOR PEDAGOGICAL INSIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Most graduate social science departments and professional degree programs require their students to study both qualitative and quantitative research methods. This binary focus typically glosses over questions such as who defines the subject matter and scope of the research and who owns or controls research findings. In this chapter, we discuss how teaching Participatory Action Research (PAR) in MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning has pushed us to focus on (1) the

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responsibilities of action researchers and their obligations to the communities and places in which they work; and (2) the importance of building the capacity of community members so that they can take control of the research being done about, with, and for them. While various manuals have suggested the best ways of doing this kind of work in practice, very little attention has been given to how to teach PAR methods to graduate students and research partners. We offer six considerations that we consider central to PAR pedagogy and, in the remainder of the chapter, describe how each of these considerations has informed the intellectual framework and pedagogical strategies at the heart of our teaching. One of the big surprises for us has been the extent to which a half-semester PAR module can radically alter the way professional degree candidates think about the rest of their course work and future careers. We conclude with an invitation to our academic colleagues who teach quantitative and qualitative research methods, but do not include any discussion of PAR-oriented issues and approaches in their courses.

Keywords: pedagogy, teaching, participatory action research

INTRODUCTION

Most graduate social science departments and professional degree programs require their students to study both qualitative and quantitative research methods. However, this binary focus typically glosses over other methodological, epistemological, and ethical considerations including questions such as who defines the subject matter and scope of the research and who owns or controls research findings. In this chapter, we discuss how teaching participatory action research (PAR) in MIT's Department of Urban Studies and Planning has pushed us to focus on (1) the responsibilities of applied social researchers and their obligations to the communities, groups, and places in which they work; and (2) the importance of building the capacity of community or group members so they can take control of the research being done about, with, and for them.

We begin this chapter with a brief overview of the intellectual history of action research (AR) and PAR. While various manuals have suggested the best ways of doing this kind of work in practice,¹ very little attention has been given to how to teach PAR methods to graduate students and research partners. We offer six considerations that we consider central to PAR pedagogy and, in the remainder of the chapter, describe how each of these considerations has informed the intellectual framework and pedagogical strategies at the heart of our teaching. One of the big surprises for us has been the extent to which a six-month PAR module can help professional degree candidates sharpen their own theories of practice and radically alter how they think about what they are learning and how they want to define their future work. We conclude the chapter with an invitation to our academic colleagues who teach quantitative and qualitative research methods, but do not take into account PAR-oriented considerations in their teaching.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: HISTORICAL ROOTS AND PEDAGOGICAL VALUE

The development of action research as an approach to enhanced scientific understanding cannot be traced to a singular point in time or to a particular discipline. Its origins tie together insights from various intellectual influences such as philosopher John Dewey's "pragmatism",² urban planner and philosopher Donald Schön's "reflective practice", general systems thinking, and critical theory (Schön, 1984; Greenwood & Levin, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). AR and PAR practitioners have also drawn inspiration from grassroots organizing and processes of social mobilization such as the civil rights movement in the United States and the

¹ See, for example, Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Greenwood & Levin, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2013; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013.

² See also, the work of sociologist and social activist W.E.B. Du Bois, such as in Du Bois and Eaton's *The Philadelphia Negro: a social study* (1899).

liberationist movement derived from the work of Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (Fals-Borda, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).³ The common thread linking these sources is a critique of scientific positivism and analytic rationality, and a call for reorienting social science more towards context-specific, experientially-based, and collectively-produced knowledge aimed at promoting social change.

John Dewey's conception of science as a form of inquiry that is fundamentally connected to practice is perhaps the most foundational contribution to the development of action research. Dewey construed inquiry as incessant "cycles of action and reflection" dedicated not simply to the production of new knowledge, but to the resolution of concrete, practical problems in society (Dewey & Rogers, 2012). In this sense, Dewey suggested that inquiry was intrinsically related to the exercise of democracy—that is, to enable an active citizenry (or public) to engage in problem-solving and to deal with conflicts through public debate. From Dewey and the work of those who followed, action research derives its orientation towards production of knowledge that communities can use to solve the problems they face—what Greenwood and Levin (2006) call "actionable knowledge."

The effort to tie inquiry more closely to action also entails an epistemological shift away from the search for generalizable knowledge or objective truth that is typically associated with the traditional application of scientific methods. As an alternative, action researchers believe that social science should place a premium on context-specific knowledge along with local ways of knowing acquired through lived experience (Greenwood & Levin, 2006). This is sometimes elaborated through the Aristotelian idea of *phronesis* or practical wisdom (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). As Flyvbjerg explains, *phronesis* "goes beyond both analytical, scientific knowledge (*episteme*) and technical knowledge or know-how (*techne*) and involves judgements and actions" derived from contextual experience (Flyvbjerg,

³ See also, Horton and Freire's *We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change* (1990) and Hale's *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement* (2016).

2001, p. 2). This kind of knowledge—based on values rather than technical rationality—is considered essential for capturing the intuitive and situational dimensions of human action and helping to improve “social and political praxis” (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

What Is Special About PAR?

A variety of approaches to the theory and practice of action research⁴ have developed over the years. In particular, the emergence of PAR can be traced to participatory research initiatives in Latin America and to the activities of leftist social movements in the 1960s and 1970s that were concerned with relationships between knowledge, individual empowerment, and societal transformation (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). A key influence in this regard was the work of Paulo Freire regarding the role of popular education in social and political liberation.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000 [1970]), Freire criticized traditional educational models that viewed students as mere recipients of knowledge—victims of what he called “the banking model” of education. He argued that “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire, 2000 [1970], p. 72). For Freire, collective inquiry through dialogue is the means through which people develop a critical awareness (*conscientização*) of their position in the world. As he explained, such awareness enables “people to discuss courageously the problems of their context and to intervene in that context” (Freire, 1973, p. 36).

Building on these kinds of insights, participatory action research is a form of action-oriented inquiry that seeks to involve community-partners in all stages of the research process—from defining the questions, to analyzing and communicating findings. It aims to both place greater

⁴ Reason and Bradbury’s (2008) edited volume on action research reunites a collection of texts covering various approaches.

control over the research process in the hands of those directly affected by the problem under investigation and to build democratic capacity for collective problem-solving within these communities. As Rahman observes, “an immediate objective of PAR is to return to the people the legitimacy of the knowledge they are capable of producing through their own verification systems, as fully scientific, and the right to use this knowledge (...) as a guide in their own action” (Rahman, 1991, p. 15). In this sense, PAR challenges conventional notions of “expertise” and aims to disrupt expert (power) hierarchies in the production and circulation of knowledge.

In this chapter, we argue that the pedagogical value of PAR as an approach to applied social science and practical problem-solving resides precisely in pushing faculty and students to think more deeply about the process of knowledge production and their responsibilities towards the communities they work in or with—particularly if there is a commitment to promoting long-term social change. Within our own discipline, urban studies and planning, professional degree candidates are typically taught the importance of public participation and community engagement for constructing democratic planning processes. Yet, we often shy away from discussing with students the ways in which they can work directly and collaboratively with communities, not simply to consult them about a pre-defined problem or plan, but rather to involve them in the very definition of problems or elaborations of plans. Even when action research has been used explicitly as a planning tool to facilitate community dialogue and explore new forms of knowledge generation—such as in Sandercock and Attili’s (2014) five-year action research and film-making project with indigenous peoples in British Columbia—outside researchers have retained control over the research, engaging the community only in select ways and failing to use action research to build local problem-solving capacity for the long-term.

Incorporating PAR or a PAR-like orientation into graduate planning education—and in applied social science departments more broadly—can prompt students to think critically about at least four key dimensions of public engagement in the realm of policy: formulation, evaluation,

intervention, and long-term implementation. Who should define which problems deserve attention? Who will control the evaluation of the effectiveness of policy or strategy? What outcomes of policy intervention should be given priority, especially in the long-term? How will affected communities ensure ongoing commitment to original policy goals and outcomes? What are the obligations of researchers and practitioners towards the communities with which they work, or that will be affected by their interventions? The teaching of PAR to graduate students can serve as a setting for the exploration of these questions and of the ways in which collaborative research with partner-organizations and communities can facilitate social transformation.⁵ Thus, the central question confronting college and university professors is: what key principles should inform the structure and operation of such an educational space?

Elements of a PAR Pedagogy

While proponents and practitioners of AR and PAR have produced many grounded accounts of their research, a discussion of the pedagogical strategies that should be used to teach PAR to graduate students has generally been overlooked (Greenwood, 2007; McNicoll, 1999; Sankaran, Hase, Dick, & Davies, 2007). Much of the published work linking action research to educational practice stems from educational research and focuses on how educators can use AR to find answers or solutions to problems faced in the classroom or in educational settings (McKernan, 1991; Mertler, 2016; Reed, 2007; Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). For example, Reed (2007) describes three examples of situations in which teachers used action research to a) collect and analyze data, and b) devise an action plan for addressing curriculum issues, school dropout, and student behavior in the classroom.

⁵ This is not to suggest that there is a particular PAR model to be followed or to assume that PAR will necessarily be more beneficial to communities (Winkler, 2013). Rather, we propose that the teaching of PAR can alter the ways students approach their own practice and think about the outcomes of their interventions beyond the short-term.

Taking note of the gap in pedagogical documentation,⁶ some scholars have written reflective accounts of their experiences teaching AR or PAR courses (Etmanski & Pant, 2007; Fine & Torre, 2008; Greenwood, 2007; Kur, DePorres, & Westrup, 2008; McKernan, 1994; McNicoll, 1999; Sankaran et al., 2007; Winkler, 2013). These are extremely valuable because they illuminate particular pedagogical “challenges and pleasures”, as McNicoll (1999) calls them. Having reflected on our own experience, we offer six considerations that we consider central to the design of PAR instruction. We think these can lead to the creation of educational spaces in which students can challenge conventional ways of approaching knowledge production and community engagement.

The first consideration is ethics. A pedagogy of participatory action research needs to confront moral questions such as who controls knowledge production and for what purposes, what counts as knowledge, and what are the obligations of outside researchers to the communities and groups with whom they work. It also requires us to consider, particularly when the research is controversial, how risks are distributed within the research team (Fine & Torre, 2008). Building on Cahill, Sultana, and Pain (2007), we argue an ethics of PAR should be characterized by a commitment to collaboration and joint-learning, by an openness to diverse forms of knowing and a recognition that people have valuable knowledge about their experiences, and by a responsibility for critical reflection, action, and capacity building. Further, an ethics of participatory action research needs to involve, in our view, continuous negotiation with the co-researchers of the conditions of collaboration and discussion of their concerns (Cahill, Sultana, & Pain, 2007; Public Science Project, 2013). As with any discussion of ethics, there are no correct answers. However, we do not think faculty and students should enter into a discussion of AR and PAR without making explicit their ethical and epistemological assumptions.

⁶ In a survey of different academic databases, for example, Sankaran et al. (2007) found only five articles explicitly focused on the teaching of AR.

A second consideration in the design of a pedagogical approach to PAR instruction should focus on the discussion of multiple ways of interacting with communities or groups to decide what research questions ought to be asked and how they can be answered. How do we begin a PAR process with a community or group? As co-researchers, what are some of the strategies we can use to engage people in problem definition and research design? What forms should translation or exchange take when different forms of knowledge are in conversation? What kinds of skills—for example, facilitative or organizational—are necessary to enable joint-learning? These are some of the central questions that need to be addressed in the design of a course about PAR.

Relatedly, the third consideration refers to ways of involving communities and groups in data gathering, which often requires training in various research methods (Public Science Project, 2013). Although PAR is often thought of primarily in terms of qualitative research, there is no reason that it should favor qualitative research strategies over quantitative methods of data analysis. As an approach to applied social science research, PAR can embrace a multitude of methods. The choice of a particular methodological strategy ought to depend on the choice of the research questions made by the co-researchers. In addressing methodological choices, it is often important to discuss with students the possibility that research methods used in a single project can evolve during the course of the project. As Kur, DePorres, and Westrup (2008) have observed in their experience teaching AR, students often struggle with the necessary lack of linearity in action-based research processes. They may need help seeing how different methods can be useful at different stages of a research effort.

The fourth consideration refers to guidelines regarding the best way to prepare case studies, particularly the importance of drawing on storytelling and narrative techniques. Since PAR places a premium on context-based knowledge, case studies can be an especially valuable tool for investigating certain issues in depth and for highlighting place-specific or context-specific factors that might define a problem and potential ways of resolving it (McKernan, 1994; Flyvbjerg, 2001). Taking context seriously

does not mean that case studies have no theoretical or policy relevance beyond the context to which they refer. Rather, taking context seriously allows one to draw insights from multiple contexts through careful comparative analysis. This often requires noting differences but also emphasizing meaningful similarities across distinct contexts. Within the realm of urban planning, Sandercock (2003) has also called attention to the power of stories and story-telling as ways of engaging communities, resolving conflicts, and informing problem-solving.

These techniques may also constitute part of a strategy for collaborative data analysis and joint-presentation of findings—what we think of as the fifth consideration in a PAR pedagogy. How might co-researchers work together to define the key audiences for the research, and interpret and represent research findings? When reporting results, how might findings be displayed in compelling and actionable ways for particular audiences? How should decisions about the use of findings be made?

Finally, a pedagogy of PAR needs to address the question of how to balance the sometimes-competing professional needs and interests of outsiders (usually the academics) and those of the community-based partners. As Cahill, Sultana, and Pain (2007) observe, academic researchers face specific institutional demands that pose challenges (often in the form of university requirements) regarding the design of collaborative research projects. These include requirements imposed by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) that are usually aimed at upholding conventional standards of scientific work in the natural sciences. If a scholar wants approval from an IRB for a particular community-based research design, she or he will need to ensure that the IRB's mandates are met while accommodating the preferences of the community partners. So, how can scholars be accountable to their community partners as well as to their university?

To summarize, we propose that a pedagogy of PAR needs to address concerns about research ethics and knowledge ownership as well as ways of interacting and collaborating with partner-communities in making decisions about question definition, data collection and analysis, and

reporting of findings. University-based PAR instruction needs to introduce students to a range of analytical techniques that are consistent with PAR's commitment to producing context-dependent knowledge, often drawing on very different ways of knowing. And, finally, PAR pedagogy needs to confront the tensions and challenges that arise when outside researchers seek to reconcile their obligations to their university responsibilities with their obligations to their community partners. Applied social scientists, in particular, have great difficulty reconciling what their university colleagues might think is "high quality" research with what the community needs. We have written elsewhere about the tensions faced by doctoral students and faculty, otherwise known as "pracademics", who want to engage primarily in community-based research (Susskind, 2013). In the next section, we describe the structure of two half-semester courses about PAR we have taught at MIT over the past four years.⁷

TEACHING PAR THEORY AND PRACTICE AT MIT

Our teaching of PAR at MIT is organized into two modules. The first, typically taught in the Fall semester, introduces students to theories of AR and PAR and exposes them to competing ideas about social inquiry and the role of applied social science in promoting social change. The focus is on the epistemological foundations of PAR, the role of the academic researcher, and the arguments for and against PAR as a scientific method. The second module, taught in the Spring semester, examines the application of PAR principles in practice, especially through the analysis of cases of knowledge co-creation with community research partners. It focuses on appropriate methods for doing PAR in practice and on the ethical dilemmas at the heart of partnerships between applied social scientists and community members.

⁷ Lawrence Susskind and Dayna Cunningham originally formulated the course in 2013. Isadora Cruxên served as teaching assistant for the course for the academic year of 2015–2016.

Despite the difference in focus, the foundation for both modules is the introduction of a theoretical framework for thinking about PAR in relation to the practice of social science and the exercise of democracy. Through an exploration of the work of Dewey and Freire as well as contributions from Appadurai (2006)⁸ and Santos, Nunes, and Menezes (2007),⁹ we encourage students to interrogate the concepts of science, knowledge, and democracy as well as the relationships among them. This not only immerses students in the intellectual history of PAR, but it helps to situate the practice of PAR within a broader set of epistemological concerns. Most importantly, it serves as the starting point for the examination of the ethical questions we raised earlier. We discuss how social science research can be used to create knowledge, the role of expertise and local knowledge in knowledge production, the relationship between knowledge—or multiple forms of knowledge—and democracy, and the role of power in configuring such relationships. While we offer no clear-cut answers, the debates that emerge allow us to plumb the value of contextual knowledge and lived experience, and the chances of building democratic capacity through collective inquiry.

After laying this foundation, we draw from manuals such as Greenwood and Levin (2006) and Reason and Bradbury (2008) to introduce general principles of AR and PAR, and explore variants such as Critical PAR and Feminist PAR. In both modules, we use cases from practice—both domestic and international—to illustrate how practitioners have carried out participatory action research on the ground. We also invite PAR practitioners to speak directly with students about their experiences.

⁸ Appadurai (2006) argues that research, understood as a form of disciplined inquiry, can empower individuals by improving their capacity to understand—and, by extension, to effectively change—their environment through active citizenship. In this sense, we might think of the democratization of inquiry at the individual level as being necessary for the exercise of democracy at a broader scale.

⁹ In “Opening up the Canon of Knowledge and Recognition of Difference,” Santos, Nunes, and Menezes (2007) argue that the struggle for social justice globally cannot happen independently from a struggle for “global cognitive justice,” that is, a recognition of the epistemological diversity that exists in the world. They suggest there is a need to replace a Western-centric “monoculture of scientific knowledge” with an “ecology of knowledges.” They observe that, “The very action of knowing, as pragmatist philosophers have repeatedly reminded us, is an intervention in the world, which places us within it as active contributors to its making” (Santos, Nunes, & Menezes, 2007, p. xxxi).

For example, Cory Greene, a formerly incarcerated PhD student at the Graduate Center of City University of New York (CUNY) and a member of the Public Science Project,¹⁰ spoke to our students about his engagement in Critical PAR projects that “sit at the intersection of race, class, education and the criminal punishment system” (Mehta, 2015). This includes the Morris Justice Project in the Bronx, New York. Greene discussed his relationship with the groups and communities he works with along with the variety of strategies his blended community and academic research team uses for knowledge co-production. Similarly, we invited Alison Coffey and Jenna Harvey from the Community Innovators Lab (CoLab) at MIT to share their experiences working on a PAR project with young people at PalmasLab, an innovation space located in a neighborhood on the periphery of Fortaleza, Brazil—we discuss this project further below. This conversation focused on the co-definition of a research question, the choice of methodological strategies for data collection, and translation of research findings into meaningful action.

The discussion of cases of PAR in practice is a useful means of drawing students into the discussion of the five considerations we raised at the outset of this chapter. The cases also bring to life the ethical dilemmas that we think are so challenging. The conversations with Greene and the team from CoLab prompted students to reflect on the question of whether outside researchers should adopt a neutral stance toward particular problems or whether PAR’s implied commitment to social change—and often social justice issues—requires a different approach to positionality in social research.¹¹ We also encouraged students to address these issues in their final papers or presentations (due at the end of the course).

Particularly in the second module, we seek to expose students to examples from practice that employ a multiplicity of approaches to data

¹⁰ The Public Science Project engages in what they call “Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR), a theoretical, epistemological, and ethical commitment of accountability to those most closely related to, and affected by, the issue(s) under study” (Mehta, 2015). See more at <http://publicscienceproject.org/>.

¹¹ The issues of neutrality and positionality surfaced in reflection memos written by students, which were posted online to the course forum, and during in-class debates. We discuss the reflection memos further in the chapter.

collection and analysis. This helps to impress upon students that the choice of research methods—whether qualitative or quantitative—ought to be contingent on the chosen research questions. Almost every year, regardless of what we say about the value of mixed methods, there is, for some students, an epistemological dissonance in using quantitative methods in a PAR project. As one student observed when reflecting about the use of a survey in the Morris Justice Project, “Since PAR is inevitably done with groups and not whole communities, it seems that one group applying a large-scale survey to a larger community without channels for engagement and contestation in the process could in some cases reproduce the same information extraction dynamic that PAR seeks to contest.”¹² We try to address such issues during in-class discussion and raise broader questions regarding scientific rigor in PAR as compared to other forms of social research. For instance, are the concepts of validity and generalizability applicable to PAR or should PAR-related research only be assessed in terms of what Greenwood and Levin call “workability”, that is, “its capacity to resolve problems in real life”? (Greenwood & Levin, 2006, p. 75) Who decides which standards to use in evaluating PAR project findings?

We dedicate several sessions to discussing the importance of case study research for social science and for PAR, and ask students to prepare a narrative analysis of a theme of their choice. In our view, narrative analysis is a critical skill for all PAR practitioners. It enables a systematic harvesting of knowledge from storytelling—one of the most basic forms of human communication—and can serve as a means of building empathy between the outside researchers and the community. We focus on representativeness in narrative analysis and review different narrative forms including thematic, structural, dialogic, and performance analysis (Riessman, 2008). Students in our course have prepared narrative analyses of documentaries, book chapters, and even Twitter hashtags. These exercises are especially helpful for addressing issues of representation and meaning-making. As Flyvberg (2001) suggests, social scientists are

¹² Reflection memo written by a student and posted to the course forum on October 20th, 2015.

generally tasked (or embrace the task) of codifying and generalizing meaning that other people have created. However, that creates a fundamental dilemma: should social scientists decide what something means? Narratives and case studies provide space for the discussion of how research findings should be presented and how to engage partner-communities and groups in telling their own stories about problems they seek to resolve.

Throughout our courses, we ask students to write reflection memos that comment on the readings and raise questions for in-class discussion. These are posted online to a collective forum and shared ahead of class. One key objective of these memos is to stimulate students to continuously reflect about what they are learning. Like other teachers of AR and PAR (Beisser & Connor, 2004; Etmanski & Pant, 2007; Kur et al., 2008), we see reflection and reflective practice as a crucial dimension of PAR. In addition to the reflection memos, we draw on Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner* (1984) and Scharmer's *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges* (2009) to discuss how cycles of reflection-action-reflection can be incorporated into PAR practice. PAR practitioners must be able to turn the beam of observation back on themselves to better understand their responsibilities in bringing about social change and confronting any tensions that may arise. Reflection memos, coupled with examples from practice and in-class discussion, have also helped students think about the transformative potential—and the limits—of PAR research in a range of different contexts.

At the conclusions of each module, we ask students to reflect with us on ways in which the course can be improved. Several students have mentioned how the course has provided one of the few opportunities during their graduate education to discuss in depth their roles in knowledge production and their responsibilities toward the communities with which they engage. Many have thanked us for the opportunity to explore their own personal theories of practice as planners. Some suggested that we expand the scope of the course to discuss PAR as an approach to professional planning education and practice more broadly. This has prompted us to think about how a PAR-orientation might be incorporated

more generally into methods courses in the master in city planning program at MIT. In the next section, we draw on the experiences of some of our former students to illustrate how the courses have helped shape their personal theories of practice and professional development.

Helping Students Develop Their Theories of Practice

Teachers of AR and PAR have written about the challenge of structuring courses that allow sufficient time for students to discuss theory, learn different methods, and engage in meaningful practice (McKernan, 1994; McNicoll, 1999). McKernan (1994), for example, noted that, in his experience, a single semester was simply not enough to cover these three areas. It has been surprising to us, however, how completing even one of the half-semester PAR modules we offer at MIT can shape the ways students approach the rest of their graduate education and professional practice.

Our students have noted, for example, that the PAR courses have served as spaces where they could talk through tensions and ethical dilemmas they encountered in their exposure to planning practice in previous work or in other courses but which they had had little opportunity to explore in depth. Importantly, our students have emphasized that such discussions were fundamental for helping them develop their own theories of practice, that is, the sets of principles and values they thought should guide their actions and professional endeavors.

According to Andrew Binet, a former master's (and current PhD) student who took both modules and also served as a teaching assistant for the course, the idea of a theory of practice was "spoken a lot about as an important thing in [other classes in the department] but in terms of actually articulating it for myself and actually having a personal and real system of value orientations, the PAR class is what enabled me to do that, especially

as someone who had zero planning experience.”¹³ Binet noted, in particular, how important it was for him that the course was co-taught by two professors with very different views about PAR, which allowed him to “triangulate”, as he called it, and develop his own thinking about PAR and its connection to planning practice. For Binet, “planning that doesn’t have a PAR-like orientation risks exacerbating systems of oppression. If planning is about intentional social action, the only way it can do this is through PAR-like processes” that help define scopes of inquiry and engage issues of power and inequality.¹⁴

Eventually, this “triangulation” became central to Binet’s own professional work. Since 2015, he has been involved in a multi-methods research process supported by the Healthy Neighborhood Equity Fund (HNEF) and implemented through a collaboration with DUSP faculty-member, Mariana Arcaya, the Conservation Law Foundation, and MIT’s CoLab. The goal is to examine the ways in which urban development impacts community health in different neighborhoods across the Boston metropolitan area. Binet has been responsible for coordinating the PAR component of the project, which involves collaborative research design, data collection, and analysis alongside an “inter-generational, multi-community group of resident researchers” (Community Innovators Lab, 2017). Reflecting on how the course has influenced his work in the project, Binet observed:

By virtue of taking that class I became able to talk about power in a way that I would not otherwise have. Ultimately what was necessary within the [HNEF] PAR process was the ability to actually and meaningfully talk about power both [with residents] and within our own team—like, I’m a white person from a different country coming into your community—and to be able to have a frank conversation about what that means for research ethics. I have no doubt that I didn’t do it perfectly but the only reason I was able to do it in the first place was because of this

¹³ Interview with Andrew Binet, September 26th, 2017, Cambridge, MA, United States.

¹⁴ Interview with Andrew Binet, op. cit.

class. And related to that, the other piece was learning to map out the different types of knowledge and value simultaneously and create an understanding about what types of knowledge were in play.¹⁵

Another way in which the course supported students in developing their personal theories of practice was by providing an avenue by which they could reflect about PAR in relation to different strands of theory or practical experiences they were invested in. For example, Jenna Harvey, a former master's student who took the PAR theory module, observed that the course helped her place her previous experience with participatory research within a broader contextual and theoretical framework for how to approach this kind of work.¹⁶

Prior to taking the PAR module, Harvey had been involved in the aforementioned collaboration between MIT's CoLab and PalmasLab in Fortaleza, Brazil. Along with Alison Coffey (a former master in city planning student who had taken the PAR practice module), Harvey worked with youth leaders at PalmasLab to design and implement a collaborative research project "focused on understanding how residents of Conjunto Palmeiras experience and engage with multiple "wealths" and "poverties" shaping the landscape of local development" (Community Innovators Lab, 2017). According to Harvey, taking the PAR course pushed her to consider more carefully her positionality as an outside researcher, the issue of accountability to her research partners, and what it meant to build democratic capacity at PalmasLab and in Conjunto Palmeiras.¹⁷ Ultimately, such reflections and the conceptual tools she learned through the course formed the foundation for her view, articulated in her master's thesis (Harvey, 2016a), that collective inquiry through PAR can foster the development of what she calls "projective agency" as an important democratic capacity, particularly for marginalized communities. For Harvey:

¹⁵ Interview with Andrew Binet, op. cit.

¹⁶ Interview with Jenna Harvey, September 23th, 2017, Somerville, MA, United States.

¹⁷ Interview with Jenna Harvey, op.cit.

PAR as a process [has] the potential for building up and strengthening capacity – the capacity to see present circumstances as susceptible to change, to think beyond them, and to imagine something new. Through the research process, the PalmasLab team exercised this capacity, and through discussion, survey implementation, collaborative analysis and reflection, they led others in their community in doing the same. (...) [PAR] as a political stance about who has the right to produce credible knowledge, and as an approach that joins together inquiry, reflection and action, has the potential to form the foundation for [a] new model of practice [based on knowledge co-creation]. Understanding PAR as just an alternative approach to social science research and knowledge production is limiting. PAR values and key principles should be at the center of planning practice, not the margins. (Harvey, 2016b)

The experiences of Binet and Harvey, while singular, help illustrate the pedagogical value of PAR for helping students situate themselves within their field and develop their own understanding of what it means to construct a transformative and democratic professional practice. While not all of our students have gone on to do PAR as part of their professional careers, many have related to us that the course was fundamental to helping them define what kinds of practitioners they wanted to become.

CONCLUSION

We have sought to highlight the importance of focusing attention on what a pedagogy of PAR ought to entail and why it is an important part of applied social science education. We have proposed various questions we believe are essential for students to think about: who owns and controls research and any knowledge produced, why context matters, what are the responsibilities of outside researchers towards partner-communities and groups, how to structure interactions with these partners, and how to conduct research in a collaborative way that builds democratic capacity in the long-term. By teaching the theories and practice of PAR to graduate students at MIT, we have found, as have others (Greenwood, 2007; Kur et

al., 2008), that learning about PAR can profoundly change—or reinforce—students’ personal theories of practice, and shape the way they approach their graduate education and professional careers.

We invite our academic colleagues who teach quantitative and qualitative research methods in applied social science departments to consider incorporating PAR-oriented material into their courses. We understand, of course, that there are important institutional challenges to teaching PAR or PAR-like approaches in academic settings, many of which do not value the principles we have discussed here (Greenwood 2007). For example, many social science departments remain attached to a positivistic approach to research, and might think of PAR as lacking the kind of “objectivity” or generalizability they associate with top-notch scientific work. Further, as Greenwood (2007) observes, the “banking model of education” continues to be the prevalent pedagogy in educational institutions. Nonetheless, we hope to provoke a conversation not just about PAR as an approach to research, but also as a way to rethink the roles and responsibilities of applied social scientists who want to engage with communities.

Unless graduate students learn how to interact with partners from the outset of a research effort, they might not learn to communicate *with* as opposed to unidirectionally convey messages *to* the groups, organizations, and communities with which they are working. Unless graduate students learn to take context into account and to build relationships and trust with those who are affected by problems or have the capacity to act on the knowledge that is shared, their contribution to social change will be extremely limited. Finally, unless students learn to think about their responsibilities toward their community partners and the possibility of building community capacity as a by-product of research, the solutions or interventions they generate are likely to have little long-term impact. These points were compellingly articulated by our former student, Jenna Harvey, in an essay about how PAR might inform a theory of planning practice. We conclude with her words:

In my experience as a student of planning, too often skills such as reflective practice and facilitation are marginalized and discounted in favor of “hard skills” that are marketable and more easily quantifiable. This kind of pedagogy often produces practitioners that think they know the solutions before actually understanding the issues, perpetuating a cycle that is often oppressive and unproductive in affecting lasting change. To break out of this cycle we must first develop the critical ability to recognize the way it confines us in the first place. Only then can we embark on a planning approach that centers on the knowledge of those closest to the problems. (Harvey, 2016b)

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