



Viewpoint Joking Around in Zimbabwe, Undoing and Redoing Participation

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I insist that social relationships include non-humans as well as humans as socially ... active partners. All that is unhuman is not un-kind, outside kinship ... (Haraway¹ in Goodeve, 2002, page numbering absent)

... we need something new ... Something is missing. There has to be a better way of going about things. (Chambers, 2004:16)

Introduction to Our Participatory Problem

In Zimbabwe, I teach a participatory course on environmental education to trainers. The course is an adaptation of a course designed by Rhodes University, South Africa. It gives participants a background in educational theories and has a strong theoretical component built around a focus on practice.

During the time that the course was being delivered to non-industry participants, the theoretical component of the course was whole-heartedly embraced. We assumed that calling the course 'participatory' presupposed the need for this theory because within the theory were the tools for emancipation. And participation, we believed, had an emancipatory mandate.

However, when we decided to redevelop the course for industry, we were uncomfortably surprised by the request from a majority of industry participants to reduce the theory and concentrate solely on skills-based training. This paper documents how this discomfort resulted in my adjusting my view of participation.

Putting truth to the vote: our participation as it was when we began

The participatory aspect of the course was reflected in a commitment to being responsive to the needs of the participants. To do this, we ensured that participants were involved in deciding course content and structure, within certain limits, those limits being set by the topic of the course and practical details such as time available for workshops.

During the sessions designed to facilitate participation, many suggestions for improvement of the course were made and responded to. The simple rule of handing over the stick worked well. I cannot say that I agreed with all the participant requests, but none insisted that I act in ways that went against my integrity. However, this comfortable situation was overthrown when

a majority of industry participants requested a reduction of the theory in the course, to be replaced with a focus on skills-based training.

The question mark over our participatory process: why we felt we couldn't support a skills-based training programme

There are problems with seeing the discourse and practice of educators as 'skills' (Fairclough, n.d.). First, it assumes that a skill can be freely transferred from one context to the other. Second, it assumes that what we have been taught as a model (in this case, a model of how to teach) translates directly into what is actually said or done in practice. On the contrary, our action is a complex matching of models with immediate needs. What trainers actually do may be significantly different from any model, ambivalent between models, or a baffling mixture of models. Third, it assumes that what we do is a mere matter of technique. It does not acknowledge that techniques are weighted with power-relations. For example, the apparently innocuous skill of careful preparatory planning can effectively prevent participation by refusing participants the opportunity to say how they would like to spend time, and by making spontaneous discussion difficult. By maintaining that planning is mere technique, the powerful can insist on this practice and so avoid challenges to the *status quo*. The theory in our industrial participatory course draws attention to the power-implications of our methods. They are viewed not as simple skills but as choices that affect power relations.

Therefore, more skills and less theory seem contrary to participatory ethics. Yet, participatory trends in curriculum development would tend to insist that we heed the calls for skills-based training; it is what most industrial participants say they want.

Participation Undone

Currently, participation has a split personality. As one persona, it underplays the participation of the real. In its other persona, it indulges in questionable dichotomies, that is, overly strong assumptions of opposites such as wealthy and poor. An effect of this split personality is an inability to support appropriate action. Let me explain further.

Underplaying the participation of the real

When Chambers (2004:7) asks 'Whose reality counts?' he is assuming that there is no shared reality, only purely subjective realities. To avoid the resulting problem of being unable to decide between realities for the purposes of decision-making and action, Chambers implies that poor people's realities are more right than other realities. Participation practitioners are encouraged to 'hand over the stick' (Chambers, 2004:9).

In practice, 'handing over the stick' implies confusion between truth seeking and democracy. What is true, it is assumed, is that which the majority of the poor people consider true. This faces the problem that the majority of poor people may not have the best version of truth. Apart from well-debated questions such as the heterogeneity of those groups, and the possibility of silences within them, such as women's silence, there is the philosophical question that a version of truth held by a majority might be less adequate than other competing versions. This is a

separate question from democracy, which is people's right to vote to decide what happens to their communities. The place for truth is in the debates before the voting; it does not itself involve voting. Confusing truth with democracy reduces the efficacy of both.

Participation's irrealism (assumption that there is no reality beyond our language constructions of it) occurred because there was a necessary flight from positivism, the belief that the only valid knowledge is measurable replicable scientific knowledge of an objective real world. Positivism denied the importance of interpretative knowledge, knowledge of the non-empirical and the power of language to influence the real. Instead, participation, in line with much sociological thinking, assumed that: 'Words are a starting point. ... To be human is to exist in language. In language we coordinate our behaviour, and together in language we bring forth our world' (Chambers, 2004:2). 'To bring forth ...', implies a god-like role for humans. What we think, leading to what we say and what we do, makes the world. We 'construct our realities' (Chambers, 2004:13). When it is in this irrealist persona, participation has too little 'participation'. It forgets to facilitate the contribution of non-humans in consensus-building debates about reality and it forgets the role those non-human entities play in co-constituting reality.

Tendency towards strong dichotomies

As its other persona, participation overplays the role of 'things', going so far as to 'thingify' human beings. It assumes hard dichotomies. For example, participatory writing refers to 'them' and 'us', 'powerful' and 'weak', 'wealthy' and 'poor', 'oppressed' and 'non-oppressed', 'donors' and 'recipients' and 'farmers' and 'researchers'. The use of hard dichotomies goes against the grain of many practitioner's primary epistemological beliefs, i.e., their beliefs about how we gain knowledge, based on beliefs about what 'is'. Hard dichotomies contradict the irrealist idea, described above, that there is no reality except our language; it implies the existence of an absolute reality of objective separate things 'out-there'.

Hard dichotomies break down when scrutinised. For example, the dichotomy of 'wealthy' and 'poor' breaks down when we realise that there is no simple objective way to decide wealthy and poor. More than this, the category 'wealthy' needs the category 'poor' to make any sense. and the way that we define 'wealthy' and 'poor' in some ways actually constructs those things, as we can see if we consider how one scientist's decision to define 'wealthy' as receiving US \$10 000 per annum will get significantly different figures for wealth compared to a scientist who defines 'wealthy' as receiving US\$100 000 per annum. These absolute categories belie the intimately networked nature of 'things'; what is forgotten is that the different things are distinct but not separate and there is a role to play for interpretation in their formulation.

Nevertheless, despite practitioner's academic acknowledgment of the inadequacy of hard dichotomies, they often feel compelled to use them. This is because acts such as writing/speaking/decision-making and, via decision-making, acting in the sense of acting to improve our circumstances, require that we dichotomise, or name. We need to acknowledge different things in order to speak/write/decide (and thus act) at all. Therefore, such practitioners must live with contradiction, on the one hand wanting to avoid strong dichotomies but on the other hand supposedly compelled to use them to allow action.

A possible outcome of participation's propensity for dichotomising is violence. In Zimbabwe, 'thingification' of the white commercial farmers as the perpetrators of inequality, without seeing how these farmers were co-constituted with black Zimbabweans,² was followed by their removal from their homes. Not only did this destroy their livelihoods, and some lost their lives, but black Zimbabweans are, as a result, facing food shortages and starvation. Hurting the 'other' often results in hurting the 'us', since we are distinct, but not separate. In Chambers's (2004) work, the dichotomising tendency has resulted in a noble but simplistic request that the wealthy give some of their wealth to the poor. Ironically, Mugabe (2000) made the same noble but simplistic request of the wealthy white farmers. He felt it was regrettable, but understandable, when the war veterans gave up waiting and resorted to violence.

In the industry course case, we were asking participants to make choices about the content of a course that was supposed to transform industry practice from environmentally unfriendly to friendly. We had had years of opportunity to study theories of learning and theories of agency. Their exposure to these very real but much-debated 'things' (I'll call these 'things' cyborgs later) was minimal. The industrialists' majority 'reality' was that they needed skills training. Our 'reality' was that skills training without critical theory entrenched inequalities. By our participatory standards, their 'reality' should have dominated.

Thus, we see the split personality of participation. On the side of too little consideration of reality, the truth of transformative teaching methodologies would largely have been ignored. This would have resulted in a poorly informed view of reality being given precedence and a lost opportunity for transformation. On the side of too much dichotomising, in this case dichotomising participants (empowered with the stick) and experts (disempowered with no stick), a kind of violence would have been enacted on the experts for whom a commitment to social justice and transformation of the *status quo* was important.

Participation Redone

First, I suggest that we change our choice of words to explain participation:

- Rather than talking about how language 'creates' the world, we should perhaps consider how it 'transforms' or 'reproduces' the world. The latter two words imply a world that pre-exists us and avoid the sense that, god-like, we create our world with our words.
- I would also suggest we stop talking about people's 'realities'. This implies multiple universes existing parallel to each other, but not touching each other. I prefer the alternative of distinguishing between transitive and intransitive realities. The intransitive reality is the essential one that we all share; the transitive reality is the one that includes interpretation and depends on its relationship with us.
- We should perhaps stop using language that implies there is an absolute knowledge. Not even poor people have absolute knowledge. We are, therefore, required to listen to all knowledge claims (note the sense in which this is part of a democratic process, but not the voting part) and to assess them on their merits. We can choose between better and worse knowledge.

Secondly, I want to suggest a technique designed by Merchant (2003). She describes a partnership ethic, in which all the stakeholders, including the non-humans, are allowed to speak, 'Both nature and humans will have voices, and both voices will be heard' (Merchant, 2003:229). In a similar vein, Haraway (1991) suggests that our world is populated by cyborgs. Humans are cyborgs, co-constituted with non-humans, and non-humans are cyborgs, co-constituted with humans. The idea that we are all cyborgs, that is, mutually constituting, allows us to be conceptually distinct, yet not separate from each other, and implies an equality that requires we give the non-humans a voice. At a practical level, a partnership ethic involves allocating people to 'speak' for the non-humans, for example, trees, soil and even social structures such as institutions or mechanisms such as 'how we learn', with all the caveats of concern for trustworthiness that accompany moments when people speak for others.

Thirdly, I want to suggest that communities, after careful consideration of knowledge claims, should then put the question of how to proceed to the vote. In terms of 'participatory' processes, this implies an acknowledgment of the usefulness of expert knowledge of cyborg entities. Participants can then examine knowledge claims in an attempt to make informed decisions. In other words, rather than putting truth to the vote, we put decisions to the vote.

Fourthly, I want to suggest that we stop obsessing about action. This obsession is an artefact of participation's split personality. The action that we thought was missing will become obvious to us, it has been there all the time, once we move beyond the uneasy oscillation between irrealism and strong dichotomies. Since we are constantly reproducing society through our daily activities, we can transform our reality by not doing, that is, by not reproducing it. Sometimes the best form of action is inaction, as Ghandi showed us with his concept of non-violent non-cooperation.

Conclusion

In the case of our industrial course, we did not include the cyborg 'what we need as learners to be empowered' as a participant in our stakeholder discussions. We confused our search for truth with democracy. We also oscillated between, on the one hand, a denial that there was a difference between the tutors and the participants (we called the tutors 'stutors') and, on the other hand, a hard dichotomy between the tutors and the participants which resulted in potential violence against the one half of the dichotomy. Rather, we should have engaged in discussions amongst all the stakeholders, including the non-humans, in order to arrive at an informed place that could serve as a platform for democratic decision-making.

Notes on the Contributor

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Endnotes

- 1 One has to see the jokes in Haraway's work; the power of irony to make serious points that otherwise go unsaid (Goodeve, 2002). This paper is what Haraway would call a serious joke.
- 2 In this approach to reality, there is no such thing as racial purity.

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