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INTRODUCTION

Editorial: Knowledge democracy for a transforming world

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Abstract

The past five decades have seen enormous, worldwide growth in, and appreciation of, knowledge democracy – the discourse which we have found best contains the various theoretical approaches, values and practices within which participatory research exists. This Introduction outlines our understanding of knowledge democracy, which can be expressed by a number of principles: (1) Recognition of a multiplicity of epistemologies and ways of knowing; (2) Openness to assembling, representing and sharing knowledge in multiple forms (including traditional academic formats and all manner of social and arts-based approaches); (3) Recognition that knowledge emerging from the daily lives of excluded persons is an essential tool for social movements and other transformational strategies; and the (4) Requirement to carefully balance the need to protect the ownership of communities' knowledge with the need to share knowledge in a free and open access manner. We are pleased to present five articles from around the world that broaden and deepen our understanding of knowledge democracy – from a theoretical perspective, a practice perspective, an ontological perspective, and an action or political perspective.

Keywords:

knowledge democracy, community-based research, participatory research, engaged scholarship, open access journal

Introduction

We welcome readers to this special issue of *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*. This issue contains five articles that were written in response to a call to contribute to a themed issue on knowledge democracy. On behalf of the journal's Editorial Committee, Margaret Malone, the Managing Editor, invited the two of us, Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon, to be guest editors for this issue of *Gateways*. Interestingly, several other manuscripts came in for consideration without referring to the theme. As it turned out, these three additional articles are complementary to the first five and, in fact, offer us opportunities to expand the conversation. We will comment briefly on all articles.

So how did it all begin?

In 1974, Budd Hall was invited to give a talk to the communications department at Stanford University on his research on radio study group campaigns in Tanzania in the early 1970s. His afternoon talk went well, prompting respectful listening and interesting questions from the audience. Later in the evening, the host brought together a group of academics to his home for more informal conversation. He asked Budd if he had any other work that he would be willing to share with the group for a few minutes. Budd thought about it and decided to share some of his early ideas on participatory research, ideas that had emerged within the research community of the University of Dar es Salaam during those days, influenced by the thinking of the then President of Tanzania, Julius K Nyerere, and others, such as Paulo Freire, who had visited that country. He told a short story about emerging thinking on non-colonial, community-based participatory research methods which privileged the experiential knowledge of those women and men living challenging lives of poverty and exclusion. Included in his talk were a number of critiques of the dominant approaches to research of the day, which were based on top-down expert knowledge paradigms. When his talk ended, Budd recalled that, 'The room exploded with noise, hands in the air, and shouts'. The assembled group of progressive academics, many of them considered to be among the brightest in the world because of their Stanford University positions, were furious. Budd's critique of the dominant academic mode of production had touched a nerve, and the room, to a person, pushed back. They couldn't get him out of town fast enough.

Budd, as we know, was not stopped by this experience, nor by many other similar experiences in those years, and together we (Budd and Rajesh) created the International Participatory Research Network in 1978. Rajesh had had a similar rejection of his participatory research experience working with tribal peoples in Southern Rajasthan during the early 1970s. When he first attempted to write up his work for his PhD in Organizational Development at Case Western Reserve University in the USA, Rajesh was told that it was not acceptable scholarship and to start again. He did not stop, but rather found a young academic willing to take him on and support him to develop a PhD using participatory research approaches.

We share these stories because they underscore how far we have come. The creation of *Gateways* as an open access journal devoted to building awareness of the growing world of participatory research, community-based research, participatory action research, engaged scholarship and the many other family members of this important movement marked an important step in the maturation of community-based participatory research. Supported by internationally respected universities and open to contributions from community and social

movement-based intellectuals, *Gateways* occupies a special place in our global architecture of engaged scholarship. Such a journal would not have been possible 45–50 years ago.

So we were delighted to be invited by the editors of *Gateways* to be Guest Editors for this issue, which includes five articles responding to the idea of knowledge democracy. Knowledge democracy is the discourse that we have found best encompasses the various approaches, values and practices of participatory research. Knowledge democracy, as we have most often expressed it, embraces a number of principles: (1) recognition of a multiplicity of epistemologies and ways of knowing; (2) an openness to assembling, representing and sharing knowledge in multiple forms, including traditional academic formats but also a range of social and arts-based approaches; (3) recognition that knowledge emerging from the daily lives of excluded persons is an essential tool for social movements and other transformational strategies; and (4) sharing research findings in a free and open manner, while protecting the ownership of knowledge held by communities. Readers can learn much more about our thinking on these matters from a range of resources on our UNESCO Chair website (see www.unescochair-cbrsr.org).

The articles in this issue bring to attention what knowledge inequity means from a practical point of view. They come from very different parts of the world: urban French-speaking Quebec, the Atlantic coast of English-speaking Newfoundland, Canada, the Andean mountain regions of Colombia, the drylands of Northern Kenya and the Acholi territory of Northern Uganda. From them, our understanding of knowledge democracy is broadened and deepened from a theoretical perspective, a practice perspective, an ontological perspective, and from an action or political perspective. We are pleased to note that three of the five case studies have been contributed by persons associated with the Knowledge for Change Consortium on Training in Community-Based Participatory Research, the training network with which both of us are associated.

This issue opens with an article by Baptiste Godrie and his colleagues in Quebec on ‘Epistemic injustices and participatory research: A research agenda at the crossroads of university and community’. The article, based on work done by a Quebec research group, has a focus on poverty. The project brought together academics who had an interest in poverty from several disciplinary perspectives, and community and social movement activists associated with poverty action groups. They add an important set of theoretical contributions to the discourse on epistemic justice and remind us of the important work of Fricker (2007), who writes about epistemic injustice occurring through hermeneutical injustice. We are grateful to Godrie and his colleagues for sharing both their framework and the practical tool they have developed for evaluating participatory research. Notably, they also remind us that participatory research supports accumulation of knowledge ‘with a very high level of contextual validity’. It builds theory as well as responds to transformation.

Nkatha Mercy was born and raised in the drylands of Northern Kenya. Now Coordinator of the Knowledge for Change Community-Based Research Training hub based at the MS Training Centre for Development Cooperation in Arusha, Tanzania, she notes that for the past 20–25 years Western development ‘experts’ have been coming to her homeland to ‘empower’ local women and men to better care for the land, the animals and the people. She asks us why external Euro-centric knowledge is superior to the African Indigenous knowledge of the Borana, the Turkana or the Rendile. Following a detailed presentation on the complexities and realities of her region from an ecological perspective, she takes us into the epistemological sophistication of the pastoralists who have been living in this region for millennia. She speaks of the interweaving of language, of spirituality, of place, of humans

as simply a part of energies of life. She speaks of the women's knowledge arising from their specific engagement in rural life. Her article closes with reference to a hopeful development, University Mtaani, a form of outreach to those previously excluded from higher education by Tangaza University College. Offered in community locations, learning and community dialogues are combined in a pedagogy of praxis.

Colombia, so recently emerging from a 50-year civil war, is the location for *Gateways'* third offering by Daniel and Angela Lopera-Molano from the University of Ibagué. Their work is located in the village of *Gaitania* in the Andean foothills, near where the FARC guerilla movement began. The authors are part of an academic program in critical design at the University. They entered into an agreement to work with the Nasa Wes'x Indigenous community, 150 ex-combatants, and an association of coffee producers on a community enterprise project. The project worked so well, that the collaboration created a new brand of coffee, called the Third Agreement, based on the territory's autonomous peace processes. Third Agreement coffee is now marketed in towns in Colombia, including Bogota. (By happy coincidence, both Budd and Rajesh have had the chance to taste this excellent coffee.) An important contribution to knowledge democracy is their creation of several words in Spanish that articulate principles of knowledge democracy in quite a powerful way. The word *plandisposición* combines planning and disposition. *Escuchacción* combines the Spanish words for active listening and action. *Sentipensar-actuar* combines acting, thinking and feeling. The importance of creativity in language invention in languages other than the all too hegemonic English is seen in the article from Gulu University in Uganda as well.

A team from Gulu University, a community-based university in Northern Uganda, includes lecturer David Monk, Vice-Chancellor George Openjuru, senior lecturer Martin Odoch, community leader Denis Nono and Simon Ongom. One of their contributions to deepening and broadening concepts of knowledge democracy is found in their title, *Acholi Ngec ma gwoko lobo*. In English this means Acholi knowledge for protecting the world. It is an element of African epistemology that underpins all their work. Like Nkatha Mercy's work on pastoralist epistemology, they raise up their work as an Acholi contribution to the body of knowledge available for all of us wanting to make this a better world. They share three stories with us. The first is about work done by a local NGO to help youth move forward. The young people create ideas for their futures through dance, stories, theatre and the arts. Their second story is the experience of an environmental activist working with communities concerned about the cutting of trees for charcoal production. Eighty per cent of the villagers were opposed to the tree cutting, which resulted in profits for the charcoal makers, and this had been going on for a long time. While the story is not over, their work has succeeded in getting the local council to ban tree cutting. The final story reports on how Gulu University created a new degree program in water engineering. Rather than take a blueprint from some Western university model of what a water engineering program should look like, they brought various ministries, NGOs and community members together to imagine what the curriculum should be. The university was amazed at the quality of the contributions, and reports much interest by the community in registering for the course.

The final article in this themed collection is by Gardner and Scarth, who bring the world of young people from low-income communities to our attention. Working out of St John's Newfoundland and the Memorial University of Newfoundland, they have taken on the myth that low-income communities are the reason for poor performance of students in schools. To do so, they developed a research and engagement approach to working with community members and teachers based on principles of knowledge democracy. Through their work, they

developed seven ‘knowledge practices’, which include storytelling, use of ecological metaphor, strength-based approaches, and the arts. Their work emphasises celebration, and community assets rather than deficiencies. It also offers three ‘ways of knowing’: lived knowing, interconnected knowing and participatory knowing. They use a graphic, ‘Tree of Community Knowledge’, to document, categorise and share what they have learned. Their work underscores the power of the arts to challenge outdated stereotypes and to raise the confidence of young people and low-income community members to confront obstacles to advancement.

Extending the Conversation

We have taken a look at the three additional articles and would like to draw readers’ attention to how they might also be understood from the perspective of knowledge democracy, beginning with the article by Lisa Bishop and her colleagues from Memorial University in Newfoundland, Canada, the same part of the world that the earlier Gardner and Scarth article came from. They are based in a university health centre and wanted to find ways to better support mental health issues in youth. Rather than find a model from some other part of the world and apply it, they initiated a community-engaged research approach which resulted in the creation of a Community Alliance on youth mental health and a youth mental health action plan – all done by taking into account the lives and words of youth themselves.

Janzen and Ochocka are Co-Directors of the Community Based Research Centre in Ontario, Canada. They are among the most respected people working in the field of community-based participatory research and evaluation. Their article shares their reflections on the use of a Community Based Research Excellence Tool (CBRET), which they developed for assessing excellence in three Syrian refugee research projects in Ontario. They provide evidence that CBR, itself, contributes to social change. They identify six aspects of CBR that are key when looking at excellence in this type of work: community-driven, participation, rigour, knowledge mobilisation, community mobilisation and societal impact.

Sarah Walker and her five colleagues are community conservation specialists working out of Colorado State University in the USA. Their article is on the ethics of cross-cultural community conservation research in Samburu, Northern Kenya. They were involved for several years with Unity Women’s Village, a unique women’s and children’s only village in Samburu. They begin with the words of women from the village speaking about outside researchers, ‘They don’t tell us who they will share their stories with’. These are words that could come from nearly every community around the world that has experienced external researchers. They raise important questions about the ethics of doing research when one is not from the community.

Gateways welcomes all comments on our themed issue on knowledge democracy. We hope that many of you reading these articles might decide to submit journal articles of your own on knowledge democracy in the future. Of course, both Budd Hall and Rajesh Tandon are most eager to hear from you as well.

References

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