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Commentary:
Working Across Distant Spaces:
Connecting Participatory Action Research and Teaching

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(commentary for Sara Kindon and Sarah Elwood (guest editors) special issue of
Journal of Geography in Higher Education on “Widening Participation? Participatory
Action Research and Geography Teaching”)

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Abstract

This commentary reflects on the key themes and goals of this symposium issue. It contextualises the relationship between participatory action research (PAR) and teaching in the increasingly popular field of critical action-oriented geography. It considers a number of benefits to student learning from engagement with PAR, drawing on the papers in the collection, and raises some critical questions for future development.

For many geographers, teaching and research take place in separate spaces. The teaching/research nexus may be a “complex and contested relationship” (Healey, 2005, 195), but the links are often weak (Jenkins, 2000), the relationship predominantly one-way (Healey, 2005) and, in many countries, the dichotomy between them is growing (LeHeron et al, 2006). Some of the best teaching is informed by others’ research and our own; sometimes we talk about a two-way flow where students’ engagement with our research material (or the simple act of having to distil it) enriches our thinking when we are back in research mode. But this isn’t anything like an equal exchange. As Cook et al. (2007) have recently demonstrated, direct student engagement in research issues, and the challenge of drawing on and situating their own experiences and values, not only democratizes but enriches teaching and learning for all concerned.

The common distance between researchers/researched can be viewed as in direct parallel to this separation of teaching/research, and of teachers/learners. The pursuit of research knowledge is informed predominantly by our engagements as academics with academia. For most, it is this narrow sphere in which the aims of our research are generated, in which findings are analysed and interpreted, from which certain theories are drawn in explanation, and where we publish. Informants and respondents 'out there' in the wider world are drawn on as sources of data, but in reality they are rarely involved in any other stage of research processes.

Generally, then, there is considerable distance between these various spaces of academic activity, a hierarchical scaling accorded them, and a fixedness to the power relations inside and between them. The issue of this symposium, linking Participatory Action Research with University teaching, presents a radical challenge to this distance; it destabilises longstanding patterns of academic activity through connecting these spaces. It is one expression of the recent resurgence of activism and participatory modes of research engagement in human geography. As Sara Kindon and Sarah Elwood make clear in their inspiring and nuanced overview, the work of a few earlier pioneers such as Bunge (1977) has some resonance with the larger projects described here. But on the research front, geographers are today engaging to a far greater degree in Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches: co-researching with, rather than on, communities, and establishing reciprocal partnerships (see Cahill, 2007; Kindon, 2005; Kindon et al., 2007). The present resurgence challenges the discrete spaces of academic activity by drawing activism closer into

conventionally 'academic' activities in geography, and geographers into activist ventures outside (see Routledge 1996).

Up until this symposium, teaching and supervision have figured far less in these discussions. Partly in response to calls in the discipline for critical action-oriented research that directly challenges social injustice through its practices, Noel Castree (1999) and others have argued for the political potential of teaching as one of the most effective ways that we as University teachers and researchers can effect social and political change. The exciting promise of this symposium is that the editors and authors ably dismantle any binary between research and teaching: their emphasis is on effecting change through teaching and research by closing the conventional gap between them.

The symposium comes at a critical time, then, with its assertion that participatory principles, values and practices in one sphere of academic life can and should transfer over to the others. The editors and authors are developing highly innovative practices that connect teaching, research and activism directly in their own programmes. While integrating PAR with teaching has many potential benefits for all of the parties involved - Universities, academic and community researchers, outside organisations and those affected by the social, economic or environmental policies that these projects may engage with - my main focus in what follows is evaluating the benefits to students' learning. The papers provide quite different examples of high quality teaching and learning through engagement in PAR in particular contexts. Together they make up a rich, energising and instructive collection, but this is a relatively new field for geographers, and I also point to some questions for future reflection.

Enriching Students' Learning: Theory, Positionality, Ethics...and Mess

The first benefit evident from all of the papers is that engaging in PAR practice helps to engage students in a deeper understanding of theory. In participatory research, theory, practice and change are approached as equivalent and fully integrated partners (Pain and Kindon 2007). For example, Meghan Cope's project with children who attend an after-school facility fulfilled the requirements of an undergraduate course, enhancing the teaching of children's geographies through students co-creating knowledge with children and through the encouragement of theoretically informed reflection among students. Meghan also talks about benefits to her own learning that come from interacting with and reflecting on students' experiences, offering some important critical insights into participatory research with children. Sarah Elwood's project focuses on students' theoretical as well as practical learning of GIS, demonstrating that these knowledges would not have been developed or integrated to the same extent or as effectively without the hands-on and personal engagements outside the University. As Sarah puts it, "in these partnerships, students' conceptual and methodological learning is not situated in the classroom and then demonstrated in the field collaboration, but rather, is situated in both places simultaneously".

Secondly, engaging in PAR always involves (or should involve) confrontation and reappraisal of our own positionalities, values and sets of ethics. Indeed this can be one of the most challenging aspects of engaging with PAR, professionally and personally. For students, who tend to come from more privileged social backgrounds than average, this can be thrown into sharp relief (see Mountz et al., forthcoming). For educators, the reflection that PAR demands from participants on their values and

worldviews is a major benefit, alongside the soft skills that Sara Kindon and Sarah Elwood identify. An especially valuable insight from Meghan Cope's paper is her discussion of attitudes that are harmful to PAR with children. The project proved challenging to some students when faced with the realities of poverty. One of the unsettling aspects of doing PAR is recognising prejudices and stereotypes in ourselves, and when learning takes place only in lecture theatres or libraries we are unlikely to confront this in quite the same way. Meghan offers helpful reflection on working through and with staff and students' positionalities and values when they are at odds with the worlds we enter outside academia.

On the face of it, the subject which Sarah Elwood teaches is one of the most difficult through which to engage students in participatory research: as she outlines, GIS have been critiqued for producing remote and authoritarian forms of knowledge. The technology may attract students with particular ways of knowing and ideas about who knowledge should benefit, which do not sit easily with the democratic principles and practices of PAR. All of the authors remind us that students as well as researchers take on the challenge of PAR in particular ways - their varying backgrounds, personalities, values and politics mean they relate to projects and non-academic co-researchers differently. These differences can be constructive if we work across them (Pratt, 2007). Students are a diverse group, bringing experience and expertise which challenge and enrich the thinking and practices of researchers and other participants.

Thirdly, participatory ethics can often collide with institutional norms about what ethical research is (see Cahill et al., 2007). Participatory modes of teaching in the classroom, as well as participatory research in the field, can acknowledge and build

upon students' previous knowledges and their existing ethical values. Participatory teaching here involves the premise that students have critical capacities which are engaged and enrich their understanding (Askins 2007; see also Hopkins, 2006). In the context of PAR, research ethics are viewed not as something imposed from above, but as requiring careful negotiation between researchers and subjects, respecting and taking account of differing moral and political positions (see Askins 2007; Manzo and Brightbill 2007; Sanderson and Kindon, 2004;).

Fourthly, all of the papers acknowledge the messiness and complexity of research realities, and that it is not just academically acceptable but vital for students to expect mess and learn to navigate through it. For example, for Sarah Elwood, the most valuable understanding her students gain is not just how GIS work, but how they work within specific social, cultural and political settings. In moving between curriculum, classroom and field, her students navigate some of the messiness of real research collaborations and see that things work out unpredictably in the field. Attention to the spatialities of participation is an important learning tool here, as participation, its processes and outcomes are partly determined by circumstances and settings (Kesby et al., 2005, Kesby, 2007). Related to the messiness of our own positions, Pamela Moss's assertion is an important one: that there is no need to balance competing requirements, but rather seek a continual 'movement between intellectual positionings and activist settings'. Being open about mess is seen by many PAR researchers as an essential part of individual and collective reflexive development, and far more instructive about the deeper issues of justice, power and politics in research than 'clean' depictions of practice (Kapoor, 2002).

Critical questions

I also want to highlight a number of questions that are raised by this symposium issue.

The first is how to negotiate and address the barriers to working across the traditionally separate spaces of research and teaching using PAR. Increasingly, the activism that some geographers are enacting in their research and teaching needs to be targeted at the institutional structures, policies, practices and cultures that constrain this sort of working. Barriers include the conflicting priorities and responses of different worlds as they come face to face; the constraints imposed by institutional norms and demands; and enduring attitudes among colleagues about where academic staff and students should be focusing their energies. This last point may have an especially constraining effect on new and junior academic staff, on whom pressures to perform in certain ways may be greatest (see Salem and Foote, 2006). While PAR raises new sets of tensions and constraints, there are also opportunities and contradictions of which we might take advantage. In the UK, for example, while the effect of research auditing is to place teaching as a poor relation (Jenkins, 1995), the regional agenda expects universities to be embedded in, and to contribute to, their immediate localities. Too often the emphasis is on the University as the knowledgeable partner, and the region as receiving knowledge, rather than any radical rethink of knowledge hierarchies through local communities adding value. But as Sara Kindon and Sarah Elwood point out, there are significant differences between types of institution and between national higher education regimes, with the University/community partnerships that facilitate linking up teaching with PAR taking different forms. Many will share Pamela Moss's feeling that it is hard to do activist research 'because of the rising expectations of academic excellence'. Yet as her own work shows excellence and participatory activism are not opposing poles

(further examples are given in Pain, 2007). Moreover, engaging with and attempting to rework what 'excellence' means in academic contexts constitutes another site of resistance. The language of 'excellence' and 'world-leading' – increasingly applied by Anglo-American geography departments - is pompous, and tends to contain narrow views of both excellence and the world.

Secondly, what other ways are there of relating the distant spaces of teaching and research, and what can we learn from them? It would be paradoxical to suggest that PAR is the only means of linking teaching and research in material ways, opening up the academy and students' experiences to the lives and concerns of those outside, or pursuing action- or activism-oriented research and teaching - there is no suggestion of that didactic position within this symposium. Though they are relatively few and far between in the literature on teaching, there are other modes of engagement which can speak to and potentially enrich our practice of PAR: for example, Ian Cook's thought-provoking paper written with his undergraduate students suggests situating academic debates and issues in students' own lives, and so placing the classroom as sites of learning for students and researchers (Cook et al., 2007). In her highly reflexive paper here, Pamela Moss talks of the dilemmas she faces in negotiating the supervisory relationship with her postgraduate students. While many come armed with feminist politics, experienced in activism, and keen and highly motivated, her students face constraints on their involvement in community research. The students described in the paper eventually chose to use discourse analysis for their dissertations rather than direct participatory methods. Pamela has come to see this as a form of activism which is as useful to many of her students who hold roles outside the academy alongside pursuing postgraduate study, including in their workplaces or as community activists.

This is a point which resonates, as PAR opposes any privileging of some forms of knowing over others. Rather theory, practice, and change are seen as intimately bound, and many theoretical and methodological strategies have radical potential. What needs to be confronted is the very narrow range of experiences of theories, methods and practices to which many students are exposed.

Thirdly, in the spirit of keeping a critical eye on participatory processes, we should ask what participation really means in different student/community encounters? To what degree are projects participatory, and at what stages? How (and how far) is authority truly shared, who is producing knowledge, and who does the process benefit (see Mountz et al. forthcoming)? There is no sense of glossing over these issues, and no lack of criticality, in any of the papers here. But there are further questions, and more will arise as practice continues to expand. For example, we could ask where do research questions and agendas come from, and how far are they negotiated? How do we support students when projects diverge from expected paths, follow up new lines of enquiry, or participants choose to adopt methods that they and students have no training in supporting? How are students prepared for the responsibility of dealing with community participants' expectations, differences and tensions over the course of the project? And what happens when they themselves come into conflict with participants, harming relationships that academic and community partners may have nurtured for years? All this is not to suggest that PAR involving students is much more fraught with danger than PAR involving academic staff: the literature is littered with examples of 'faux PAR' (Pratt, 2007). What is needed is a proliferation of resources and examples of practice that can support and guide students, staff and community researchers past potential pitfalls.

Finally, one of our key concerns as academics on a day to day basis is simple: how can we fit it all in? Meeting the increasing and sometimes competing demands of working in higher education – teaching, research, administration, outreach - alongside maintaining any sort of work/life balance, is challenging. As Sara Kindon and Sarah Elwood point out, linking PAR and teaching in the ways outlined does not make for an easier, more streamlined professional life, and is a choice made for ethical, moral and educational rather than simply strategic reasons. The projects are demanding of staff time and capacities: the authors here have exceptional skills to organise and navigate between different groups and settings involved in their research and pedagogy. Elsewhere, Mountz et al. (forthcoming) point to the gendering and racialisation of community engagement and activist scholarship: women and people of colour, while still seriously under-represented among geography staff, are disproportionately involved in this type of work. It is rarely given reasonable recognition in promotion or tenure criteria, and so the hours and sustained involvement spent on this type of work tend to be minimised on applications and CVs. Universities should alter their tenure and promotion criteria to recognise this strategically important work (Mountz et al., forthcoming).

This symposium provides a very valuable resource for those who want to connect the different spaces and activities of human geography through more participatory practices. It further highlights that participation in geography is about far more than ‘methods’: it is suggestive of transformation of every sphere of our activities. There are barriers to bringing together distant and discrete spaces, but enormous potential rewards for all spheres of activity. PAR can lead to more inspiring and enriching

learning, as students are not just observing, or talking to, but collaborating with people outside the academy in creating knowledge. PAR involves continual critical examination of beliefs, attitudes and values underpinning research, and constant work to connect theory, research practice and social change. These endeavours are ones that our wider institutions would be well placed to scale up and pursue.

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