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# **Participatory Communication (Research) from a Freirean Perspective**

**By Jan Servaes**

## **Abstract**

Paulo Freire's ideas on education, conscientization and participatory development have assumed the status of external and universal truths which can be applied in any developing society. Though Freire's theory of dialogical communication and action is based on group dialogue rather than the mass media, there is a sense in which this theory can apply to almost any aspect of human communication, in a truly participatory manner. In spite of the attraction of participatory methodologies, their users are cautioned against uncritical application in all situations.

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# **Communication par le Biais de Participation (recherche): Perspectif de Freire**

**Par Jan Servaes**

## **Résumé**

Les idées de Paulo Freire sur l'éducation, la spécialisation et le développement par le biais de participation, assurent la bien fondé des vérités externes et universelles, qu'on peut appliquer à toute communauté sur la voie de développement. Sa théorie de communication et de l'action dialogique se base sur le dialogue au niveau du groupe, plutôt que sur les théories populaires de la masse média. Cette théorie de Freire semble s'appliquer à tous les aspects de la communication humaine, d'une façon qui permet une véritable participation. Néanmoins, l'auteur signale qu'il faut tenir compte des défauts que comportent les méthodologies basées sur la participation, lorsqu'elles sont employées dans n'importe quelle situation, sans préalablement avoir fait une analyse critique des réalités impliquées.

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## Introduction

The struggle for democracy is the centerpiece for the struggle for liberation. Yet it is also clear that democracy has different meanings for different peoples throughout the world. For some, it is synonymous with capitalism, the propagation of acquisitiveness and greed, the barbaric practices of colonialism, and conceptually opposed to socialism. For others, it is a process of achieving equality of social justice for all peoples through popular sovereignty. Paulo Freire (1993, p. XI)

The notion of *Participatory Communication* stresses the importance of *cultural identity* of local communities, and of *democratisation and participation at all levels* – international, national, local and individual. It points to a strategy, not merely inclusive of, but largely emanating from, the traditional 'receivers'. Paulo Freire (1983, p. 76) refers to this as the right of all people to individually and collectively speak their word: "This is not the privilege of some few men (and women), but the right of every (wo)man. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone - nor can he (or she) say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words".

In order to share information, knowledge, trust, and commitment in development projects, participation is very important in any decision making process for development. "This calls for new attitude for overcoming stereotyped thinking and to promote more understanding of diversity and plurality, with full respect to the dignity and equality of peoples living in different conditions and acting in different ways" (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems or MacBride Commission, 1980, p. 254) This model stresses *reciprocal collaboration* throughout all levels of participation. Listening to what the others say, respecting the counterpart's attitude, and having mutual trust are needed. Participation supporters do not underestimate the ability of the masses to develop themselves and their environment. "Development efforts should be anchored on faith in the people's capacity to discern what is best to be done as they seek their liberation, and how to

participate actively in the task of transforming society. The people are intelligent and have centuries of experience. Draw out their strength. Listen to them." (Xavier Institute, 1980, p. 11).

In practice, adopting some or all of the above principles, new forms of communication have been emerging. Decentralised media systems and democratic communication institutions, emphasise *self-management by local communities*. New concepts of media professionalism bring a greater knowledge of and respect for forms of people's communication, and emphasise the recognition of and experience with new formats of journalism and broadcasting which are more consonant with the cultural identity of the community, and a greater awareness of the ways democratisation of communication is taking place and can take place.

Consequently, all these changes do also affect and change the role and place of communication research.

### **Empowerment and Participatory Communication**

*Authentic participation* directly addresses power and its distribution in society. Participation "may not sit well with those who favour the status quo and thus they may be expected to resist such efforts of reallocation of more power to the people." (Lozare, 1994, p. 242). Therefore, development and participation are inextricably linked.

Participation involves the more equitable sharing of both political and economic power, which often decreases the advantage of groups in power. Structural change involves the *redistribution of power*. In mass communication areas, many communication experts agree that structural change should occur first in order to establish participatory communication policies. Mowlana and Wilson (1987, p. 143), for instance, state:

Communications policies are basically derivatives of the political, cultural and economic conditions and institutions under which they

operate. They tend to legitimise the existing power relations in society, and therefore, they cannot be substantially changed unless there are fundamental structural changes in society that can alter these power relationships themselves.

Since dialogue and face-to-face interaction is inherent in participation, the development communicator will find him/herself spending more time in the field. It will take some time to develop rapport and trust. Continued contact, meeting commitments, keeping promises, and follow up between visits, are important. Development of social trust precedes task trust. Both parties will need patience. It is important to note that when we treat people the way we ourselves would like to be treated, we learn to work as a team, and this brings about honesty, trust, commitment and motivation too. This brings about *genuine participation*. And genuine participation brings about appropriate policies and planning for developing a country within its cultural and environmental framework.

Consequently the *perspective on communication* has changed. It is more concerned with process and context, that is, on the exchange of 'meanings,' and on the importance of this process, namely, the social relational patterns and social institutions that are the result of and are determined by the process. 'Another' communication "favours multiplicity, smallness of scale, locality, de-institutionalisation, interchange of sender-receiver roles (and) horizontality of communication links at all levels of society" (McQuail, 1983, p. 97). As a result, the focus moves from a 'communicator-' to a more 'receiver-centric' orientation, with the resultant emphasis on meaning sought and ascribed rather than information transmitted.

With this shift in focus, one is no longer attempting to create a need for the information one is disseminating, but one is rather disseminating information for which there is a need. Experts and development workers rather respond than dictate, choose what is relevant to the context in which they are working. The emphasis is on information *exchange* rather than on persuasion in the diffusion model.

## Two Major Approaches to Participatory Communication

There are two major approaches to participatory communication which almost everybody today accepts as common sense. The first is the dialogical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1970, 1983, 1994), and the second involves the ideas of access, participation and self-management articulated in the UNESCO debates of the 1970s (Berrigan, 1979). Every communication project which calls itself participatory accepts these principles of democratic communication. Nonetheless, there exists today a wide variety of practical experiences and intentions. Before moving on to explore these differences, it is useful to briefly review the common ground.

The *Freirian argument* works by a dual theoretical strategy. Freire insists that subjugated peoples must be treated as fully human subjects in any political process. This implies dialogical communication and action. Although inspired to some extent by Sartre's existentialism - a respect for the autonomous personhood of each human being, the more important source is a theology that demands respect for otherness - in this case that of another human being. The second strategy is a moment of utopian hope derived from the early Marx that the human species have a destiny which is more than a fulfilment of material needs. Also from Marx is an insistence on collective solutions. Individual opportunity, Freire stresses, is no solution to general situations of poverty and cultural subjugation.

Freire believes that individuals have the capacity for reflection, for conceptualising, for critical thinking, for making decisions, for planning and social change. It is not merely awareness, however, that is important, but its relationship to a project of social transformation, whereby consciousness and action on consciousness are dialectically linked. According to Freire, action and reflection are organically integrated. It is this dialectical and emancipatory process of action and reflection that constitutes the process of *conscientization*.

These ideas are deeply unpopular with elites, including elites

in the Third World, but there is nonetheless widespread acceptance of Freire's notion of dialogic communication as a normative theory of participatory communication. One problem with Freire is that his theory of dialogic communication and action is based on group dialogue rather than such amplifying media as radio, print and television. Freire also gives little attention to the language or form of communication, devoting most of his discussion to the intentions of communication actions.

The second discourse about participatory communication is the UNESCO language about self-management, access and participation from the 1977 meeting in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. The final report of that meeting defines the terms in the following way (see Berrigan, 1979):

*Access* refers to the use of media for public service. It may be defined in terms of the opportunities available to the public to choose varied and relevant programs and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organisations.

*Participation* implies a higher level of public involvement in communication systems. It includes the involvement of the public in the production process, and also in the management and planning of communication systems.

*Participation* may be no more than representation and consultation of the public in decision-making. On the other hand, self-management is the most advanced form of participation. In this case, the public exercises the power of decision-making within communication enterprises and is also fully involved in the formulation of communication policies and plans.

These ideas are important and widely accepted as a normative theory of alternative communication: it must involve access and participation. However, one should note some differences from Freire. The UNESCO discourse includes the idea of a gradual progression. Some amount of access may be allowed, but self-management may be postponed until some time in the future. Freire's theory allows for no such compromise. One either



respects the culture of the other or falls back into domination and imposed education. The UNESCO discourse talks in neutral terms about "the public". Freire talked about the oppressed. Finally, the UNESCO discourse puts the main focus on the institution. Participatory radio means a radio station that is self-managed by those participating in it.

### **Consequences for Participatory Communication Research**

Participatory research is related to the above mentioned processes of conscientization and empowerment. It was probably Paulo Freire himself who introduced the first version of this approach in his philosophy of conscientization. Rather than agenda being defined by an academic elite and programs enacted by a bureaucratic elite for the benefit of an economic or political elite, participatory research involves people gaining an understanding of their situation, confidence and an ability to change that situation. Therefore, participatory research assumes a bias toward the poor rather than the professional. Robert White (1984, p. 28) says this is quite divergent from "the functionalist approach which starts with the scientist's own model of social and psychological behaviour and gathers data for the purpose of prediction and control of audience behaviour. The emphasis is on the awareness of the subjective meaning and organisation of reality for purposes of self-determination".

Participatory research is *egalitarian*. Thematic investigation thus becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness. It is an *educational process* in which the roles of the educator and the educated are constantly reversed and the common search unites all those engaged in the endeavour. It immerses the exogenous "researcher" in the setting on an equal basis. Considering the necessary trust and attitudes as well as cultural differences, the task is not easy, and makes unfamiliar demands on researchers/educators.

## **Strengths and Weaknesses**

The recent popularity of participatory research, the act of labelling it as such, may have implied that it is something special that requires a particular expertise, a particular strategy, or a specific methodology. Similar to participation, there has been great effort towards definitions and models of participatory research to lend an air of "respectability." Also similar to participation, perhaps this is no more than an attempt to claim title or credit for an approach which, by its very nature, belongs to the people involved. As one is dealing with people within changing social relations and cultural patterns, one cannot afford to be dogmatic about methods but should keep oneself open to people. This openness comes out of a trust in people and a realisation that the oppressed are capable of understanding their situation, searching for alternatives and taking their own decisions.

Because there is no reality "out there" separate from human perception and, as put forth in the multiplicity paradigm (Servaes, 1989), there is no universal path to development, it is maintained that each community or grouping must proceed from its own plan in consideration of its own situation. In other words, to the extent the methodology is rigidly structured by the requisites of academia, participatory research is denied.

By its nature, this type of research does not incorporate the rigid controls of the physical scientist or the traditional models of social science researchers. Chantana and Wun Gao (1985, p.39) state: "There is no magic formula for the methodology of such PR projects. However, there are common features taking place in the process: (1) It consists of continuous dialogue and discussion among research participants in all stages; [and] (2) Knowledge must be derived from concrete situations of the people and through collaborative reflection ... return to the people, continuously and dialectically".

Therefore we would like to delineate participatory research as an educational process involving *three interrelated parts*:

- (1) Collective definition and investigation of a problem by a group of people struggling to deal with it. This involves the social investigation which determines the concrete condition existing within the community under study, by those embedded in the social context;
- (2) Group analysis of the underlying causes of their problems, which is similar to the conscientization and pedagogical processes addressed above, and;
- (3) Group action to attempt to solve the problem.

Therefore, the process of participatory research is cyclical, continuous, local, and accessible. *Study-reflection-action* is the integrating process in this type of research. Kronenburg (1986, p. 255) gives the following characteristics of participatory research:

[It] rests on the assumption that human beings have an innate ability to create knowledge. It rejects the notion that knowledge production is a monopoly of "professionals"; [It] is seen as an educational process for the participants ... as well as the researcher; It involves the identification of community needs, augmented awareness about obstacles to need fulfillment, an analysis of the causes of the problems and the formulation and implementation of relevant solutions; The researcher is consciously committed to the cause of the community involved in the research. This challenges the traditional principle of scientific neutrality and rejects the position of the scientist as a social engineer. Dialogue provides for a framework which guards against manipulative scientific interference and serves as a means of control by the community.

### **Evaluation and Validity in Participatory Research**

Given a continuous cycle of study-reflection-action, participatory research inherently involves formative evaluation. Indeed, the terms participatory research and participatory evaluation are often used synonymously. Actors are exercising themselves in

participatory evaluation by the whole group of the situation of underdevelopment and oppression.

Congruent with the objectives of participatory research, the purpose of evaluation is to benefit the participants themselves. It does not function to test the efficiency of an exogenous program, formulate diffusion tactics or marketing strategies for expansion to a broader level, gather hard data for publication, justify the implementing body, or collect dust on a ministry shelf. In brief, it is an ongoing process as opposed to an end product of a report for funding structures.

Whether participatory research "succeeds" or "fails" is secondary to the interaction and communication processes of participating groups. The success of the research is seen no more in publications in 'reputed' journals but in what happens during the process of research.

Bogaert et al. (1981, p. 181) add that "participatory evaluation generates a lot of qualitative data which is rich in experiences of the participants. It may be ... quantitative data is sacrificed in the process. However, what is lost in statistics is more than made up by the enhanced richness of data".

The implication is not that other methods or exogenous collaboration in evaluation are forbidden. Writing of research participants, D'Abreo (1981, p.108) states: "While they, as agents of their own programme, can understand it better and be more involved in it, the outside evaluator may bring greater objectivity and insights from other programmes that might be of great use to them. However, the main agents of evaluation, even when conducted with the help of an outside agency or individual, are they themselves".

Turning to the question of validity, Tandon (1981, p.22) suggests, on a methodological level, that "getting into a debate about reliability and validity of PR is irrelevant because it is quite the opposite shift in understanding what this research is." Its focus is on authenticity as opposed to validity. However, referring to generalizability and validity addressed in relation to qualitative research, it can be argued that validity in its less

esoteric sense is participatory research's hallmark. "If ordinary people define the problem of research themselves, they will ensure its relevance" (Tandon, 1981, p.24), and their involvement "will provide the 'demand-pull' necessary to ensure accuracy of focus" (Farrington, 1988, p.271).

Finally, the basis of participatory research, indigenous knowledge is inherently valid. This is not to say conditions are not changing or that this knowledge cannot benefit from adaptation. The argument is that, in most cases, this knowledge is the most valid place from which to begin.

### **A Final Word of Caution**

Participatory research can all too easily be utilized as yet another tool of manipulation by vested interests. Charges are correctly made that it is often a means of political indoctrination by the right and the left alike. Often, organizers have been attacked for manipulating people's minds and managing their actions towards their own ends.

While the approach strives towards empowerment, challenges existing structures, and is consequently ideological, rigidly prescribed ideologies must be avoided. In addition, knowledge and perspective gained may well empower exploitative economic and authoritarian interests instead of local groups. Far from helping the process of liberation, if the researcher is not careful, he or she may only enable the traditional policy-makers and vested interests to present their goods in a more attractive package without changing their substance.

Even the best intentioned researcher/activist can inadvertently enhance dependency rather than empowerment. If she/he enters communities with ready-made tools for analyzing reality, and solving problems, the result will likely be that as far as those tools are successful, dependency will simply be moved from one tyrant to another.

In other words, overzealous researchers can easily attempt to compensate for an initial apathy by assuming the role of an

advocate rather than a facilitator. "What looks like progress is all too often a return to the dependent client relationship" (Kennedy, 1984, p.86). This approach is no better than more traditional researchers with hypotheses and constructs to validate, or the diffusionist with an innovation for every ill.

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