Chapter 1
Preparing Critical Educators and Community–Engaged Scholars Through Participatory Action Research

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ABSTRACT

Participatory action research (PAR) is a community-based form of inquiry conducted with individuals affected by an issue or problem being studied rather than about them. Rather than a method of inquiry, PAR is an epistemological stance towards knowledge and knowledge creation that is rooted in critical, emancipatory pedagogy. Because it is an orientation, rather than a discrete method, PAR is difficult to teach. Here the authors explore the experiences of both undergraduate pre-service teachers and doctoral students as they seek to reconcile PAR principles and practice with their personal and professional backgrounds. The purpose is not to present the best approach for teaching PAR in the university classroom; rather, it is a reflective exploration of the experiences of the authors’ participants, which reveals rich insights into what it feels like to become researchers within the ‘culture’ of formal higher education in the United States.

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INTRODUCTION

Participatory action research (PAR) is a community-based form of inquiry conducted with individuals affected by an issue or problem being studied rather than about them (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). PAR seeks to disrupt the traditional research hierarchy (researcher-researched) by positioning participants, often historically marginalized individuals, as co-creators of knowledge (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Mirra & Rogers, 2016). Rather than a method of inquiry, PAR is an epistemological stance towards knowledge and knowledge creation that is rooted in critical, emancipatory pedagogy (Freire, 1970).

Because it is an orientation, rather than a discrete method, PAR is difficult to teach. Therefore, it is often learned in the field; as a result, involving learners as co-participants and co-creators of knowledge in PAR projects is an important way of imparting the methodology and allowing students to understand and, perhaps, adopt its epistemological stance (Call-Cummings, Hauber-Özer, & Dazzo, 2019; Galleta & Jones, 2010; Goh & Loh, 2013). Joining other scholar-practitioners committed to critical pedagogy and concerned about the positivist and neoliberal trends dominating educational institutions (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Brown & Rodriguez, 2017), here we examine the potential benefits and challenges of infusing higher education with PAR epistemology. We engage in reflexive praxis by exploring the processes of teaching and learning this critical-pedagogy-inspired methodology in order to highlight how it can be useful for preparing professionals who will engage in this same praxis in their daily work. The purpose is not to present the best approach for teaching PAR in the university classroom; rather, it is a reflective exploration of the experiences of our participants, which reveals rich insights into what it feels like to become researchers within the ‘culture’ of formal higher education and education departments in the United States.

To this end, we draw on the first author’s experiences as a teacher educator and qualitative methodologist introducing both undergraduate pre-service teachers and doctoral students to PAR. We foreground the voices of her students as they seek to reconcile PAR principles and practice with their personal and professional backgrounds, research and career goals, and logistical constraints within formal educational settings and contexts. By juxtaposing the reflections of two related but distinct groups – undergraduate pre-service teachers anticipating joining the teaching force and experienced teachers working toward a PhD in education in order to become teacher educators, school administrators, or researchers – along with the reflections of their instructor, we identify important shifts in understanding and positionality toward teaching and educational research.

The chapter also elaborates on the undergraduate and doctoral course designs, including the use of texts and learning activities such as Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1985). It describes the process of engaging students in conducting simple PAR projects to try out the methodology, come to understand its epistemological commitments, and develop their own identities as knowledge creators. The voices of both cohorts of students are woven into the chapter through rich reflective data, and the second and third authors, members of the graduate-level class, offer their perspectives as experienced educators and novice scholars.