

The potential of PAR and participatory evaluation for increasing the sustainability and success of community development initiatives using new communication technologies

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Abstract

This paper discusses some of the complex issues identified during the ongoing trial of the Learning, Evaluation, Action & Reflection for New technologies, Empowerment & Rural Sustainability (LEARNERS) process in two diverse communities in rural Queensland, Australia. This process aims to increase the sustainability and success of community development initiatives that use new communication and information technologies (C&IT). It advocates the inclusion and collaboration of diverse community groups in participatory evaluation processes, developing learning communities, and analysis of differences such as gender, age and ability.

The LEARNERS project involves a partnership between the two participating communities, five government and industry partners, and a university research team. Participatory action research (PAR), participatory evaluation, and feminist research methodologies are being used in this three-year research project. We discuss the strengths and limitations of these methodologies and present case studies of the implementation of the LEARNERS process in the two communities.

Our preliminary analysis of the themes and issues emerging from the trial suggests a contradiction between the ideals of the LEARNERS process and the reality of implementing the process in the two communities. We argue that in critically assessing the trial it is useful to consider the macro and micro level contexts involved, and the interrelationships between them. A key challenge is to use the diversity of tacit knowledge of community members in research that embodies the principles of PAR and offers practical solutions to C&IT problems. The long-term sustainability of the use of the LEARNERS process is a significant issue for further research. A more realistic and practical focus and regular critical reflection and rigorous evaluation is seen as important to successful participatory community development projects that use C&IT.

Introduction

Participatory action research (PAR), participatory evaluation, and feminist action research methodologies have often been successfully used in community development projects around the world for over 30 years (Brunner and Guzman, 1998; Maguire, 1987). These methods seek to increase empowerment and inclusion, to build community capacities, and to produce knowledge and action useful to community needs and goals (McTaggart, 1991; Papineau and Kiely, 1996).

Recently, there has been an increasing focus on the role of communication and information technologies (C&IT) in rural community development in both Australia and overseas. The effective use of technologies such as email and the Internet is argued to have many potential benefits for sustainable community and economic development (Mansell and Wehn, 1998; Simpson, Wood, Daws and Seinen, 2001). However, the use of C&IT raises many challenges and issues for community participation, inclusion and empowerment. The long-term sustainability of C&IT initiatives such as community websites is a key issue. Facilitating access to C&IT by all groups in a community and securing ongoing funding, resources and support to maintain initiatives are some of the crucial issues, especially for small rural communities.

The complex and contradictory nature of participation and empowerment discourses and practices and the often-idealistic nature of these discourses have been illuminated in recent critiques (Gore, 1992; Humphries, 1996; Lennie, Hatcher and Morgan, 2003). Such critiques suggest that researchers need to give greater acknowledgement to differences between participants, including those related to gender, power and knowledge, and to take both the macro and micro contexts of participatory projects into account. They also suggest that a rigorous and ongoing evaluation and critical reflection process is required to develop more effective theories and practices in this field.

This paper discusses some of the complex themes and issues identified in our preliminary analysis of the implementation of an innovative participatory planning and evaluation process labelled the LEARNERS process (Learning, Evaluation, Action & Reflection for New technologies, Empowerment & Rural Sustainability). This process is currently being trialled in two rural communities in Queensland, Australia. Our project appears to be fairly unique in that we have identified few other projects in

Australia or overseas that are using PAR and participatory evaluation to evaluate community-based C&IT projects.

Following a brief overview of the LEARNERS project, we summarise the participatory methodologies used in the project and discuss their major strengths and limitations. The LEARNERS process is outlined in more detail than case studies are presented of the two participating communities. These case studies illustrate women's participation and leadership in the local project activities and its preliminary impacts and effects. We then discuss some important themes and issues identified in our preliminary analysis of the strengths and limitations of the LEARNERS process and its potential for increasing the sustainability and success of community-based C&IT initiatives.

The LEARNERS project

This project is currently being conducted by a research team at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Brisbane, which is working in partnership with community members and organisations in the Tara and Stanthorpe Shires and five partners from the government and education sectors. The project began in October 2001 and will be completed in October 2004.

Project activities have included meetings and workshops facilitated by the researchers and by community members, focus group discussions, and individual interviews with key participants. Workshops have included small group discussions, brainstorming and other participatory decision-making methods. A range of C&IT, including telephone, email, online discussion lists, a project website (<http://www.learners.bus.qut.edu.au>) and teleconferencing has been used for regular communication and interaction with community participants and project partners. Representatives of some project partners have played a very active role in the project, including taking part in fieldwork, while others have been less actively involved. It is a high-energy project and limited funding, time and resources have placed constraints on some project activities.

The participatory methodologies used in the LEARNERS project

Participatory action research

PAR seeks to include and involve a diversity of community members, to incorporate local knowledge and ideas, and to enhance democracy and individual, group and community empowerment. PAR is a political process because it involves people making changes together that also affect others (McTaggart, 1991, p.177). Critical reflection is a crucial step in each PAR cycle.

Through activities such as focus group discussions and critical reflection workshops, the LEARNERS project is using PAR as a means of creating new knowledge about community leadership, participation and inclusion and the role of C&IT in sustainable development. Issues related to gender and other differences and power relations are being identified and mutual learning is taking place.

Like all participatory methodologies, PAR has certain limitations. They include the greater amounts of time, energy and commitment required to undertake activities compared with other research and evaluation approaches, and the high degree of trust needed between those involved that can take some time to develop. In addition, when people with different levels of power, status, influence and knowledge come together, the ideal of participation becomes problematic (McTaggart, 1991, p. 170). To reduce power and knowledge differences, the LEARNERS project has attempted to use inclusive communication and participation processes that enable all participants to have a say in planning and decision-making, and that draw on the existing knowledge, experiences and skills of participants.

Participatory evaluation

Participatory evaluation (PE) methodologies can be particularly useful in assessing complex community-based projects such as those involving the use of new C&IT. In a PE, the evaluators are the stakeholders or participants involved in a project. Researchers or other professional staff act as methodological consultants in the evaluation, and decisions about the evaluation are usually jointly made by stakeholders and researchers. For an evaluation to be considered participatory Rebien (1996, p.160) suggests that stakeholders need to participate in at least three evaluation phases: 'designing terms of reference, interpreting data, and using evaluation information'. The LEARNERS research team and partners have assisted the evaluation coordination groups in each community to identify the community C&IT projects to be evaluated, the key evaluation questions, and the methods to be used.

Participatory evaluation methodologies have been found to enhance the long-term sustainability and success of programs through building community capacities and the inclusion of diverse stakeholders in decision-making. These methodologies can facilitate interaction between people, enable ongoing learning, foster a sense of 'ownership' of initiatives, and potentially produce community and individual empowerment (Brunner and Guzman, 1989; Papineau and Kiely, 1996).

However, Rebien (1996, pp. 154-155) suggests that PE has certain theoretical weaknesses related to the 'confusion surrounding the participation concept itself' and the conceptual weakness of participation. In addition, the concept of empowerment is often used in uncritical and unreflexive ways. Other limitations include the time and resources needed to train those involved, the difficulty of achieving representativeness, and participants' varying levels of skills and commitment to the process, and varying levels of access to resources to undertake evaluations. In addition, conflicting perspectives and agendas can be more apparent in participatory evaluations, compared with traditional evaluation methodologies.

Feminist research methodologies

Feminist poststructuralist critiques (Gore, 1992; Lather, 1991, Lennie et al., 2003) suggest that research which has emancipatory aims can have contradictory effects and that claims for empowerment require closer examination. This entails adopting a more critical and self-reflexive approach and using more rigorous methods to evaluate such claims. The LEARNERS project is developing and applying such methods, building on research already undertaken by the first author (Lennie, 2001). She is

bringing a pragmatic and pluralist feminist approach to the project that is congruent with the PAR and PE methodology of the LEARNERS project. This involves using a participatory feminist evaluation methodology that aims to be empowering and inclusive by giving voice to a diversity of participants (particularly women), and taking their contexts, needs and lived experiences into account.

Feminist poststructuralist theories of the gendered nature of power, knowledge and discourse are also being drawn on. These theories can highlight the contradictions and dangers of participatory methodologies that are often overlooked. This component of the LEARNERS project aims to contribute to the development of more rigorous and conceptually stronger participatory methodologies.

Overview of the LEARNERS process

The LEARNERS process originated in a pilot project that included an extensive literature search and review, developing a participatory evaluation framework, and collecting feedback on this framework from people in several rural and regional communities in Queensland (see Lennie, Lundin and Simpson, 2000). The process was refined as part of our current research project and is undergoing ongoing revisions, based on feedback from community participants and other stakeholders. The major goals of the process are:

- The long-term sustainability and success of C&IT initiatives.
- Increased collaboration and cooperation between people and organisations from various sectors in rural communities.
- Enhanced community capacities in understanding and using participatory planning and evaluation methods.
- Increased community participation and inclusion in planning and evaluation and the sharing of information about success factors and evaluation outcomes. As well as through face-to-face meetings and workshops, C&IT such as email and community websites and traditional local media could be used for this purpose.
- The development of 'learning communities' - communities in which formal and non-formal lifelong learning is encouraged. Learning communities aim to facilitate sustainable economic development, promote social inclusion and cohesion, and encourage civic and social participation (Faris, 2001).
- Giving value to empowering forms of leadership that are based on collaboration, sharing information, networking, encouraging participation, and supporting people (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1995).

The LEARNERS process is very flexible and able to be used in various ways that meet community goals and needs. It involves identifying and building on existing community strengths and resources, engaging in continuous PAR cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, and learning about and using PE methods. Participants are encouraged to take a 'whole of community' approach to participation and assessment, and to take differences such as gender, age and ability into account. Based on learnings from the evaluation, the initiatives would be reviewed

and redesigned to better match community needs. This ongoing process would involve working on different cycles in various sequences, as new learnings emerge, new needs and issues are identified, and new C&IT initiatives are implemented.

Case studies of the participating communities

Case studies of the implementation of the LEARNERS project in the two participating communities and its initial effects are now presented. At this point, more on data on the Stanthorpe community and project impacts has been collected than on the Tara community.

Tara Shire case study

Tara Shire is a farming region, 330 kilometres west of Brisbane. It has a very scattered population of just over 3,800 people and 1,000 people live in the main town of Tara. About one third of the population live in on rural residential subdivisions with few services and facilities. The Shire has been identified as being in the top ten most disadvantaged communities in Queensland (Tara Shire, 2001), and has limited access to services such as transport and communication. The area has been affected by severe drought and bushfires in recent years.

The Shire's extensive geographic area, scattered population and changing demographic profile created a very divided community. People were not working together and small townships were operating in isolation. Many people were apathetic and negative and there was little proactive leadership. The community did not actively seek support and assistance from outside. Consequently, the area lagged behind in its development and in the uptake of new C&IT.

About three years ago, a new Mayor and new Shire Councilors provided positive leadership and actively began building a more cooperative and pro-active community. Community leaders, particularly women, started to generate motivation. A number of C&IT initiatives were implemented, including the Tara Shire Community Website, which is managed by the Shire Council, public Internet access, and computer and Internet training courses.

Given this positive energy and outlook, the Council expressed interest in using the LEARNERS process to help the community work together to reach its goals and to engage in more effective planning and evaluation. They hoped that the process could help improve communication systems and training and access to new C&IT.

The Council's Community and Economic Development Officer became the local LEARNERS project coordinator in May 2002. She was enthusiastic about the project and used her good relationships with community organisations and groups to generate interest and support. Assistance with the project was provided by the IT Support Officer employed by the Council, who managed the Community Website and conducted computer and Internet training. However, she left the community in early 2003 and has not been replaced by the Council.

An initial meeting was held in July 2002 with eight community leaders (seven women and one man). A community workshop was then held involving fifteen women and eight men from a diversity of age groups and occupations. This generated some new

ideas and awareness about the use of new C&IT. The local coordinator made presentations about the LEARNERS project at various community meetings.

A project steering committee was formed, comprising representatives from various townships. This committee nominated the Tara Shire Community Website and community IT training and access as projects to be evaluated. A workshop that collaboratively planned these evaluation projects was subsequently held in March 2003. This workshop involved four women and five men from various community organisations. Key evaluation questions were identified and various evaluation methods were suggested by participants with input from the research team. These methods included focus group discussions, telephone interviews, and a survey of community members. The evaluation coordination group later decided to conduct a survey of the community. In part, this was due to participants' lack of skills and confidence in conducting interviews and facilitating focus groups and the time that would be required. Participants initially anticipated that this survey would be quickly completed. However, due to various factors, including the opportunity for professional assistance with redesigning part of the website, the survey has not yet been completed and distributed.

At a critical reflection workshop in December 2002, two local project leaders reported that the business sector was the first to 'drop out' of the project and there was initially 'a lot of misconception as to what [the project] was about'. They had found it 'very hard' to explain the project and suggested that it needed to be put into 'a lot more user-friendly terms'. While groups such as school principals 'picked it up straight away', others found it difficult to understand. However, they reported some positive impacts of the project. It helped to improve the networking, communication and sharing of information between various community groups through email and the Shire website. More people are using new C&IT, and new ways of using C&IT to overcome communication and distance problems have been identified. While interest in the project continues to be fairly high, the loss of the Council's IT Officer has had a major impact on key project activities.

Stanthorpe Shire case study

The Shire of Stanthorpe is located 230 kilometres south west of Brisbane in the Granite Belt region. The Shire has a population of 10,373 people and 5,500 people live in the main town of Stanthorpe. The region's major industries are agriculture, farming and tourism. Like other parts of rural Queensland, the area has recently experienced a severe drought. A significant number of residents are of Italian descent, and some have poor literacy skills. Compared with Tara Shire, Stanthorpe Shire has good communication systems. However, there is limited public access to the Internet, and a general lack of awareness about the opportunities that can be provided by new C&IT.

While the Granite Belt has many active community groups and strong leaders, there is poor interaction and information sharing among groups and newcomers find it difficult to gain formal leadership positions. The community is seen as conservative, and somewhat fragmented and insular. As in Tara Shire, women are leading many community development and C&IT projects.

The Stanthorpe Shire Council has recently implemented a range of C&IT initiatives. They include a Council website, a virtual community project called 'GraniteNet' with 80 community interest groups, and the Stanthorpe Community Learning Centre initiative, which aims to become the hub of learning in the region. A key issue is the sustainability of GraniteNet once its government funding runs out. Community ownership of GraniteNet had not yet been established and it is largely regarded as a Council project.

The GraniteNet Project Officer, and the Stanthorpe Learning Community Project Consultant, became the local LEARNERS project coordinators. As in Tara, a meeting with local leaders was held, followed by a workshop for community members. Five women and two men participated in the community leaders meeting. The workshop, which involved ten women and three men from a range of organisations and occupations, identified the development of the Granite Belt as a learning community as key area of interest. Further meetings and workshops were held to begin planning activities associated with the Learning Community project. Some new participants joined these activities, most of which were conducted without involvement from the researchers.

Both the local coordinators and participants began to experience confusion about how the larger Learning Community project fitted with the LEARNERS project. At the critical reflection workshop, the project coordinators expressed a desire for more participation by the researchers in the community activities. Maintaining the motivation and interest of local participants and the coordination group was a key issue.

Some limitations were imposed on a proposed evaluation of GraniteNet due to concerns about the potentially negative effects of seeking feedback from community members but being unable to make changes to the site due to various technical constraints. However, following negotiations between the researchers and the local coordinators, a small group of interested participants subsequently agreed to begin planning an evaluation of the Granite Belt Lifelong Learning Group's use of GraniteNet as a pilot project. The group reviewed the Lifelong Learning Group's website and collaboratively designed a short survey of its members. The mostly positive feedback from this survey helped to increase motivation among the coordination group. A workshop involving researchers and industry partners was subsequently held to collaboratively analyse the survey data and critically reflect on the evaluation process. Actions to be taken, based on this analysis, were agreed to.

While there have been some negative effects, the project has had several positive impacts, including improved communication and linkages between community groups and organisations, and the formation of a core group of people who are enthusiastic about developing a learning community. The project has also had some effects on women's leadership and empowerment. One active participant, who had previously been a 'bystander' during meetings of her community support organisation, reported

that she gained ‘an incredible amount’ of empowerment, that her leadership skills had increased ‘tremendously’, as well as her facilitation, communication and ‘diplomacy’ skills.

Critical analysis of key themes in the LEARNERS process trial

Several themes and issues have emerged from our critical reflections and preliminary analysis of the implementation of the LEARNERS process in the two participating rural communities. These include:

- The contradiction between the ideals of the LEARNERS process and the reality of implementing the process in rural communities
- Some people and groups seem to more readily connect with and understand the process compared with others.
- The extent to which the process is sustainable and widespread capacity building is possible.

These themes are now discussed in more detail.

The ideal versus the reality of implementing the process

The LEARNERS process is underpinned by a relatively idealistic vision of a diversity of women and men from all community sectors collaborating and cooperating, building their capacities, engaging in ongoing learning, and using empowering and inclusive forms of leadership and participation. Community members are envisaged to be effectively using C&IT in these activities. However, translating such an ideal into practice is clearly problematic. In critically assessing the LEARNERS process trial it is useful to consider the macro structures and micro level contexts involved and the interrelationships between them (Lennie, 2002). The macro level context includes government policies that promote capacity building and ‘community engagement’, inequities in access to new C&IT, the social and economic effects of the drought, and the often male-dominated leadership structures in rural communities. The micro level contexts include the power relations among people in community organisations, and the diverse values and communication needs of various groups and individuals that can affect their interest and participation.

Small rural communities such as those involved in our project are often fragmented and insular with groups competing against each other rather than collaborating. Formal leadership structures such as local government tend to be patriarchal and ‘concomitant with elitism based on rural conservatism’ (Gray and Lawrence, 2001, p.197). New residents can experience exclusion, and women are often absent from key decision-making roles. However, the project has attracted women and some men in leadership positions in community development and education who are interested in using more inclusive communication and participation processes and fostering learning communities.

While some improvements have recently occurred, many people and organisations in Queensland rural communities lack effective access to new C&IT or do not have the

resources, interest or capacity to use these technologies regularly. During times of great social and economic hardship such as drought, other issues are often more pressing than access to the Internet. Lack of time and energy is a key barrier to participation in this context.

Our current and previous research has found that women are often the 'new pioneers' in the uptake of the Internet in rural areas (Rural Women and ICTs Team, 1999). While this suggests that women should be a key target group, the approach advocated by the project is one that aims to be inclusive of all community groups. However, gaining the interest and participation of both women and men from all community sectors, particularly the farming, business and technology sectors, has proved problematic.

Connecting with the process

Related to the above issues is that participatory evaluation methods fit better with some people's values, beliefs and ideologies than with others. Some people prefer more traditional planning and evaluation methods that are not underpinned by the democratic ideals of PAR. Some community groups involved in the LEARNERS project were unfamiliar with the concepts used, others viewed some of the language as 'jargon', and several initially considered the process as quite complex. The local coordinators found it difficult to explain the process to certain community groups.

This raises questions about the ways in which the LEARNERS processes can be most successfully used by rural communities, including: 'do all of the people involved need a good understanding of the process and its underlying concepts and principles?' This has implications for the empowerment, inclusion and participation of a broad diversity of people.

One way to understand this issue is via the distinction between tacit and codified knowledge (Hearn and Foth, forthcoming). Most research methods aim to produce codified knowledge, privileging theory, formal definitions, arguments or other publicly verifiable knowledge forms. Although this is seldom acknowledged, these methods also produce tacit knowledge among researchers and participants. This knowledge is embedded in their actions and everyday experiences. PAR also produces codified knowledge. Action research exists in a meta-theoretical space that has seen, for example, Marxist (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988), feminist (Naples and Clark, 1996) and liberal (Argyris, 1982) forms emerge. However PAR also *explicitly* privileges the production of tacit knowledge, given that it is an important source of the construction of knowledge about local communities, as well as the implementation of changes in those communities. Tacit knowledge is therefore an important part of the local social ecology of the project.

Expressed in these terms, the questions for the LEARNERS project become: 'how important is it for participants to engage with the codified knowledge of the researchers?' and 'how can researchers engage with and design processes in terms of the tacit knowledge of various groups in a community?' Too much of a focus on producing codified knowledge means that the project would risk being irrelevant to the community, which is more concerned with practical solutions to C&IT issues. Too great an emphasis on the tacit knowledge of conservative community members and

groups risks replicating existing non-inclusive processes. The challenge is to use the whole diversity of tacit knowledge of the community in research that embodies the principles of PAR.

Long-term sustainability of the process

In both of the participating communities there appears to be a certain degree of dependency of the participants on the researchers and project partners to generate ongoing motivation and to facilitate workshops and other activities. A further issue is that key project leaders in each community have left the area to live elsewhere. This suggests a need for some adaptability or succession of project leaders. To be effective, the LEARNERS process requires a dedicated and funded driver or project leader. The ideal project leader needs to:

- believe that the process can address their strategic needs;
- be committed to their community and to using the process;
- have sufficient time and resources to implement the process effectively;
- have good networks and networking/communication skills; and
- have the ability to explain or 'translate' the process to a variety of community groups and individuals.

While the workshops in each community initially attracted fairly large groups, only a small group are actively involved in planning and conducting the evaluations in each community. It appears that a more realistic model is a limited core group of people who are driving the process with a secondary group of interested stakeholders. The ideal is that the core group is representative of multiple community sectors. However, while this model appears to make the process more manageable, it raises questions about the extent to which new skills, knowledge and ideas will be passed on to others.

A key issue is therefore the long-term sustainability of the process and the identification of factors that will enable participants to continue using the process once the project is concluded. This will be the focus of future stages of the project.

Conclusion

As other research has found, implementing community participation and evaluation processes that aim to be inclusive and empowering raises many complex issues (Boyce, 2001; Lennie, 2002; Mathie and Greene, 1997). The preliminary results from our trial of the LEARNERS process in two diverse rural communities suggest a need to consider the extent to which this process will work successfully in all rural communities and with all kinds of groups. A key learning is the need to be more realistic about the type of people and groups that are willing to be involved in the participatory planning and evaluation of C&IT projects, and are interested in ongoing learning about the use of C&IT in community development.

The ideals of the process and the reality of implementing the process in the two communities suggested several contradictions. We argued that in critically assessing the implementation of the LEARNERS process it is useful to consider the macro and micro level contexts of the project and the interrelationships between them. A key

challenge is to use the whole diversity of tacit knowledge of community members in research that embodies the principles of PAR and offers practical solutions to C&IT problems. The long-term sustainability of the use of the LEARNERS process is a significant issue and a dedicated and funded local driver seems essential. A more realistic and practical focus and regular critical reflection and rigorous evaluation are clearly required for successful participatory community development projects that use C&IT.

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