

***Participatory Research, Monitoring & Evaluation:
Applications in Education***

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This paper introduces the concept of participatory research, monitoring and evaluation and examines its relevance to the field of education. It discusses some of the similarities between a participatory approach to evaluation and a constructivist approach to learning. It then describes a school setting where knowledge building and knowledge sharing practices have been successfully implemented, resulting in a stronger school community, improved student academic performance, and greater social justice.

I. An introduction to participatory monitoring and evaluation

Participatory research, monitoring, and evaluation are all approaches which democratize the creation and sharing of knowledge. There is an emphasis on the *participatory* or socially situated nature of this collective wisdom. Each voice matters, and yet it is the weakest voices that are amplified and given more weight. Perhaps these voices have been mute or silent in the past. Or perhaps they did speak out but were overpowered by dominant players and were not heard. Traditional methods of research and evaluation have emphasized objectivity, the role of the “expert,” and efficient data collection techniques. Participatory monitoring and evaluation (“PM&E”) rearrange the knowledge landscape so that the little people are the most important ones. Careful attention is paid to indigenous “know-how,” local needs, and socially constructed solutions drawn from within the community. Emphasis is also placed on the inter-

connectedness of theory, knowledge and practice, and the rich and symbiotic nature of this ongoing interplay or praxis. Most often, PM&E has been applied in the context of development work or poverty reduction, and yet it is relevant in almost every sphere of life. In this paper, the emphasis is on the field of *education* and *learning*, particularly among lower-income, immigrant, and/or marginalized populations.

II. The social and constructivist dimensions of learning

In “socially situated learning” (Resnick, 1991) or “distributed cognition,” (Salomon, 1998) the cultural and social context play a very important role. Knowledge is no longer simply contained in each individual’s head. Instead, it is spread across the environment -- in tools, in symbols, in artifacts, and in the interaction of several minds. It is almost as if people “think together” or “use each other to think.” Learning is not just the transmission of facts or theories but, rather, the social, dynamic (and very creative) process of knowledge construction. The nature of cognition is thus recast as inherently social and cultural. (Vygotsky, 1978).

In a constructivist classroom, students work together and build new knowledge in cooperation with one another while learning from the knowledge and skills of others. Students think actively and apply an understanding of facts and ideas to new and novel contexts. The teacher and fellow students actively scaffold an individual’s performance to new levels. In many ways, a constructivist and socially rooted approach to learning is quite similar to participatory research, monitoring and evaluation. In both cases, a facilitator (or teachers) encourages the beneficiaries (or students) to engage in a dialogue over time, to use learning and education to promote reflection, and to construct solutions that are authentic and contextually relevant.

III. The effects of knowledge sharing

In participatory monitoring and evaluation, theoretical knowledge plays an important part -- in informing action, in skills development, and in capacity building. It is therefore imperative that all people -- whether wealthy and educated or marginalized and poor -- have the ability to access, learn and share relevant information. This is also the dramatic and transformative power of education. An example of knowledge sharing and collaborative learning would be the “open access” and “open textbooks” movement. When textbooks are published by corporations with proprietary interests, costs are artificially high and access is limited to those who can afford them. But when knowledge is freely available --as with open source or free software or MIT’s OpenCourseWare or through the National Council of Educational Research & Training in India which provides free downloadable textbooks -- then the barriers of hoarding and secrecy are broken down.

IV. A continuous learning community: Knowledge sharing and participatory evaluation in education

What is the impact of knowledge sharing and constructionist learning in education and how is participatory evaluation used by schools? These theoretical questions are best answered by describing a case study in which increased parent involvement helped shape the school’s learning goals and also contributed to improved student achievement.¹

The California Academy for Liberal Studies (CALs) is a small charter middle school (grades 6-8) which serves students from low-income families in Los Angeles.

¹ The author of this paper served as a facilitator during the school’s “self study” and internal evaluation process.

Fewer than 16% of the adults in the neighborhood have completed high school and many of them live in poverty. The vast majority of students at CALS are Latino (96%) and over 50% are classified as English Learners when they start school. The school hopes to inspire in its graduates a “lifelong commitment to intellectual growth so that they will enrich and serve the communities in which they live.”

How could a school that starts out against the odds have such an ambitious mission? CALS students do not simply expect to get through school; they take a leadership role in their own education. The school has instilled a college-going culture and is infused with opportunities for continuous learning. Teachers are dedicated, feel a sense of ownership in the school, and actively collaborate with each other on a daily basis. And, particularly in the last year, parents are slowly but firmly asserting their role as members and decision-makers of the school.

The strength of CALS is in its people – the students, the teachers, the staff, the administrators, the parents, and the entire community. Their participation is active, engaged, authentic, and inspiring. But this was not always the case. At first, the college-going emphasis was not highly valued by the parents, most of whom had not attended college themselves. Many of these parents were more concerned about immediate academic goals rather than whether or not their child would go on to college. The founder of the school conducted focus groups (separate and combined) with the teachers, parents, and students as part of an internal (and highly participatory) evaluation of the school. He believed strongly that “social capital” or the benefits of interactions among people would increase if well-designed partnerships could enable families, students, and others in the community to interact in productive ways.

During the focus groups, teachers commented on the parents' lack of involvement and were concerned that they did not share the vision and mission of CALS. Brilliant (2001) has commented on how it is common for educators to perceive that Latino parents "do not have an interest in their children" and their education. However, Latino parents often have work schedules that prevent them from coming to school, and might have transportation and childcare issues. "[Parents], most of whom care deeply about the achievement and future of their children, but are unfamiliar with the system of education in the United States, do not understand how they are expected to relate to it, and do not know how or where to find assistance." (Nicolau & Ramos, 1990)

Since a majority of parents at CALS speak Spanish with little English, there was a tendency to keep to themselves and to let the teachers do their jobs. The school administration worked closely with the staff and teachers to help them to understand the barriers that prevent Latino parents from participating in their children's education. After a series of meetings and focus groups, many teachers and administrators agreed that relationship building activities between parents and teachers might bring them closer together. The school printed an announcement in the monthly CALS bilingual newsletter inviting parents to get involved as liaisons or volunteers. A group of interested parents (all of whom were bilingual) stepped forward, got to know each other, began defining their roles, and started establishing themselves as the voice of the parent community.

In the process, parents began to organize around various issues and events, the most important one being the development of the school's learning goals. Next, the parent organizers facilitated parent groups (which were open to the entire community), and a dramatic shift occurred as parents realized their power and shared responsibility as

architects of the CALS learning goals. After a year-long process, the school's learning outcomes were finally agreed upon by all stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators and students), and one parent commented,

The process helped me to see that all CALS staff, teachers, parents and students have common goals. It also confirmed that we all want to work together as a team to provide a good learning and education so our students (kids) will be better prepared for college and beyond. This is a wonderful experience that everyone wants to move forward and aren't afraid to face new challenges for the best.

Thus, the school's learning goals were not just an abstract set of outcomes imposed upon them by an outside evaluator or governing body. The goals were created by the school (after a lengthy and participatory self-evaluation process) and are real, tangible and meaningful to everyone in the school community. These learning goals continue to play an important role as they guide the school's curriculum, program development, staff training, and policy decisions. Over the past year, as commitment and engagement levels have deepened, parents and families are experiencing a greater sense of belonging and ownership within the CALS community thus creating a new culture of shared decision-making. Students understand the importance and value of the college-going culture and engage in self-reflection and analysis of their work on a regular basis.

There continues to be an emphasis on innovation and collaboration in teaching, and over half of the teachers at CALS are working on participatory research or "action research" projects. These projects go through a cyclical process in which teachers and administrators determine questions to research, based on their school or classroom situations, collect and analyze data from multiple sources to answer the questions, study, select, and implement interventions, and then reflect and evaluate on their "lessons learned."

Administrators and teachers at the school remain passionate about engaging parents and community members to create a powerful culture at CALS and to organize themselves as active decision-makers within the school. The principal regularly meets with teachers as part of a professional development workshop to elicit their feedback on improving parent engagement.

Jackson and Kassam (1998) have discussed how “[b]lending participatory evaluation with results-based management demands that local project participants, as well as other stakeholders, become engaged in a meaningful way in defining the results to be achieved by a project.” In this case, the whole-hearted and enthusiastic participation by all stakeholders helped shape the school’s learning outcomes and created a strong sense of pride, purpose and community. There have also been significant improvements in student achievement and test results since the “self-study” process was completed.

Social justice, activism, and innovation all share a commitment to eschewing the old tested ways and to ushering in new, uncharted, possibly anti-establishment solutions. Paulo Freire (1970) has written extensively on the importance of critical pedagogy and the transformative role of education. In this case, a small school went out of its way to be inclusive and reflective. In the process it reinvented itself, with strong support from all its stakeholders, and is now recognized as an exemplar by researchers and leaders in the school district. It is this willingness to stand side by side with the poor, the invisible, the marginalized and the disenfranchised that fuels both participatory evaluation and education reform.

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