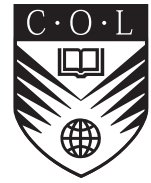


COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING



# PREST

Practitioner Research and  
Evaluation Skills Training in  
Open and Distance Learning

Researching marginalised and  
disadvantaged learners

HANDBOOK

**B5**

The PREST training resources aim to help open and distance learning practitioners develop and extend their research and evaluation skills. They can be used on a self-study basis or by training providers. The resources consist of two sets of materials: a six-module foundation course in research and evaluation skills and six handbooks in specific research areas of ODL. There is an accompanying user guide. A full list appears on the back cover.

The print-based materials are freely downloadable from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) website ([www.col.org/prest](http://www.col.org/prest)). Providers wishing to print and bind copies can apply for camera-ready copy which includes colour covers ([info@col.org](mailto:info@col.org)). They were developed by the International Research Foundation for Open Learning ([www.irfol.ac.uk](http://www.irfol.ac.uk)) on behalf of COL.

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### Handbook B5: Researching marginalised and disadvantaged learners

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# Researching marginalised and disadvantaged learners

HANDBOOK

**B5**

## Handbook overview

Welcome to handbook B5 in the PREST series. This handbook focuses on the issues that arise in researching marginalised and disadvantaged learners. Its overall aim is to provide you with information, tools, skills and guidance on research and evaluation methods that are appropriate for doing research with and for learners who are disadvantaged in some major way compared with learners in the mainstream.

This is a very important area of research for those involved in ODL. Why? Simply because governments and organisations around the world look to ODL methods and approaches to solve the problem of how to reach potential learners who are on the margins of their societies. Conventional approaches rely on bringing learners together in schools or on campuses, for daily lessons, with a teacher with whom they are face-to-face. These approaches are not reaching people who are too poor to come, who live far from these institutions and cannot leave their families and communities to relocate, or who are discriminated against because of their ethnicity, gender, religion, or some physical disability. By enabling people to study in their own communities, rather than requiring them to travel to a major centre or even to live there, ODL gives them a chance they would otherwise not have. Researchers have the job of supporting these providing institutions and organisations by using systematic research methods to discover what kinds of programming and support, work best for these learners. This handbook will help you in that task of discovery.

## Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this introduction, you should be able to:

- 1 State the aims and objectives of the handbook.
- 2 State your own aims, objectives and timelines in working with the handbook.
- 3 Describe how you will be using the handbook.

## Aims of the Handbook

The aims of this handbook are to:

- ▶ define the terms 'marginalised' and 'disadvantaged' as they apply in particular to learners
- ▶ explore various approaches to researching marginalised and disadvantaged learners
- ▶ familiarise ODL practitioners with participatory action research (PAR), a research strategy often used with marginalised or disadvantaged peoples
- ▶ enable ODL practitioners to use this strategy to research issues arising from provision of ODL to marginalised and disadvantaged learners.

## Handbook objectives

When you have worked through this handbook, you should be able to:

- 1 drawing from examples, define 'marginalised' and 'disadvantaged' in the context of teaching and learning, and explain the basis for the definitions
- 2 drawing from examples and your own experience of research, identify and analyse the strengths and limitations of various approaches to researching marginalised and disadvantaged peoples
- 3 on the basis of case studies, analyse the PAR approach; in particular, its principles, characteristics, procedures, and the problems that arise in its use
- 4 apply these principles, characteristics and procedures in a critical manner to a case study of a project.

### Activity 1 20 mins



#### Your own aims and objectives

Take a few minutes to write down your reasons for working through this handbook. Are your own aims and objectives reflected in the ones that are set out above?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit* ▶

---

## Handbook organisation

The handbook is structured into this introduction and six units, as follows.

This introduction: (1 hr)

Unit 1: Definitions and questions (3 hrs)

Unit 2: Research methods (3 hrs)

Unit 3: Participatory action research (PAR) (3 hrs)

Unit 4: Doing PAR (5 hrs)

Unit 5: Case study (5 hrs)

Unit 6: Project (optional)

Each unit is made up of the following components:

- ▶ an introductory paragraph or two that provide an overview of the unit, its focus and outcomes
- ▶ one or more activities for you to engage in, such as readings to complete and analyse, questions to answer, or problems to solve
- ▶ a commentary on these responses that takes you deeper into the topic by providing new information and suggesting further reading
- ▶ a unit summary
- ▶ feedback on your responses to the questions or problems posed in each activity.

You will need about 20 hours to work through the first five units of this handbook. The time required for the project unit is really up to you, since it depends on the scope of your project and the number of people involved in it. A time limit is suggested for each step of the project process, but this can only be a guide.

## How to use the materials

The materials in this handbook are designed to be used in two ways:

### For self study

The handbook is self-contained. All the readings you will need are contained in the *Resources File* which accompanies this handbook. In addition, the general feedback provided in response to each activity is intended to keep you on track, yet, at the same time, reinforce your own thinking and reflection.

### For workshops

The handbook can also be used in a workshop setting. Each of the activities could be done by small groups, and the feedback used as general guidance for both workshop leaders and participants. In a workshop setting, feedback can be more individualised, since participants have an opportunity to ask questions and receive direct answers, both of the workshop leader and of each other.

The project unit is intended primarily for those who will be doing the work contained in the handbook for credit; the project is intended, at least in part, as a vehicle for that credit, a piece of work that can be assessed and assigned a grade.

**Activity 2** 20 mins**Using the Handbook**

This activity will help you to think about how you are going to use the handbook in order to meet your own needs.

- 1 Take a few minutes to note down the way in which you will be using the handbook.
- 2 If you are using it in self-study mode, note also how much time you have available, and your own goals in terms of completing the work. You might want to put some actual dates or timelines into a schedule, as a way of monitoring your progress and keeping yourself on track toward your goal.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

**Resources**

The following resources are used in this handbook:

<b>Resource</b>	<b>Name when referred to in our text</b>	<b>Location</b>
Molteno, M. 1988 'Education at the margins', keynote paper presented to the International Extension College conference <i>Education at the Margins</i> , Cambridge, 15-16 June (extract: II Marginalisation and poverty, pp 2-5)	<i>Molteno II</i>	Resources File
Molteno, M. 1988 'Education at the margins', keynote paper presented to the International Extension College conference <i>Education at the Margins</i> , Cambridge, 15-16 June (extract: IV Research – who? and how? pp 9-18)	<i>Molteno IV</i>	Resources File
Warr, D. 1992 <i>Distance teaching in the village</i> , Cambridge: International Extension College (extract Prologue pp viii-xii))	<i>Warr 1</i>	Resources File
Warr, D. 1992 <i>Distance teaching in the village</i> , Cambridge: International Extension College (extract: Course research, pp 11-19)	<i>Warr 2</i>	Resources File
Denscombe, M. 1998 <i>The good research guide</i> , Buckingham: Open University (extract: Issues concerned with the use of action research)	<i>Denscombe</i>	Resources File
British Council. 2002 <i>Nigeria Community Education Programme</i> , London: British Council (extract: Success in adult education, pp 9-13)	<i>British Council</i>	Resources File
Voyageur, C. 2001 'Reading, willing and able: prospects for distance learning in Canada's First Nations Community', <i>Canadian Journal of Distance Education</i> 16, 1: 102-112	<i>Voyageur</i>	Resources File
Mathie, A. and Dighe, A. 2001 'Participatory project planning (SAVINI): experience and lessons', <i>Indian Journal of Open Learning</i> 10, 2: 175-192	<i>Mathie</i>	Resources File



These resources are included as an appendix at the end of the publication.

## Other resources

The following books may be helpful when you come to implement the process that is outlined in this handbook.

Freire, P. 1970 *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. 1983 *Ethnography: principles on practice*, London: Methuen

Hopkins, D. 1985 *A teacher's guide to classroom research*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press

Horton, D., Peters, J. and Gaventa, J. 1991 *We make the road by walking*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press

Kemmis, S. and McTaggart, R. (eds.) 1992 *The action research planner* (3rd ed), Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press

Lewin, K. 1948 *Resolving social conflicts*, New York: Harper

Maguire, P. 1987 *Doing participatory research: a feminist approach*, Amherst, MA: The Centre for International Education, School of Education, University of Massachusetts

Selener, D. 1997 *Participatory action research and social change*, Ithaca: Cornell Participatory Action Research Network

Schon, D. 1983 *The reflective practitioner: how professionals think in action*, London: Temple Smith

Torres, C. 1992 'Participatory action research and popular education in Latin America' in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 5, 1: 51-62

Zuber-Skerrit, O. (ed.) 1996 *New directions in action research*, London: Falmer

## Summary

In this introduction you:

- ▶ learnt about the aims, objectives, and structure of the handbook
- ▶ reflected on your own aims and objectives, the way you intend to use the handbook, and the time you have available for this work

Now on to the substance of the course – who are the marginalised?

## Feedback to selected activities



### Feedback to Activity 1

We hope that your reasons for working through this handbook are matched by the content and process of the units that follow. Perhaps you have some particular marginalised group, or a particular research project, in mind. If you do, it will be useful to keep that group or project in mind as you complete the activities that are set out in the handbook – you will have several opportunities to reflect on the questions that you would be asking in your research, the methods that you would use to pursue them, and the ways in which the answers might or might not be useful to you.

---

### Feedback to Activity 2

It's difficult to give you specific feedback on what you have noted about your own time allocation and your plans for using the handbook. All we can advise is that you be honest with yourself. Set realistic goals. You are not in competition with anyone, except possibly yourself!

---

# Definitions and questions

## UNIT 1

### Unit overview

Before launching into how to research marginalised and disadvantaged learners, we must first define our terms. Who are the marginalised? What do we mean by 'disadvantaged'? What sorts of research questions arise with reference to these learners? In this unit we will be seeking answers to these questions, with the help of some readings by two educators whose work has focused on marginalised learners, Marion Molteno, who works with the NGO Save the Children, and David Warr, whose work as a long-term consultant and technical advisor has taken him to many countries of Africa and South Asia.

### Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit, you should be able to:

- 1 define the terms 'marginalised' and 'disadvantaged'.
- 2 list some research questions that arise in regard to marginalised learners.
- 3 begin thinking about the methods one might use to answer these questions.

### Defining 'marginalised'

Who are the marginalised? Clearly they are people who live 'on the margins', but on the margins of what? How are those margins created and defined? Let's begin with your own ideas about how you would define the 'marginalised learner'.

#### Activity 1 45 mins



#### Your own definition

- 1 Take a few minutes to note down the kinds of learners you think of when you read the term 'marginalised'.
- 2 In your own context of teaching and learning, which learners or potential learners are 'on the margins'?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

## The ideas of Marion Molteno

Let's turn now to Marion Molteno, to see what light she can shed on this questions.

### Activity 2 45 mins



#### Marginalization, education and poverty

Use the resource *Molteno II* in the *Resources File* for this activity. This is Section II (*'Marginalization', education and poverty*) from Molteno's address to the IEC conference *Education at the Margins*.

As you read, try to reach answers to the following questions:

- 1 Whose view is reflected in the term 'marginal'?
- 2 In summary form, who does Molteno say are the 'marginalised'?
- 3 Why is education so often seen as a way out for the marginalised?
- 4 Molteno lists a number of categories of marginalised children: what underlying cause ties these categories together?
- 5 What three kinds of poverty does Molteno define?
- 6 What advantages does Molteno see in working with the term 'inequality' rather than the term 'poverty'?
- 7 Molteno uses the word 'disadvantage' once – what do you think she means by it?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

## The terms 'marginalised' and 'disadvantaged'

This handbook is intended to focus on both the marginalised and disadvantaged. What is the difference between these terms? In government circles, at least in North America, 'disadvantaged' is often used as a euphemism for 'poor', as in this definition from a US government health careers scholarship programme for the 'disadvantaged':

*An individual from a disadvantaged background is defined as one who comes from an environment that has inhibited the individual from obtaining the knowledge, skill, and abilities required to enrol in and graduate from a health professions school, or from a programme providing education or training in an allied health profession; or comes from a family with an annual income below a level based on low income thresholds according to family size published by the US Bureau of Census, adjusted annually for changes in the Consumer Price Index, and adjusted by the Secretary, HHS, for use in health professions and nursing programmes.*

It is understandable that programme administrators need definitions like this one in order to sort out who is eligible for scholarships. At the same time, it is difficult to escape the thought that the bureaucrats who devised the above definition are doing their utmost not to use terms like 'poor', 'powerless' or 'marginalised', which might be politically dangerous. In this handbook, we continue to use the term 'marginalised', and, when necessary, words like 'poor' and 'powerless' as well, precisely because of their political implications and consequences.

What implications do terms like 'marginalised' have for our research efforts? One possibility is that because such terms are politically loaded, by using them we might experience more difficulty getting our research proposals accepted by funders. Would this be the case in your institution or organisation, do you think? Another implication of using the definition of 'marginalised' that Molteno has provided, which ties marginalization to powerlessness, is that by researching the marginalised we are studying the powerless. If we are trying to find out what kinds of programmes and services work best to include the powerless and, further, to support them so that they succeed and thereby acquire more power over their situation, we are at least implicitly engaged in the work of transformation. Heeding Molteno's categorisation of poverty, this work of transformation and empowerment needs to go on not just at the level of the individual, the person living in poverty, but also at the levels of the household, the community, and the nation. Perhaps it is little wonder that those in power might find this threatening!

We will discuss this issue in greater depth in subsequent units. For now, let us turn our attention to the kinds of research questions that are raised when we focus on the poor and the powerless.

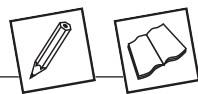
## Possible research questions

If, as researchers, we are concerned with educational programmes for the poor and powerless, what kinds of issues are we likely to be focusing on? What kinds of questions will arise in our efforts to deal with those issues, and what kinds of methods will we need to use in order to answer those questions?

The reading in the following activity gives us a more concrete setting for asking – and answering – these questions. The setting is a village in Pakistan. The circumstances that bring the author to this village arise from a project hosted by Allama Iqbal Open University that focused on seeing whether the University could work with rural communities in Pakistan and help them, through distance education techniques, to improve the quality of day-to-day life in the village. In other words, the project aimed at giving villagers more power and control over their lives and livelihoods, to help them adapt to changing conditions in the village, not to provide qualifications that would encourage people to join the exodus to the towns. David Warr, author of this extract from his monograph entitled *Distance teaching in the village*

(International Extension College, 1992), was lead technical advisor on the project, which began in 1982.

### Activity 3 45 mins



#### Research questions

Use the resource *Warr 1* in the *Resources File* for this activity. This is the prologue from Warr's *Distance teaching in the village*.

Read it now, keeping the following questions in mind:

- 1 Would you describe the villagers who are participating in these classes as 'marginalised'? If so, in what way or ways?
- 2 There are a number of kinds of data collection mentioned in this extract. Who is collecting these data? How are they being collected, and for what purpose?
- 3 What input do the participants in these classes appear to have into decisions about what topics are covered? What other kinds of interactions happen between the developers of the programme and the participants?
- 4 If you were one of the project people visiting these classes, what kinds of questions would you have about what you are seeing? Which of these questions would require some research in order to answer them? How would you go about answering these questions?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

All the questions raised in the last activity would require research to answer them, some of it immediate, some of it more long-term or longitudinal. We will pursue possible research methods in the following section, and in the next unit. It is important to note at this point that not all questions you might wish to ask are readily amenable to empirical research. For example, you might be asking yourself whether the project goals are just and equitable given the overall needs of the country of Pakistan. This is more of a value judgement than a research question. You could canvass others' opinions about this and arrive at a range of answers, but you are not likely to arrive at anything resembling a definitive answer to your question.

## Beginning to think about methods

Our final task in this unit is to begin to think about what kinds of methods we could use in order to answer the questions that are prompted by educational programming in settings such as the ones we had read about here, for learners who are relatively poor and powerless. For the questions that have been prompted for you, and that appear to be research questions – that is, research is required in order to answer them – you now have an opportunity

to give some thought to how you might go about answering them, in the following activity.

### Activity 4 45 mins



#### Beginning to think about methods

- 1 Look back at the research questions that you came up with in Activity 3, which were prompted by your reading about the FEPR project.
- 2 Taking each of your questions in turn, note down some of the methods you could use in order to answer them.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

You might wish to draw up a similar table using the questions that you have generated. You will have an opportunity in the following units to develop these initial thoughts about methods.

## Unit summary

In this unit we have looked at some of the complexities of defining 'marginalised' and 'disadvantaged' and noted some key points as follows:

- we reached a working definition of who we mean when we talk of 'the marginalised' – namely, the poor and powerless
- the process of marginalization is a political and economic one
- education alone is not likely to bring the marginalised into the centre where the holders and wielders of power reside
- education can, however, improve the life chances of the marginalised and enable them to gain more power over their lives and livelihoods
- researching the marginalised as potential or actual learners inevitably involves us in economic and political change and sometimes struggle, and these issues affect and shape our research methodology.

It is to these issues that we turn our attention in the next units.

### Feedback to selected activities



#### Feedback to Activity 1

After a bit of thought, my list of marginalised learners – written in the context of Canada, where I live – includes the very poor; those who neither speak nor read French or English very well, those who live in very remote communities where only limited learning opportunities are available, and those who have

some physical or mental impairment that seriously interferes with their ability to learn.

Canada is one of the world's most affluent countries. Even in a country as wealthy and advanced in technological terms as this, there are marginalised people. In fact, there is one group, Canada's aboriginal or First Nations people, who share every item on my list:

- ▶ they are, for the most part, very poor, compared with the majority of Canadians
- ▶ their first languages are neither of Canada's two official languages; instead, they grow up speaking Cree, or Dene, or Ojibwa, or Blackfoot, or another of dozens of indigenous languages
- ▶ many of them live in remote communities, on reservations that were granted to them by treaty or other agreements with the British Crown and subsequently the Canadian government. In many reservations there is very limited schooling available, and what schooling exists is of poor quality
- ▶ because of their poverty and alienation from the mainstream of Canadian society, First Nations people tend to suffer from a higher incidence of serious illnesses, substance abuse and disability.

In writing this list, and especially in focusing on First Nations people, I begin to realise that even though a group might constitute the numerical majority in their region or even in their country, they can still be marginalised, meaning that they are on the margins in terms of economic and political power. In Canada, the aboriginal people lost their lands to the colonising powers and were pushed to the margins of Canadian society, where they continue to suffer this centuries-old loss. Have the people on your list also been pushed to the margins? Or have they been marginalised by means of some other set of forces and circumstances?

Also, when I think about many of the First Nations people I have worked with, I realise that they are people who care very much for their identity as Cree or Dene; as small children they saw the reserve as the centre of their universe, not on the margins at all. If they see themselves as marginalised now, it is only in response to the discrimination and rejection that they have experienced as older children and adults, from those in the non-aboriginal, mostly 'white' mainstream of Canadian society. So is marginalization primarily in the eye of the beholder?

---

## Feedback to Activity 2

Here are some possible answers for you to consider:

- ▶ According to Molteno, the term 'marginal' always reflects the point of view of the dominant – you can be marginal only if someone with greater power says you are.



- ▶ The 'marginalised' for Molteno are the poor and powerless – those without resources and without power.
  - ▶ Education is seen as a kind of magic that will transform any situation, but Molteno is cautious. Lack of education for Molteno is more a symptom of marginalization than a cause, and to bring about transformation, one must attack the root causes rather than the symptoms.
  - ▶ Molteno is looking for the underlying causes of marginalization – of girls, of the disabled, of ethnic minorities, of pastoralists – and sees poverty as the one factor tying all these categories together, 'the great excluder'.
  - ▶ Poverty exists at the level of the household, the community and the state. This puts girl children in poor households in poor communities in poor countries at quadruple disadvantage.
  - ▶ Molteno finds 'inequality' even more illuminating than 'poverty', because 'inequality points up the fact that some have more than others: even though most are poor, some are rich; even though most are powerless, a few have power. Molteno sums up her argument this way: *'the issue is one of grossly unequal distribution – of resources, of the power to control and allocate them. Only by challenging these inequalities – between and within nations – can we expect a transformational effect'*.
  - ▶ Molteno uses the term 'disadvantage' to mean an unfavourable situation or circumstance. I suspect she uses it only once because it does not convey the power of terms like 'poverty' and especially 'inequality'
- 

### Feedback to Activity 3

Here are some possible answers for you to consider:

#### 1 Marginalised or not?

When I read this extract, I noted a number of things about the villagers that would characterise them as 'marginal' or 'marginalised'. Dhok Gujran, the first community described, seems very remote – even a Land Rover can't reach it. There is no clinic or other formal provider of medical services. Many of the participants are not able to read, hence the use of audiocassettes and posters. There does not seem to be any formally organised education for the children, judging by the number of them who are onlookers in the class. There does not appear to be a school building – the class is taking place out of doors. Poverty is a relative thing, but these villagers seem relatively poor – electrification is only now reaching them, for example.

#### 2 Data collection

In terms of data collection, I noted that the group leader in the Dinga class was taking attendance, and completing a feedback form. The comments and questions will be conveyed to the course producers, so that they can respond

to some of the questions in later tape recordings. I am assuming that the attendance data will be used to inform project staff about the level of interest and participation the classes are attracting, which is one measure of the success of the project. In a footnote, there is also a mention of the pre-testing of course materials, in which a questionnaire was used to see what learners could recall of the class session, despite the many distractions of the village setting.

### 3 Input of participants

The course producers seem to be genuinely interested in what the participants in these classes have to say. They respond to the questions that are collected on the feedback forms, for example. In addition, the men studying livestock management are taking a course that villagers who took earlier courses requested, suggesting that the course producers are always on the alert for topics that would interest and be of benefit to the villagers.

### 4 Questions raised

Watching these classes would prompt all kinds of questions for me. For example, the leader of the women's health class appears to be a villager herself, one who has presumably been trained by project personnel to take on this role. Who are these women? What role did they play in the village before taking on this job, and what role will they play once the classes are over? Will there be some change in their status? Will the role of facilitating learning groups mean some expansion of horizons for them? And the villager-participants, who are they? Do they include the poorest of the villagers, or mostly the more successful ones? Are they applying in their day-to-day lives what they are learning in these groups? Are they encouraged by their participation in these classes to go on to learn other kinds of things, perhaps reading, writing and arithmetic? The women who are talking about setting up a poultry cooperative might need such skills, for example. Finally, what is the long-term impact of classes like these? Five or ten years down the road, are these villagers actually living healthier and more productive lives, with greater control over health and livelihoods? And what can we learn from the experiences of this project that could be applied in other, similar projects elsewhere? Are the lessons generalizable?

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### Feedback to Activity 4

Here are the questions that I thought of asking, had I been an observer of this project. In the following table, I have listed the questions on the left, and the possible methods on the right.

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Research question	Possible methods
The women who have been trained as group facilitators: who are they?	A list could be drawn up from project records, or from additional questioning of the women leaders, of their names, ages and educational background. Some information would also be needed about their households – livelihood, husband's income and status – since it is from this that a woman's status is likely to derive in a village setting.
What role did they play in the village before taking on this job? How is this new role changing their status in the village – expanding horizons?	These kinds of answers are most likely to come from interviews. These women do read and write, so a written questionnaire could be administered, but interviews would be likely to gather richer data.
Who are the participants? Do they include the poorest villagers?	The group leaders could be trained to gather this information. They probably know it anyway, being members of the village themselves!
Are participants applying what they learn?	The surest way to gather this information is through observation of participants' lives. Interviews might produce answers intended to please the interviewer, rather than the reality of these participants' lives.
Are participants likely to want more of these organised learning experiences, given their success in these groups?	Again, the group leaders are the people best placed to gather this kind of information, through questioning of participants.
What is the long-term impact of these programmes?	Researchers would need to return to the villages where the programmes were offered and, through a combination of interviews and observations, gather data that could be compared with the data available at the close of the project. That is, project personnel would establish a set of indicators of success, and detailed information on those indicators at the close of the project, so that any changes in those indicators could be readily determined by subsequent researchers.
What lessons from this project can be applied in subsequent projects?	This is an outcome of the project evaluation. The evaluation team would amongst other tasks determine what lessons can be learned from this project that could be applied elsewhere.



# Research methods



## Unit overview

In this unit we pick up where we left off in Unit 1, namely, with some unanswered research questions. We will look at a range of research methods, both quantitative and qualitative, and assess their advantages and drawbacks in helping us answer questions about marginalised learners. We will also return to Molteno's keynote address, in which she advocates a particular approach to researching marginalised learners. We will look at how that approach differs from the other approaches we have discussed in terms of purpose, intent, and methods, and suggest a label for it – participatory action research, or PAR.

## Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit, you should be able to

- 1 describe a range of research methods that can be used for researching marginalised learners
- 2 analyse their advantages and drawbacks in the context of marginalised learners
- 3 describe, analyse and label an alternative approach to researching marginalised learners – its purpose, intent and methods.

## A range of research approaches

The process of choosing appropriate research methods is not a matter of 'right' and 'wrong' choices. The researcher is faced with a variety of options and alternatives. Each choice brings with it a set of assumptions about the social world it investigates. Each choice brings with it a set of advantages and disadvantages. Gains in one direction will bring with them losses in another, and the researcher has to live with this.

There is no 'right' direction to take. There are however, approaches and methods that are better suited for tackling specific issues and questions than others. Let's return now to the questions that you raised in the previous unit, and take a look at what kinds of approaches and methods might work best for tackling them.

**Activity 1** 1 hour**Questions, methods and answers**

Return to your list of methods made in Activity 4 of the last unit.

- 1 Try to categorise or label the methods you suggested. For example, you might have suggested ‘questionnaires’ or ‘interviews’ or ‘observation’ or ‘document review’. List these methods.
- 2 Then, taking each in turn, suggest one or two reasons why you think this method is a good choice for the particular question you are answering, and for the group you will be studying.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

**Sources on methods**

Did you come up with similar lists and reasons? Yours may well have differed from mine; we have probably had different experiences of research. My list of methods, however, is pretty standard. In addition, I will admit that the list and especially the reasons for choosing these methods was helped by a couple of textbooks that I have used when doing workshops on research methods (see box).

If you can get your hands on these, they make excellent resources for researchers, whether beginners or experts.

Let's take a closer look at our list of methods, now, and consider what the disadvantages of these methods might be.

**Sources on research methods**

Denscombe, M. 1998 *The good research guide*, Buckingham: Open University Press

Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. 2000 *Research methods in education* (5th ed.), London: Routledge Falmer

**Activity 2** 1 hour**Methods and drawbacks**

Note down your thoughts in response to the following questions. Take your time in thinking about them. It will help you to think about drawbacks if you mentally put yourself in the position first of the researcher, and then of the person being ‘researched’.

- 1 Take another look at your answers to Activity 1 above. This time, think about what drawbacks or limitations each of the methods you list might have.
- 2 Will this method give you a complete answer to your question?
- 3 Is its use likely to present any difficulties in terms of the group you are researching and their situation?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

## Approaches to researching the marginalised

It's time now to turn from our focus on methods to consider more broadly the approaches we are taking to our research. We need to recall that in this handbook we are focusing on the marginalised, the poor and powerless. How does this focus affect our methods? What sort of approach to our research, regardless of which methods we choose, is likely to yield the most beneficial results, not only for us as researchers, but more importantly for the subjects of our research? Let's join Marion Molteno once again as she delivers her keynote address to the conference on 'Education at the Margins'.

### Activity 3 1 hour



#### Approaches to research

Use the resource *Molteno IV* in the *Resources File* for this activity. This is the Section 4 ('Research - Who? and How?') of the Molteno address.

Use this to help you answer the following questions.

- 1 If we focus on the classroom alone and what goes on there, what are we missing, according to Molteno?
- 2 Who understands life on the margins?
- 3 What is the problem with what Molteno terms 'currently fashionable notions of participation'?
- 4 What do we need to do if we want our research to be useful to those on the margins?
- 5 What is the problem with our existing categories and models?
- 6 What alternative does Molteno advocate?
- 7 How does the Save the Children research project exemplify this alternative?
- 8 The research used as an example was done with children. Do you think it would also work with adult learners? Why or why not?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

## Labelling the approach

The approach to research that we have been discussing here has been labelled 'participatory action research' or PAR. The remaining units of this handbook will focus on this approach, which, as we shall see, arose from a desire by researchers to use theory and research to solve immediate social problems. This is research not for its own sake. Rather, the purpose of PAR is to bring about change. The principle at work here is that research should not only be used to gain a better understanding of the problems which arise in everyday practice, but actually set out to alter things, and to do so as part of

the research process, rather than tag it on as an afterthought. Further, for this research to bring about meaningful change, it must involve those whose lives are being changed as participants in the research and not just subjects of it. Research thereby becomes part of the process of social transformation, rather than standing apart from it.

PAR is a strategy for research rather than a specific method. It is concerned with the aims and the design of the research, but does not specify any constraints when it comes to the means for data collection. Questionnaires, interviews, observation, documentary research – all can be used in PAR. The difference is that the questions on the questionnaires are developed in collaboration with the people whose ideas, perceptions and behaviours are under scrutiny. The questionnaires are administered and the interviews carried out by the people whose lives are under scrutiny. Observations are done by people who are participants in the situations they are observing. Documents are scrutinised by people who are insiders to the lives and circumstances portrayed in those documents.

We are devoting a substantial portion of this handbook to this approach, because PAR was developed by researchers whose primary concern was with the lives of those on the margins, and how research could work to transform lives or at least change them for the better. Making this approach work in an educational setting – in particular an ODL setting – is the focus of the next two units.

## Unit summary

In this unit we have looked at:

- ▶ a number of research methods that can be employed in answering questions that arise from experiencing at some level the lives of those on the margins of their societies
- ▶ the advantages these methods offer
- ▶ their problems and drawbacks
- ▶ participatory action research (PAR), which is an approach to researching the marginalised that starts with the marginalised themselves rather than with the systems of which they are part, in the hopes of transforming those systems in ways that make them work for the marginalised instead of against them.



## Feedback to selected activities



This feedback is in answer question 1 and 2.

### Feedback to Activity 1

When I looked at my list of questions and methods, I discovered that I had suggested four kinds of methods:

#### Question 1 Questionnaires

For example, to find out more about the women who have been trained as leaders or facilitators of the learning groups, I thought that a questionnaire might work, as a way of finding out their names, ages, educational background, household, income and status. A questionnaire-type survey, administered by the group leaders, might also be a way of finding out more about who the participants in the programme are, and whether the programme is reaching the poorest villagers.

#### Interviews

For example, in order to find out what roles the participants in this programme have in the village, and how those roles might be changing as a result of the programme, I suggested an interview approach as a way of gathering rich data about these women. I used the word 'rich' to refer to information that is more than superficial, that helps us understand the nuances and subtleties of village roles and statuses, not just their external appearance.

#### Observation

For example, I thought that observation would be a useful method for discovering the extent to which participants are applying what they are learning in the FEPR programme. Researchers could simply observe what was happening in a variety of households over a period of time to see whether the women of the household are using the new techniques or information they are learning in their groups.

#### Document review

I also thought that some document review will be required. There are likely to be existing lists of participants, for instance; these could be reviewed to see what information they offer about the participants in addition to their names. Also, project evaluation always involves a good deal of document review.

Why choose these methods in particular? Here's what I am hoping to accomplish by using these methods.

#### Question 2 Questionnaires

I like the idea of having the group leaders administer a questionnaire, for example, because this enables them, even with little training, to standardise the

inquiry. That is, by using a questionnaire, they will ask every respondent exactly the same questions, with no scope for variation. There would need to be some training, so that they ask the questions in the same way of everyone, but this is fairly straightforward. If the questionnaires have a number of pre-existing answers from which respondents can choose, this makes the respondent's job easier, and further standardises the results. Questionnaires are a popular instrument for gathering information because they enable researchers to gather information from a potentially large group of people in a relatively brief period of time.

### Interviews

Interviews are a good way to get data which deal with topics in depth and in detail. The research can gain valuable insights based on the depth of the information gathered. Respondents also typically enjoy being interviewed; interviews give them a rare chance to talk about themselves and their ideas, hopes or dreams at length to someone whose purpose is to listen without being critical.

### Observation

Systematic observation – that is, observation that uses an observation schedule with the items that are to be observed clearly set out – directly records what people do, rather than what they say they do. Especially when the observer is also a member of the group being observed, observation offers the possibility of rich insights into social processes.

### Document review

Large amounts of information are held in documents, especially in a project situation. Documentary research offers a cost-effective way of getting data, such as statistics about FEPRAs participants, from sources that are permanent and open to scrutiny by others.

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## Feedback to Activity 2

In choosing my methods for the questions I would like to answer, I am aware that although I can accomplish many useful things by using them, I may also run into some problems with them.

First, I don't think that any of these methods alone will give me a complete enough answer to my questions. I prefer to use a variety of methods. Not only can I put together a more complete answer that way, but I also increase my chances of getting an accurate answer, since I can check the findings from using one method with findings from using each of the other methods. This cross-checking is called 'triangulation' of data.

In terms of the risks and limitations of each method, here are my thoughts:

## Questionnaires

Pre-defined questions help to standardise the process and ensure that everyone gets asked the same questions. Those administering the questionnaire may find it frustrating and restricting, however, to be held to the exact wording that is set out in the questionnaire. For example, if the group leaders are assigned the task of administering this questionnaire to their participants, and are trained to do so, because they know the women in the group so well they might think of better ways to ask a particular question. They might also think of better questions to ask. Likewise, if the respondents are given a set of answers from which to choose, they might well find that frustrating too, especially if none of the pre-set answers matches the answer they want to give. These 'pre-coded' questions can bias the findings towards the researcher's, rather than the respondent's, way of seeing things.

## Interviews

Interviews can produce rich data, but they also have drawbacks. For one thing, they can be very time consuming, for both the researcher and the respondent. Another problem is that the information produced by interviews is non-standardised; this can pose difficulties for those whose job it is to analyse the results and make some sense out of them. A third problem is reliability. The relationship between interviewer and respondent, the circumstances in which the interview takes place, the way in which the questions are asked – all of these factors affect the results, which can be inconsistent and possibly biased. It is also possible that the respondent is simply saying what she thinks the interviewer wants to hear; or, conversely, is afraid to speak openly.

## Observation

Unlike questionnaires and interviews, observation yields information about what people actually do rather than what they say they do. This is also a limitation of observation, however. The focus on behaviour describes what happens, but not why it happens. It does not deal with the intentions that motivated the behaviour. A further problem arises from the use of observation schedules. These help you systematise the process, but their use can also lead to oversimplification. By forcing what you observe into particular categories, you might miss or distort the subtleties of the situation you are observing. You are probably also missing much of the context of what you are observing, contextual information which can have a bearing on what is being observed. Finally, your presence as an observer can be a problem: can an observer with a clipboard and observation schedule really avoid disrupting the naturalness of the setting?

## Document review

Even documents, solid and authoritative though they seem, can present problems. For one thing, they may not be authoritative at all. It is important to

know who wrote or compiled the document, and for what reasons. Documents sometimes owe more to the interpretations of those who produce them than to an objective picture of reality.

Did your list of problems include some of these? You may well have noted some problems that I did not. Again, our experiences of research have probably been quite different. You may well have encountered problems with these methods that I have not. Let us leave this consideration of methods now and think more broadly about the kind of approach we are using in our research.

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## Feedback to Activity 3

### 1 What do we miss by looking at the classroom alone?

Molteno points out with great clarity what we miss if we look only at classrooms. For instance, if we look only at classrooms and not at the whole picture of children's lives, we might miss the fact that there are children who should be in these classrooms but are not there because their parents can't afford the fees, or because they were orphaned when their parents died of AIDS.

### 2 Who understands life on the margins?

Molteno's answer is, the people that live that reality. They can't write about it, however; so it is up to people like us to do so, on their behalf and working with them, finding ways of being able to listen to the people who can expand our understanding.

### 3 'Currently fashionable notions of participation'

Molteno points out how much we talk about enabling the marginalised to participate in the research that is done on their lives, yet how little we actually practice this participatory approach. Unfortunately, the standard research approach often leads us to conclusions that bear little relationship to the reality of the lives of those who are our research subjects. It is a challenge to find ways of being sensitive to local perceptions and at the same time being aware of the dominant structures that have helped shape those perceptions.

### 4 What do we need to do?

We need to avoid jumping in with pre-packaged solutions that our knowledge of other situations may have led us to devise. We may know a great deal about a global range of solutions, but that knowledge does not necessarily confer wisdom.

## 5 What is the problem with our existing categories and models?

Our categories and models may not be appropriate for understanding the lives and situations of marginalised people. We need to be especially wary of relying on the 'one-size-fits-all' approach. We need new categories and models, models that come from the marginalised themselves.

## 6 What alternative does Molteno advocate?

Molteno's alternative approach starts with children and their perceptions, drawn from accounts of people who work closely with them and listen closely to them, rather than with the system that is trying to provide education to these children. The approach starts with questions about children's lives rather than questions about schools.

## 7 The Save the Children research project

The Save the Children research project that Molteno describes exemplifies this approach, in the following ways.

- ▶ this project focused on learning systematically from the existing understandings of local workers
- ▶ these understandings were then combined with the perspectives and skills of presentation of more western-educated colleagues
- ▶ the results were documented in a form that reflects the reality of life on the margins, yet does so in a way that informs those at the 'centre' – decision-makers who have power over the lives of those on the margins
- ▶ contributions from children and those who work with them were sought in a number of forms, including oral accounts, which were then drafted by those who were more comfortable with written language
- ▶ the submissions produced in this way included analytical overviews and case studies, all of them submitted to the original contributors for critique and comment
- ▶ a group of people representing all of the working groups then came together to draw some preliminary conclusions and lessons learned, for publication along with some of case studies.

## 8 Methods for adults

In terms of whether this approach could work with adults, I noted that in Molteno's conclusion, she speaks in general terms of 'peoples' lives' rather than of the lives of children only. To me this implies that the approach she advocates applies equally to work with adults. I think that her statement, 'Questions of children's education cannot be adequately considered without involving children' could be rewritten as 'Questions of adult education cannot be adequately considered without involving learners'.

Do you agree? Your reading may well have prompted other thoughts than the ones I have reflected here. We do, after all, bring different experiences and backgrounds to our reading, and these are going to be reflected in our responses to it.

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# Participatory action research (PAR)



## Unit overview

In this unit we take a closer look at the approach to researching the marginalised that was introduced in Unit 2. We begin with a brief history of PAR and an account of the various forms that action research has taken, with a focus on PAR and its political roots. We then examine the distinguishing features of PAR and its underlying assumptions. Finally, we will consider some of the issues that confront participatory researchers, aided in our consideration by an excerpt from Martyn Denscombe's *The Good Research Guide* in which he discusses the practical nature of action research, its advantages, and its drawbacks.

## Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit, you should be able to:

- 1 define the PAR approach to researching marginalised learners in terms of what sets it apart from other research approaches.
- 2 set out the underlying assumptions of the PAR approach and assess their implications for our research as ODL practitioners.
- 3 analyse the advantages and drawbacks of this approach for researching marginalised learners.

## The genesis of PAR

The historical roots of participatory action research lie in the work of nineteenth and early twentieth century political activists including Karl Marx, Frederik Engels, and Antonio Gramsci. Marx's famous claim that the point of philosophy is not to understand the world but to change it sums up the action orientation of these revolutionary thinkers, writers and activists. In order to understand the political crises which characterised mid-nineteenth century Europe, Marx and Engels used the participant observation method of research, aligning themselves with the oppressed through participation in their strikes and other actions rather than assuming the detached, allegedly value-free stance of the traditional researcher. For Gramsci, writing from prison where he had been jailed by Mussolini, the true or 'organic' intellectual is a member of the oppressed group. The leadership of these intellectuals is

nourished by the reality of peasants and workers. Whether community organisers, peasant or union leaders, these people are instrumental in creating knowledge that will lead to actions to liberate the working class and peasants from oppression (Selener 1997:14).

PAR as we know it today, however, has its deepest roots in Latin America, where it developed into its present form. The work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, among others, was fundamental in the development of PAR. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire introduced the concepts of conscientization and critical reflection. By conscientization he meant the identification and critical analysis of social, political, and economic contradictions, leading to organised action to solve immediate problems and to counter the oppressive aspects of society. Freire advocated a research approach that involves a change in the traditional role of the researcher – who is also an educator – from that of ‘objective’ external researcher to ‘committed’ co-investigator. The role of the target population changes as well, from that of objects to be studied to active participants in the research process (Selener 1997:14).

The professional origins of participatory research focus on the inability of the dominant research paradigms and approaches to promote social change, as was evident in the excerpts from Marion Molteno’s keynote address. Researchers such as Hall (1975, 1979), Gaventa and Horton (1981) and Tandon (1982) argue that the emphasis of these conventional approaches on quantitative analysis – research that tends to be associated with numbers as units of research – reduces the complexity, meaning and richness of human life to scores and tabulations. Hall (1977:4-8) in particular argues that such an approach oversimplifies reality and produces results which are inaccurate in at least three ways:

- 1 Research in the dominant tradition extracts information from individuals in isolation from one another and then collapses it into a single set of figures, thereby diminishing the complexity of human feeling and experience.
- 2 In extracting information through structured interviews or multiple-choice questionnaires, researchers oblige respondents to choose a response that might not reflect their perceptions.
- 3 The surveys compiled by researchers in this dominant tradition suffer from a lack of context, and present reality as a static snapshot of individuals rather than a picture of social beings who have a past and a future.

Researchers, who want an approach that reflects the reality of the poor, and who work to help change that reality, turn to participatory action research. By involving the people whose problems are being studied as co-researchers in all stages of the process, it is hoped that the results can help people solve practical problems, both in their immediate daily lives and in the longer term.

This is a good point at which to stop and reflect for a moment, in the tradition of Freirian ‘critical reflection’, on our reactions and responses to this alternative research approach.



**Activity 1** 45 mins**Initial reflections**

In the previous two units we worked with a number of questions that arose from reading an account of a project that provides education to villagers in Pakistan, people marginalised by poverty. Look back at the questions you listed.

- 1 Where did your questions come from, would you say?
- 2 How might these questions change if the villagers themselves were involved in framing them? What kinds of questions might they want researched?
- 3 What sorts of concerns does involving the villagers themselves in framing questions about these educational programmes raise for you as a researcher?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

Let's take a look at how PAR compares with other research approaches. Perhaps this can help alleviate some of our concerns about usefulness and legitimacy.

## PAR compared with other research approaches

There is a wide range of activity that lives under the label 'research'. Especially when one considers the outputs that research produces, this variety becomes very apparent.

### Research for publication

One kind of output is the article or book that a researcher produces with a tenure or promotion review in mind, the kind that says, 'I am an academic, or an aspiring academic, and therefore I must publish'. We are all familiar with the concomitants of this academic 'publish or perish' syndrome. The same research gets recycled in many different formats and outlets. Research-in-progress is not even submitted for publication because it is considered too vulnerable to criticism. Shared or collaborative authorship is also problematic, because ownership of the intellectual product cannot be pinned down, credit or blame cannot be definitively assigned, and the number of 'points' such work merits in the academic scoreboard are hard to calculate.

### Basic research

Another kind of research and writing is research that arises out a researcher's own strong interest in some feature of human existence or experience, and in which researchers engage primarily because of the questions they feel compelled to find answers to, rather than because of some externally-drive need to publish. On the surface this kind of research may look esoteric,

because it appears to have no immediate relevance to anything but the researcher's own interest. Some of this research, however, turns out to be watershed work, the kind that helps define the boundaries of a field of study and serves as a landmark or guidepost to future travellers in the domain. In following their own passion, these researchers have hit on something that, even in the absence of clear intention, becomes a basis for further thought and action. This kind of research is for this reason called 'basic' research.

## Action research

There is a third kind of research, which also grows out of passion and commitment. Like the passion that informs the 'basic' kind of research just described, this passion is clearly intellectual, since it involves all the same capacities of mind. It is perhaps more the source and target of this passion that sets it apart, growing as it does out of the researcher's engagement in social and political action and the intent that the research and writing contribute in some positive way to that action. This is research and writing that is intended not just to expose, explain or describe. Rather, its intent is explicitly to enable the self and others to act on the world in a more insightful, informed and constructive manner. This kind of research is often labelled 'applied', but in its more overtly political form it is more accurately labelled 'action' research.

Of these three types of research, 'action' research is the most suspect in academia. Its stated commitments fly in the face of the injunction to be 'objective', which is every researcher's introduction to the field. This research can cause trouble, since it is likely to make claims that challenge the *status quo* and confront the powerful. Action research is typically no less valid than other types of research, in terms of the care such researchers take to review the existing literature, to triangulate data sources, to check and verify those sources, and to proceed systematically from assumptions to questions to data to findings. Rather, it is the clearly political agenda of action research that unsettles academia, that makes power-holders uneasy, and that renders such research much less likely to receive funding, support, and 'points' in the academic world.

Worse yet, from the point of view of the opponents of such research, is the requirement that action researchers situate themselves clearly in the work, that is, that they be clear and up front about their social and political location vis-à-vis those of who, and with whom, they are writing. The fundamental assumption of action-oriented research and writing is that all researchers are engaged in the situations they are researching. What action-oriented researchers do is acknowledge this engagement, and the effects it has on the kinds of questions that get framed; who asks the questions, to whom, in what manner; and to what ends; how the questions are answered, by whom, and why; who writes up the findings and according to whose criteria; and who gets to use and benefit from the results. Action researchers do not own the results of their work. Rather, the results belong to those on whose behalf and

with whom the research has been done. For this reason, action researchers prefer to speak of 'participants' or 'colleagues' or even just 'people' rather than of 'research subjects' or, even worse, 'research objects'. Their 'subjects' become co-researchers in a real sense, thereby compounding the issue of ownership of the knowledge that is being created in the research, and the awarding of 'points' on the academic scoreboard.

It's time to stop again for reflection. How does this delineation of the types of research strike you? Does it help to alleviate some of your concerns about PAR and its legitimacy?

## Activity 2 45 mins



### Further reflections

Take a moment to reflect on the foregoing section.

- 1 What kinds of research have you been engaged in up to now?
- 2 Has any of it had the 'action' orientation that characterises PAR and sets it apart from other approaches?
- 3 If so, what problems did you encounter with it? Did it achieve what you wanted to achieve?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

## Assumptions underlying PAR

In order to delve a bit more deeply into the participatory action approach to researching the marginalised, let's take a look at the assumptions on which the method is based. On the basis of what you have already read and encountered about PAR, what would you say are these assumptions? What do PAR practitioners assume about the way society is structured and functions? What do they assume about how social change should occur? What is the role of knowledge in achieving power?

## Activity 3 45 mins



### Assumptions

Based on what you have read about PAR so far, list the major assumptions on which the approach is based:

- 1 How is society structured?
- 2 How can change in societies be brought about?
- 3 What is the relationship between knowledge and power?

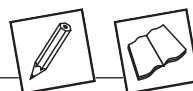
*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

Thus participatory researchers promote empowerment of the community by encouraging ordinary people to participate in knowledge generation and to use the knowledge created to improve their situation. In Selener's words, '*Participatory research assumes that returning the power of knowledge generation and use to ordinary, oppressed people will contribute to the creation of more accurate, critical reflection of social reality, the liberation of human creative potential, and the mobilisation of human resources to solve social problems*' (Selener 1997:28).

## Issues in PAR

As you have read the material on PAR provided so far, beginning with Molteno's keynote address, there have doubtless been some questions raised in your mind about the effectiveness of PAR, and the likelihood that any research project can be fully participatory. We began to consider these concerns in Activity 1. Let's return to those now, for a more thorough consideration.

### Activity 4 45 mins



#### Issues

Take a moment to look back at the concerns you listed in Activity 1.

- 1 Do you still have those concerns? Have they changed in any way? Perhaps your concerns have become more focused as a result of working through Activities 2 and 3. You may be able to add some detail to them now, or even add to or subtract from your list.
- 2 Then use the resource *Denscombe* in the *Resources File* taken from Martyn Denscombe's book, *The Good Research Guide* and compare your list with his.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

## Unit summary

In this unit we have:

- defined the PAR approach somewhat more precisely
- examined the underlying assumptions of PAR
- considered some of the issues that arise for PAR practitioners.

We will be continuing our exploration of these characteristics, assumptions and issues in the units to come, as we examine a number of case studies of ODL research in marginalised populations, in the light of what we have read so far.

## References

These sources, which have been referred to in this unit, would make useful reading for those of you who would like to explore the materials in this unit in more depth.

Freire, P. 1970 *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, New York: Seabury Press

Gaventa, J. and Horton, B. 1981 'A citizen's research project in Appalachia' *Convergence* 14, 3: 30-42

Hall, B. 1975 'Participatory research: an approach for change' *Convergence* 8, 2: 24:32

Hall B. 1977 'Breaking the monopoly of knowledge: research methods, participation and development' in B. Hall., A. Gillette and R. Tandon (eds.) *Creating Knowledge: A Monopoly?* Toronto: International Council for Adult Education

Hall, B. 1979 'Knowledge as a commodity and participatory research' in *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Education* 4, 393-408

Selener, D. 1997 *Participatory action research and social change*, Ithaca: Cornell Participatory Action Research Network

Tandon, R. 1982 'A critique of monopolistic research' in B. Hall., A. Gillette and R. Tandon (eds.) *Creating Knowledge: A Monopoly?* Toronto: International Council for Adult Education

### Feedback to selected activities



## Feedback to Activity 1

### 1 Source of questions

When I looked at my list of questions, I realised that my questions were prompted primarily by my own professional curiosity as a distance educator. They are the kinds of questions I ask about any programme I encounter, especially an educational one, that is aimed at helping poor people solve problems in their lives. On reflection, I think they are good and useful questions. Comparing educational programmes in terms of their effectiveness in actually reaching the poor and marginalised and meeting their needs, both immediate and longer term, is a valuable activity for educational researchers.

### 2 How the questions might change

I am also open to the possibility, however, that the villagers actually involved in those programmes might ask quite different questions, questions that would be of more immediate relevance to their lives. How do I really know what their needs are? How do they define them? And who are 'they', really? Even a

small village is not socially or economically homogeneous. There are likely to be a number of levels of socio-economic status and prestige operating here. Am I going to get the same or different answers about educational needs when I talk to the village leaders than when I talk to the very poorest villagers? Village leaders may well have the luxury of time to be part of educational group activities, as well as motivation, since it is important to them to be seen to be involved with the foreigners who come to the village from time to time in connection with the project. The very poorest, on the other hand, probably have very little time for anything but keeping themselves fed and clothed. They might also be shy, or reluctant, to take part in anything that involves outsiders to the village, since outsiders are as likely to bring trouble as they are to bring help.

### 3 Concerns

This possibility raises a number of concerns for me. As much as I might wish to involve the villagers in the research I am doing, it is hard for me to know which villagers to involve – the leaders, who might be relatively easy to talk with and who are likely to be enthusiastic about taking part in research, or the very poorest, who probably have the greatest and most immediate needs and yet are the hardest to involve? Will the poorest have time to be involved in this research? What's in it for them, what benefits could they derive from it?

You may well have other concerns, perhaps about methods – how do you actually go about getting people involved in research on their own lives? Perhaps your concern focuses on generalisability – even if you manage to involve one set of people in research that helps solve problems in their lives, how can the results of that research be useful to anyone else? Or perhaps you are concerned that there is something 'unscientific' about working so closely with the people whose lives are under scrutiny – how do you as a researcher maintain your objectivity in such a situation? Aren't your results going to be too biased to be considered legitimate research results in the wider community of researchers?

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## Feedback to Activity 2

### 1 Research in which you have been engaged

My primary experience with PAR was my involvement as a team member in a large-scale project based in Canada and funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The project was called 'CAP' – the Canada-Asia Partnership.

The project focused on PAR – its intention was to set up 'centres of excellence' in participatory approaches to education for development, in Canada, Thailand and the Philippines. 'Centres of excellence' was the CIDA designation; in the case of this project 'centres of expertise' would probably have been a more appropriate designation.

## 2 Has it had any action-orientation?

The project had a strong action-orientation, although, as was the case for those involved in the Save the Children research project Molteno describes, we were working not directly with the poor or with children. Rather, we were working with NGO workers who worked closely with the poor and knew them well, often because they were members of the groups with whom they were working. With these people we researched and wrote collaboratively. We grounded our writing in their real, lived experiences of educating for development. Further grounding came from our collective knowledge of a wide range of literature in the field, which became incorporated into our base of experience. As the people designated 'lead researchers' in the terminology of CIDA projects (we considered ourselves in the 'lead' only in terms of having more direct access to project funding) we knew the power of connecting our work to that of others, and acknowledging our debts to those who had written before us and from whom we had learned. We wrote, however, not for an audience that wanted reviews of the literature, but for people who might benefit from our documenting of our experiences because they, like us, were trying to make their work a more meaningful and positive force in the world. By sharing our experiences in a carefully analytical and reflective way, we aimed to support others in their work, by offering them whatever cautions, signposts and guidelines that had emerged from our work.

## 3 What problems did you encounter?

In this work, we encountered a number of significant problems. One major problem was how to evaluate the work and its impact on those whose lives we were hoping would be improved as a result of our actions. We were convinced that we had succeeded in terms of fulfilling the original goals of the programme, and were able to support that conviction with hard evidence from a fully participatory evaluation of our work. Nonetheless, we found ourselves and our research progressively marginalised within our own institutions, and within the funding agency. We discovered that there is a wide chasm between those who advocate sharing and power and yielding control – which is what this project was about – and those who hold power, most importantly, power as embodied in the funding that made our work possible. When we embarked on the CAP journey, we assumed that we were all – CIDA, university administrators, CAP administrators, CAP workers, course and community participants – on the same journey, with the same destination.

This assumption proved naïve. We had not considered the effect on our collective process and outcomes of the large amount of money that was at stake in this programme. For CIDA, these 'centres of excellence' awards were the largest yet granted to universities embarking on partnership initiatives. It had doubtless required considerable political manoeuvring to establish awards that concentrated funds in this way, and there was enormous pressure within the bureaucracy to demonstrate to the politicians, and the electorate whom they represented, that these funds were being spent in an effective manner.

This demonstration could not be left to the vagaries of a participatory process. Hard control, hard accounting, and hard results, that could be seen and counted, were clearly required. This applied at the university level as well: programme and university administrators took on the role of fulfilling the funders' expectations in order to prove that the decision to award these funds had been the right one.

In the end, the evaluation of the project was taken out of our hands and turned over to outsiders, researchers with conventional research agendas and approaches, who relied on quantifiable indicators of our achievements. Our own, participatory evaluation had demonstrated that the people involved in the project had found it a transformative experience, and that applying in their own communities what they had learned was transforming lives there as well. Quantifiable indicators of social transformation are unfortunately elusive. In the short term they do not really exist. In the long term they have a tendency to slip out of one's grasp altogether, since there are so many forces and factors at work in human societies. In the end, we believe that our participants' claim comes as close to a useful measure of success as any: if people tell you that they have changed and that they have observed meaningful changes in both the behaviour of others around them and in the situations and structures of which they are a part, it is reality. We dropped pebbles of participation into ponds in communities in Canada and Asia, and the ripples continue to spread and are not yet dissipating, as far as we can tell. In the end, this outcome made our work and struggle worth doing, even though it failed to gain the official stamp of 'success'.

I hope that your experience was as satisfying for all your participants as ours was – and that it received an official stamp of approval as well!

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### Feedback to Activity 3

These are not easy questions to answer, on the basis of only a brief encounter with descriptions of PAR. To help us gain a more complete view, here is an expert account of the assumptions that PAR practitioners make about these issues (Selener 1997:21-29).

#### 1 How is society structured?

Participatory researchers view society and social change from a radical perspective. They question the basic structure of society, concentrating on those overall conditions at international, national, regional and community levels, that generate and promote the exploitation of the poor majority by elite groups in society.

#### 2 How can change in societies be brought about ?

Solutions to exploitation are viewed as process through which subjects become social actors, participating by means of grassroots mobilisations in actions intended to transform society.



### 3 What is the relationship between knowledge and power?

Participatory action research assumes that research is not value-free or neutral, regardless of the approach. All research is political in nature, and has the potential to affect the distribution of power in society. Research can serve either to maintain or to challenge society's existing power relations.

Participatory researchers maintain that knowledge has become the single most important basis of power and control. Scientific knowledge today is viewed as the only legitimate and accepted form of knowledge. Ordinary people are rarely considered knowledgeable in this framework, and are excluded from the specialised field known as research. By contrast, indigenous, common, popular, or people's knowledge is a key feature of participatory research. People often lack the information, skills, and experience to understand and analyse their own knowledge, however, and the social structures and relations which shape their powerlessness. Therefore, participatory researchers aim not only to elicit and systematise popular knowledge, but to help create new knowledge from a synthesis of 'popular' and 'scientific' knowledge. This is part of an overall strategy intended to use knowledge as a means to gain more power in society.

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## Feedback to Activity 4

Here are the results of my tackling these two tasks.

### 1 Do I still have the same concerns?

I continue to be concerned about the nature of participation. Who in a community is it realistic to expect to be a participant in research? If the poorest or most marginal in a community are excluded from research because they lack the time or are shy or even fearful of outsiders, will others in the community who enjoy higher status and prestige take the concerns of the poorest as their own. Or will the poorest continue to be pushed to the margins?

### 2 How does Denscombe change my view?

Denscombe expands my list of concerns considerably. Here are the issues that he points up:

- ▶ **Ownership of the research** – Who is really in charge? Who owns the data? Are expectations about ownership genuinely shared by all participants?
- ▶ **Ethical issues** – Action research can never be covert or hidden. In addition, the same need for informed consent on the part of those whose lives are being researched applies in action research as it does with other approaches.
- ▶ **Reflexivity** – Insider knowledge is undoubtedly valuable, for the insights it sheds on the way things really work in a group or community. But the outsider also has an advantage of seeing a situation with a second pair of eyes, which can highlight things

than might have escaped an insider's notice. Both are needed, but insiders and outsiders need to get the balance right.

- ▶ **Resources** – Action researchers who are researching their own practice and situations will inevitably face extra work, since they are faced with the day-to-day demands of their work or life and the demands of researching it as well.
- ▶ **Generalisability** – It may be difficult to generalise the findings from researching a local case to a broader set of possible situations. Hence, action researchers should beware of making 'grandiose' claims. Action research, however, can be just as rigorous as any research – it can draw on and test theories, use suitable methods, and offer some evaluation of existing knowledge. Action research is an approach rather than a method; action researchers use standard research methods but do so in somewhat different but equally rigorous ways, as we shall see in subsequent units.

Denscombe is talking about a kind of action research that happens in the researcher's own worksite. In this case, the worksite becomes the community whose members the researcher needs to recruit as co-researchers. As a result, Denscombe's language differs somewhat from the language used by those such as Selener, whose action research is focused on residential communities and their development. Nonetheless, I think that his list of issues is appropriate to community development research as well as workplace research.

Did you have additional issues on your list? You will have an opportunity to explore those in the units that follow, in which we will be looking at some examples of research in marginalised populations, and assessing the extent to which the researchers have used a participatory and action approach, and what the outcomes of that approach have been.

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# Doing PAR



## Unit overview

In this unit we take a look at how participatory action research is done. We will first set out some methodological guidelines, outlining the four phases of PAR. In a major activity you will read and analyse three reports of education-related research on populations that could be termed ‘marginalised’ – although determining the extent to which those populations are marginalised will be part of the task. The analysis will be guided by some questions about the extent to which the research described here could be described as ‘participatory action research’. That analysis will prepare you for the next (and for some of you, final) unit, which will be devoted to a more extensive analysis of a project that, unlike the research reported in the writings under study in this unit, is actually termed ‘participatory’. We will determine the extent to which it lives up to its claims.

## Learning outcomes

When you have worked through this unit, you should be able to

- 1 list and describe the four major phases of participatory action research
- 2 analyse the extent to which research in ODL for marginalised peoples could be described as participatory and action-oriented
- 3 reach some conclusions about the difficulties of applying fully participatory approaches in open and distance learning contexts.

## Conducting participatory action research

Our first task is to describe the way in which PAR is typically conducted. Our guide is Daniel Selener, who provides the following account of the four phases of participatory action research and what they entail (Selener 1997:39-42).

The four major phases are:

- 1 Organising the research project and gathering knowledge of the working area.
- 2 Definition of the problem by project participants.
- 3 Critical analysis of the problem.
- 4 Planning and implementing a plan of action.

## Phase 1: Organising the research and gathering knowledge of the working area

This phase includes establishing relationships with the various stakeholders in the research. In the case of ODL research, stakeholders will include learners, facilitators and tutors, and any organisations or others who are involved in supporting the teaching and learning process.

This phase also involves defining the framework of concepts and methods that will shape the research. The following tasks contribute to the fulfilment of these objectives:

- ▶ defining the objectives of the research, the methods that will be used to achieve them, and the assumptions that underlie the research
- ▶ defining the population of the study
- ▶ setting up the research team: selecting and training its members
- ▶ drafting and approving the budget
- ▶ drawing up a tentative timetable for the project
- ▶ setting up a structure for monitoring and evaluating the research; that is, ensuring that the research is on track towards meeting its objectives, and then, evaluating the outcomes in terms of the extent to which the objectives have been met.

This phase also involves gathering basic information about the group that is the focus of the research by:

- ▶ collecting and assessing relevant information about the socio-economic, political and technological context to aid the process of identifying a problem jointly with members of the group
- ▶ discovering as much as possible about how the members of the group view the world in which they live and the role that education plays in their lives.

## Phase 2: Definition of the problem

This phase involves the joint identification, by the research team and other members of the group, of the topic or the focus of the research, i.e. the most significant problems that the group would like to address.

## Phase 3: Critical analysis of the problem

In this phase, the task is to critically scrutinise the problems that have been identified, to look at them from a number of perspectives – local, regional, national – and in a number of dimensions – social, political, economic and technical. The following steps are involved:

- ▶ **describing current perceptions of the problem:** Participants, working in discussion groups, state how they perceive and formulate the problem they want to solve, and their ideas as to solutions.

- ▶ **questioning the representation of the problem:** Participants are encouraged to question these perceptions and understandings of the problem by looking at the problem from other perspectives, including those of the educational provider and other organisations that may be involved in the education project.
- ▶ **reformulating the problem:** With these new perspectives, participants should now be able to formulate the problem in a more objective manner. This includes:
  - **describing the problem:** Identifying different aspects and points of view; listing, classifying and comparing information; identifying contradictions among different elements of the situation; relating it to other problems; and so on
  - **explaining the problem:** Eliciting not only immediate causes of the problem but other, deeper causes, and relationships among various problems
  - **offering strategies for action:** Formulating hypotheses for action and speculating on likely results; identifying short- and long-term solutions, both those available to the participants and those which would require action at another level; examining the collective action and cooperation necessary.

## Phase 4: Definition of the plan of action

In this step, the plan of action is designed by the participants together with the research team, based on the problems identified and analysed. The implementation of actions will change the reality initially analysed, new issues will arise, and these in turn will require further analysis and new solutions. In other words, the broad phases of participatory action research constitute an on-going process.

This is a lot of information to take in and digest all at once. As an aid to digestion, let's turn now to some examples of research to see the extent to which the steps outlined by Selener have been followed.

## Analysing some examples of research

It is not easy to find examples of participatory action research in education for marginalised populations. Indeed, although the three studies we have included here all have as their focus peoples that could be described as marginalised (although the extent to which that is the case is up to you to decide), none of them has made any claim to be an example of a PAR approach. After we have completed our analyses, perhaps we will understand some of the reasons for the scarcity of fully-fledged participatory action research studies in ODL.

The three examples we have chosen come from Nigeria, Pakistan and Canada.

- ▶ The first is the adult education component of the Nigeria Community Education Programme which ran for five years between 1997 to 2002.
- ▶ The second is the FEPR project in Pakistan, which we first looked at in Unit 2.

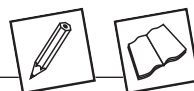
- ▶ The third is some research done on selected aboriginal (First Nations) communities in northern Canada to discover their levels of access to and usage of the technologies typically used in ODL programmes in Canada.

The questions we will be asking about each of these examples are the following:

- ▶ Would you describe as 'marginalised' the learners or potential learners who are the focus of this project? Why or why not?
- ▶ What kinds of methods were used in the study or project?
- ▶ Based on Selener's phases as described above, would you describe the methodology used in the study or project as 'participatory'? Why or why not?
- ▶ Based on the readings you have done, would you describe the research or project as 'action' research? Why or why not?

When you have completed your analyses, we will take a look at them overall to see if we can determine some of the difficulties in applying fully participatory and action-oriented approaches in research on education, and especially ODL, for marginalised peoples.

### Activity 1 1–1.5 hrs



#### Adult education in Nigeria

Use the resource *British Council* in the *Resources File* for this activity. This excerpt is taken from a booklet published by the British Council in 2002 on the Nigeria Community Education Programme. The key concept behind the programme, as set out in the preface, has been 'the partnership and synergy between communities and adult and primary learners and their ability to develop sustainable models of education with small amounts of financial assistance and larger amounts of support and encouragement'.

The programme consisted of four small projects, designed to improve primary schools and adult education centres, and to build community capabilities to manage educational development. This excerpt describes the adult education component. It is not an account of research per se, but doubtless there was research involved in setting up the project and implementing it.

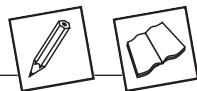
Read this excerpt now and answer the following questions:

- 1 Would you describe as 'marginalised' the learners or potential learners who are the focus of this project? Why or why not?
- 2 What kinds of methods were used in the study or project?
- 3 Based on Selener's phases as described above, would you describe the methodology used in the study or project as 'participatory'? Why or why not?

- 4 Based on the readings you have done, would you describe the research or project as ‘action’ research? Why or why not?

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

### Activity 2 1–1.5 hrs



#### The FEPPA project in rural Pakistan

Use the resource *Warr 2* in the *Resources File* for this activity. This is a second extract from *Distance Teaching in the Village* which makes explicit the research that went into the design of the methodology used in the FEPPA project. Read this excerpt now, and analyse this methodology, again using the questions set out at the beginning of in this unit:

- 1 Would you describe as ‘marginalised’ the learners or potential learners who are the focus of this project? Why or why not?
- 2 What kinds of methods were used in the study or project?
- 3 Based on Selener’s phases as described above, would you describe the methodology used in the study or project as ‘participatory’? Why or why not?
- 4 Based on the readings you have done, would you describe the research or project as ‘action’ research? Why or why not?

The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►

### Activity 3 1–1.5 hrs



#### Technology in northern aboriginal communities in Canada

Use the resource *Voyageur* in the *Resources File* for this activity.

The FEPPA programme which you looked at above was an ODL project for villagers in the Punjab in Pakistan. The research described in this article by Cora Voyageur also deals with villagers, but in northern communities in an affluent, industrialised country. These are aboriginal communities, Canada’s First Nations peoples. The research described is not part of a development project; rather, it is background research of the kind which could inform future development projects. The author and researcher is herself a member of a First Nations community, the Chipewyan First Nation, from Fort Chipewyan, Alberta, 650 km. north of the capital city of the province. On a year-round basis, the community can be reached only by air.

Read this article now, and answer these questions:

- 1 Would you describe as ‘marginalised’ the learners or potential learners who are the focus of this project? Why or why not?
- 2 What kinds of methods were used in the study or project?

- 3 Based on Selener's phases as described above, would you describe the methodology used in the study or project as 'participatory'? Why or why not?
- 4 Based on the readings you have done, would you describe the research or project as 'action' research? Why or why not?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

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## PAR in ODL

We have now had a chance to look in some detail at three kinds of projects: a fully participatory and action-oriented project in adult education that was informed by a good deal of grassroots-based research and insiders' insights; an ODL project, also for adults, that targeted a more mass audience and was partially participatory and action-oriented in its objectives and methodology; and a research project which, although conducted by an insider to the communities being studied, had as its objective the provision of background information that could be helpful to future action and was not itself directly action-oriented or participatory.

What problems do these analyses point up for those in ODL who are working with or on behalf of marginalised learners, and who would like to do research that will help these learners transform their lives? Take a few moments to reflect on this question, in the following activity.

### Activity 4 30 mins



#### Applying PAR in ODL

As an ODL practitioner, what problems would you encounter in using the PAR approach to research the issues and problems of marginalised learners? Take a few minutes to think about this, and then note down your answers.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

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## Conclusions

Do the problems we will encounter mean that we should forget about using PAR as an approach in researching marginalised learners in an ODL context? I am not that pessimistic. In fact, I think there are a number of possibilities for using participatory and action-oriented approaches in our work as ODL practitioners concerned about marginalised learners. For example:

- We can follow the example of the FEPPA project and work closely with the people whose needs we are trying to serve in developing and choosing topics for courses and appropriate materials, such as the variety of media other than print that FEPPA developed. This kind of research is likely to be most effective if it is carried out face-to-face rather than by



self-administered questionnaires or formal surveys, since in our case, the learners have no access to technologies and may not be able to read and write. We can also work with people such as NGO workers who know the communities involved intimately, and may themselves be members of these communities, as was the case in the Save the Children research.

- ▶ When it comes to delivery, we can again follow the FEPPA example in using mass-market materials in community-specific ways, training local people as facilitators and learning group leaders. Again, the research we do in order to determine the most effective ways of selecting facilitators and running learning groups will work best if done by and with local people who will be (or already are) the learners. This will help them take ownership of the process, as well as of the new knowledge which it yields.
- ▶ In terms of delivery, another possibility is to use ODL methods to train and support facilitators of learning groups. From the experience of FEPPA, the LOCAL project in Nigeria, and the Save the Children research, there are local people amongst our learners with the skills and knowledge necessary to be effective facilitators; with the right kinds of materials and support, ODL might well be an effective mechanism for their training.
- ▶ In terms of evaluation, both formative (ongoing) and summative (final), I think it is essential to work with learners as closely as possible, in order to develop an effective system of monitoring ongoing course delivery and to develop the final evaluation mechanisms. The learners themselves are in the best position to tell us how well the programme worked for them. Let's hear their stories in their own words, not as responses to questions we formulate as expert evaluators, but rather as the stories of their lives and what the course has helped them realise and accomplish. Again, this will help the learners take ownership of and responsibility for the outcomes, and help promote continued action.

Do you have additional thoughts? If so, I hope that you will make a special note of them so that you can use them in your own work as researchers.

## Unit summary

In this unit we have looked at:

- ▶ how to do PAR
- ▶ the major phases of participatory action research
- ▶ the steps these involved in these phases
- ▶ the variety of approaches to PAR as illustrated by three projects

As a result of our analyses we were able to:

- ▶ formulate some difficulties that PAR presents for ODL educators intent on doing research with and for marginalised learners

- identify some ways in which we can use PAR approaches effectively despite these difficulties.

In the next and, for most of you, final unit, we will take a more in-depth look at an ODL project that is described as participatory, to see how effectively it lived up to its claims.

## Feedback to selected activities



### Feedback to Activity 1

Here are my answers to the questions posed.

#### 1 Would I describe the learners in this project as marginalised?

Yes, I would, primarily because they are villagers without literacy. Not being able to read or write for me is an major indicator of marginalization.

#### 2 What kinds of methods were used in this project?

First, facilitators for the learning groups appear to have been chosen from amongst members of the communities involved in the project and trained by the project team. Second, these facilitators worked with learners to discover what their literacy needs were. They then assembled relevant materials for the classes. The emphasis in the classes was on the learners' own words, which were used to develop the reading materials used in the classes. Lessons were also geared to income generation – participants charted their economic activities and daily routines as part of their literacy exercises.

#### 3 Would I call this methodology participatory?

Yes, the methodology is clearly participatory. Facilitators were identified from the communities themselves and trained in a participatory fashion, drawing on their own skills and knowledge of the local situation. Facilitators in turn work closely with participants to identify the objectives of the literacy programme – what do they want to be able to do that requires reading? – and centre the classes on these objectives. Learning takes place in the local language. Participants' own words comprise the learning materials. There does not seem to be anything imposed or externally-driven in this process.

#### 4 Would I call the methodology action-oriented?

Yes. The purpose of the project is explicitly empowerment through livelihood-oriented literacy learning. The intention is to support community members in taking more effective action on their lives and livelihoods. Adult education centres have been set up as an enduring mechanism for helping to make this happen.

Did your assessment agree with mine? I also noted that the project worked closely with a Nigerian NGO with experience in the methods advocated by Paulo Freire – another indication that this project was both intentionally and effectively participatory.

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## Feedback to Activity 2

Here are my answers to these questions:

### 1 Would I describe the learners in this project as marginalised?

We dealt with this question in an earlier unit. There I described these learners as marginalised because they are villagers living on very low incomes in remote areas of a country which itself is located in one of the world's poverty zones. In addition, many of the learners are without literacy, which further marginalises them.

### 2 What kinds of methods were used in this project?

As background research, formal and informal surveys were conducted in local communities to familiarise project staff with needs, priorities and constraints as expressed by villagers themselves. This information was used as a basis for selecting appropriate course topics, designing materials, and methods and levels of instruction. Surveys were also done to determine learners' existing knowledge, attitudes and skills. Draft materials were tested with learners before final versions were developed, and each course was put through a pilot. The lead researcher was closely involved with course development teams to provide information about the target group; there were also a number of Pakistan-based organisations involved in the work. The mechanism developed for the delivery of the courses was a mobile outreach team that set up learning groups, selected and trained group leaders, distributed materials, supervised and monitored course presentation, and gathered feedback for communicating to course producers back on the campus.

### 3 Would I describe these methods as participatory?

Yes, in part. The project team worked closely with villagers and local organisations in determining needs and then the materials and delivery methods appropriate to meet those needs. There is considerable reference to 'surveys', however. The survey method can be participatory, if it is carried out relatively informally by people who are very close to – preferably members of – the community in question. Because this was a very large project, however, which aimed to cover a great many villages, the surveys were probably more of the formal kind, with questions developed by the university researchers rather than the villagers, not a particularly participatory approach. As for the materials that were developed, these were produced in mass, for use in a wide range of villages, not tailored specifically to a particular community or group – again, not a particularly participatory approach. The delivery system, with community members as group leaders, was more participatory in

orientation, since it was these leaders' job to use the materials as guides, not prescriptions, in leading discussions that were geared to local needs and interests as expressed by the participants themselves.

#### 4 Would I describe these methods as action-oriented?

Yes. The methodology of the project overall and in particular the research that lay behind it seem to be very much action-oriented. The intent of the project was to help villagers in the Punjab improve the quality of day-to-day life, through learning and applying improved agricultural techniques (e.g., cattle management, poultry raising), infant and family care (e.g., diarrhoea prevention and treatment), the basics of electricity, and so on. Project staff also recognised that while short courses can raise awareness, for this awareness to be sustained and applied in daily life there needs to be continuing support provided – hence the links with local organisations and development agencies. This might not be the kind of political action or transformation that the developers of the PAR approach, especially in Latin America, had in mind. Nonetheless, even modest improvements in lives and livelihoods can be termed 'action'.

Did your analysis differ from mine? Yours may well have been more detailed – there is a good deal of information included in this excerpt which I did not cover. You may have done a more complete job than I did!

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### Feedback to Activity 3

Here are my answers to the questions posed.

#### 1 Would I describe the learners – in this case potential learners – as marginalised?

Yes, I would. In doing so I realise that the term 'marginalised' cannot be used in an absolute sense. Marginalization is a relative matter. In comparison with villagers in the Punjab or Nigeria the villagers surveyed by Voyageur are probably quite affluent. In Canadian terms, however, they are marginalised. For one thing, these northern communities are very remote. Access to education is more difficult, as is evident from the statistics Voyageur provides. Were we to look at all the indicators of quality of life, we would see that Canada's aboriginal peoples rank considerably lower than non-aboriginal Canadians. They see themselves as marginalised from the economic mainstream, as cited by the author.

#### 2 What kinds of methods were used in this research?

The author used self-administered questionnaires (in other words, questionnaires that were sent to respondents who filled them out and returned them), and face-to-face or telephone interviews. Her informants were all community members; her most important informants were

individuals whose work in band administration offices, schools, and agencies, involved the use of technologies such as computers, faxes, and the Internet.

### 3 Were these methods participatory?

No. The researcher herself is a member of one of the communities, and as such has insights into the structure of these communities and the way of life of the people who live there. These insights helped her choose appropriate questions for research and to select appropriate informants of whom to ask these questions. Her insights were also useful in guiding her interviews. She did not work directly with community members in developing the questions, however; rather, they were part of a more generalised university survey.

### 4 Were these methods action-oriented?

Not directly. The objective of the research was to gather information which could be useful to those who are planning educational projects for these communities, in particular educational projects that involve technologies such as the computer and the Internet. Action of this kind hopefully would be forthcoming, but only down the line, not as an immediate result of the research.

Did your analysis differ from mine? If you are from a developing country, you might have had difficulty seeing Canada's aboriginal people as marginalised, since they are in absolute terms so much better off in material terms than villagers in the Punjab or Nigeria. For myself, I found it very interesting to read an account of research done by an insider to the villages being studied, and informed by an insider's insights, that was not in any way participatory or directly action-oriented. This made me realise that participatory action research is by definition conducted by or certainly with the full participation of members of the community or group that is being researched, but that insiders to a marginalised group and culture can use their insights to inform other kinds of research as well.

## Feedback to Activity 4

I see two major problems with applying PAR in ODL for marginalised learners.

First, ODL provision is typically geared to a mass market, or at least a relatively large-scale market as opposed to the smaller scale of individual villages. This is one of the main advantages of ODL: a few experts can be employed to design and develop learning materials that can be used by masses of people, thereby reducing unit costs and realising economies of scale. This process does not lend itself to the development of materials that meet local needs on a small scale, or to incorporating into the design and development process members of the communities in which the prospective learners live.

Second, ODL is by definition carried out at a distance. Typically there is little face-to-face contact between the learners and those who actually develop the learning materials. Yet, in everything we have read, face-to-face contact seems to be a typical feature of PAR research. It may not necessarily be an essential feature: ODL educators know how effective communication technologies can be in bringing people together without their being physically together. When we talk about the marginalised, however, we are talking about people without access to these technologies. Even in an affluent country like Canada, there are populations with relatively limited access to these technologies, as Voyageur's article points out. So it is difficult to see how this research could be carried out at a distance.

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# Case study



## Unit overview

In this unit we examine closely an account of a participatory evaluation of an ODL project for disadvantaged learners, treating it as a case study in which we can apply our understandings of PAR. The project is the SAVINI project, a distance education initiative in participatory project planning, mounted by Indira Gandhi National Open University, that targeted development workers in the NGO sector working for disadvantaged rural and tribal communities in India. Unlike the examples of research that we analysed in Unit 4, this piece of research – this evaluation – is explicitly labelled ‘participatory’ by its authors. In addition, the learners are explicitly labelled ‘disadvantaged’. Our task will be to read this account closely and to assess the extent to which this evaluation process lives up to the label ‘participatory’. In addition, we will assess the extent to which the process is action-oriented. We will conclude with a summary of what we have learned about PAR in ODL, including a checklist of issues to take into account in planning and carrying out this kind of research.

## Learning outcomes

When you have completed this unit, you should be able to

- 1 explain why evaluation in the context of participatory approaches can legitimately be considered research
- 2 analyse the extent to which a participatory evaluation exercise lives up to its label
- 3 draw some lessons from the analysis about the challenges of participatory evaluation, and by extension, participatory research, and some ways in which we can deal with those challenges.

## The SAVINI project – Evaluation as a kind of research

Before launching into our encounter with the SAVINI project, let’s first take a brief look at the research process of ‘evaluation’. Evaluation is a kind of research that ODL practitioners engage in on a regular basis. Is it legitimate to label ‘evaluation’ a kind of research? There are experts in research, such as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000:38), who argue that there is an important and necessary distinction between ‘research’ and ‘evaluation’, although they will

admit that there is considerable overlap between the two processes. Cohen and colleagues maintain that there is a clear distinction between them. The distinction they are making, however, is between 'basic research' and 'applied research'. Basic research they describe as 'open-ended' and 'pure'; it is the researcher who sets the agenda, according to his or her own interests. In applied research, however, the researcher works with an agenda that is set by a particular project or initiative; that agenda is to assess the extent to which a project or initiative has fulfilled the objectives that it set out to accomplish.

We have already encountered this distinction in Unit 3, and, given our concern with research that is participatory and action-oriented, we placed ourselves firmly in the 'applied' camp. In doing PAR, we are not using our prerogative as professional researchers to set the research agenda; rather, we are consciously working with the disadvantaged people in whose interests the research is being carried out, to ensure that the questions that are being asked are primarily their questions, not ours. We play a role in shaping those questions, and ensuring that they have been subjected to critical evaluation (as in the phases outlined in Unit 4), but in the end the questions are defined by our co-researchers, the disadvantaged.

Evaluation therefore fits readily within a PAR approach as a legitimate kind of research. On that basis, let us begin our examination of the SAVINI project and its evaluation.

## An outline of the SAVINI project

Before we launch into the article by Mathie and Dighe, we need some idea of what the SAVINI project was about: who it was developed for and by, what its objectives were, how the materials were developed, and how the programme was delivered. The following information is taken from 'Participatory Learning and Discourse on Local and Global Culture of the Disadvantaged', by Shobhita Jain, the faculty member of Indira Gandhi University (IGNOU) who was the lead developer of this project (2001, 159-173).

### Case study summary



#### What is SAVINI?

SAVINI is the Hindi acronym for 'Participatory (Sahabhagi) Development (Vikas) Planning (Niyojan)', the title of the programme. The programme is a certificate-level course run for development workers of selected NGOs in the States of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Uttaranchal and Uttar Pradesh.

#### Who are the learners?

The learners are all development practitioners, working in rural and/or tribal areas in these states. The eligibility criteria included: a minimum age of 18; a fairly good command of Hindi, the local language; the ability to read, write and carry out simple arithmetical calculations; and six months' experience of development work during employment with an



NGO that practises participatory development. A conscious effort is made to encourage women to enrol in the programme.

### **How are the materials developed?**

Jain describes the process that was used to develop the materials as ‘course development from below’. Through a series of meetings with selected NGOs and their workers, IGNOU faculty collaborated with these workers, who were the potential learners in the programme, on developing topics and materials for a series of modules, initially in print form. The process of development is ongoing, however. For example, fieldwork-based project reports are added to the modules as they go into second and third editions, thus enabling learners to generate from below the bulk of the course material. Video productions made by learners at one of their ‘camps’ (see below) have also been incorporated into recent versions of the modules.

### **How is the programme structured?**

The programme has the following components:

- ▶ three text-based modules, *What is Development?*, *Working with Groups and Participatory Planning*
- ▶ a field-based project to be carried out by each learner
- ▶ the daily diary, which contains a record of the learner’s continuous experience with project work; this record is submitted for assessment
- ▶ three interactive ‘camps’, or face-to-face meetings:
  - at the first camp, IGNOU faculty members hand out the course materials and provide an orientation to the programme; efforts are made to build a relationship or partnership with the learners
  - at the second camp, the faculty gathers information about each learner’s progress in using the course material and maintaining the diary. Facilitators, IGNOU faculty, IGNOU Regional Centre staff, NGO partners and the local programme facilitators listen to the learners and learn from their experiences. They also hand out any additional material that was generated at the first camp and is now incorporated into the programme
  - at the third camp, the term-end examination takes place (in the sixth month of the programme). Each learner presents the report of his or her field-based project. Presenters have the choice of presenting in any medium – written, oral, songs, paintings, street theatre or puppet show.

### **How is the programme delivered?**

Delivery of the SAVINI educational package is through the programme centres. In close association with IGNOU Regional Centres and IGNOU faculty, partner NGOs have set up programme centres, according to the number and location of learners. The number of learners is restricted to between 25 and 40 in each centre. Facilitators are also (presumably) drawn from these centres.

### **How is learner achievement assessed?**

The assessment methodology uses a participatory approach. Assessment takes place in public sessions with fellow learners as part of the evaluation panel. The panel includes one IGNOU faculty member and one NGO representative in addition to the other learners.

### **What were the results of the evaluation of the programme pilot?**

The programme was piloted in three districts. Jain provides the following summary of the results of the evaluation, which we are about to read:

- ▶ learners asked for a thorough revision of the layout of the course material, with suggestions for giving more examples relating to children, urban slum living, and global imbalance of ecology
- ▶ learners raised language issues: tough words, acronyms without their full form, long sentences, and essay style of writing
- ▶ in terms of content, learners made a strong plea to include all the case studies prepared by them.

On the basis of this feedback, a second edition of the SAVINI certificate programme has now been prepared.

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## The case study

With this summary as background, let us now turn to the evaluation itself, as set out in the SAVINI article that is included as the last reading in this handbook.

As is appropriate to a project as overtly and consciously participatory as the SAVINI programme, the evaluation process of the pilot version of the programme also aimed at being participatory. The objectives of the evaluation are typical of pilot programme evaluations. They were to:

- ▶ assess the appropriateness of the programme content and materials for the target audience
- ▶ assess the effectiveness of the training in light of the learners' skills and capacities
- ▶ assess the effectiveness of IGNOU-NGO partner relations in furthering training objectives
- ▶ assess the effectiveness, including cost effectiveness, of IGNOU's model of delivery
- ▶ engage stakeholders in a democratic and deliberative process that is in keeping with the 'bottom up' philosophy of the programme.

The overall goal of the evaluation was to provide feedback and suggestions to the project team specific enough to produce a second, more effective version of both materials and delivery. We are not in a position to assess how well the evaluation met that goal. Our task is to assess the extent to which the evaluation process was participatory, which was one of its objectives. We will also ask the questions we asked of the studies we looked at in Unit 4: Would we term the population under study here 'disadvantaged'? Would we term this research 'action-oriented'?

**Activity 1** 4 hrs

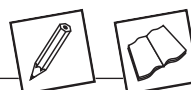
## Analysing the case study

Use the resource *Mathie* in the *Resources File* for this activity. This is an article by Mathie and Dighe published in the Indian Journal of Open Learning in 2001.

As you read the article, note down your answers to the following questions.

- 1 Would you describe the learners in this project as marginalised? Why or why not?
- 2 What methods did the evaluators use in conducting the evaluation?
- 3 To what extent would you characterise this methodology as 'participatory'?
- 4 To what extent would you characterise the methodology as 'action-oriented'?
- 5 What problems did the evaluators encounter in the evaluation process?
- 6 What problems did you encounter in reading the article? What changes or improvements would you suggest?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

**Activity 2** 1 hr

## Lessons learned

- 1 Now that you have completed your analysis, take a few minutes to note down the main things you have learned from this exercise.
- 2 What do you know or think about participatory evaluation research that you did not know before doing this activity?

## Unit Summary

In this handbook, we have focused on researching marginalised learners in ODL contexts. We began with an introduction that set out the following aims:

- to define the terms 'marginalised' and 'disadvantaged' as they apply in particular to learners
- to explore various approaches to researching marginalised and disadvantaged learners
- to familiarise ODL practitioners with participatory action research, or PAR, a research strategy often used with marginalised or disadvantaged peoples
- to enable ODL practitioners to use this strategy to research issues arising from provision of ODL to marginalised and disadvantaged learners.

We also defined the following as the desired outcomes for those of you who would work through the activities in the handbook. We hoped that on completing the work, you would be able to:

- ▶ define 'marginalised' and 'disadvantaged' in the context of teaching and learning, and to explain the basis for your definitions
- ▶ identify and analyse the strengths and limitations of various approaches to researching marginalised and disadvantaged peoples
- ▶ analyse the PAR approach, in particular: its principles, characteristics, procedures, and problems that arise in its use
- ▶ apply these principles, characteristics and procedures in a critical manner to a case study of an project.

Our definition of 'marginalised' has emphasised inequities in resources and power; inequities brought about not by some deficiency in the marginalised but by the social, economic and political forces that shape their lives. Given this definition, our emphasis in looking at possible approaches to researching the marginalised has been on finding approaches that will do more than simply help us understand these forces and their impact and consequences. What we have been looking for is a research approach that will help us to help the marginalised – specifically, those learners in our ODL programmes and projects who exist on the margins of their societies – transform or at least address the inequities of resources and power that keep them marginalised. We have looked most closely at PAR as an approach that has the potential to do that, by involving the marginalised as fully as possible as co-researchers with us, defining research questions, designing research methodologies, implementing research programmes, and evaluating the results.

In the final analysis the decision is yours to use or not use this approach. We hope that you will at least consider making your research efforts on behalf of the marginalised more explicitly research **with** the marginalised rather than **on** them. The following, project unit will give you an opportunity to do just that, and we wish you well in your continuing work of research and reflection in a way that will make a positive difference to the learners that your programmes serve.

## References

- Cohen, L., Manion, L. and Morrison, K. 2000 *Research methods in education* (5<sup>th</sup> edition), London: Routledge Falmer
- Jain, S. 2001 'Participatory learning and discourse on local and global culture of the disadvantages' *Indian Journal of Open Learning* 10, 2: 159-173

## Feedback to selected activities



### Feedback to Activity 1

This article uses a number of specialised terms which might be new to you. These are explained in the boxes in the margin.

Here are my answers to the questions posed with regard to this article.

#### 1 Would you describe the learners in this project as marginalised? Why or why not?

Yes, I would describe these learners as marginalised. They are largely rural (75%). Almost half of them are members of scheduled castes or scheduled tribes (these are castes and tribes which were listed on a 'Schedule' that was part of an Order of the Parliament of India in 1950, an initiative to abolish 'untouchability' and list those groups who merited special attention because of the extreme levels of discrimination they were suffering). A quarter of them are female. These learners are not the poorest of the poor – they are literate, for example.

They are, however, working closely with and behalf of the poorest under the auspices of NGOs that are partners with IGNOU in this programme.

#### Focus group

A form of group interview where using the interaction within a group which discusses a topic supplied by the researcher. It is from the interaction within the group that the data emerge.

#### 2 What methods did the evaluators use in conducting the evaluation?

The evaluation team comprised three persons, all of whom were to some extent 'insiders', having been involved in the project as members of one of the stakeholder groups or as part of the development team. The methods included document review, group (as opposed to individual) interviews with learners, interviews with group facilitators, a questionnaire survey (based on the results of the interviews) conducted by post with representatives of the partner NGOs, individual interviews, and group meetings. The evaluators summarised and analysed the data by developing a system of categories or themes as they emerged from the data. The draft report was sent to IGNOU and collaborating NGOs for verification and discussion. The learners were involved in as many interviews as possible, so as to increase the credibility of the findings.

#### Correlation analysis

Correlation analysis draws out relationships between variables that seem to be involved in the process under study. In this case, the evaluators were trying to discover the extent to which learners' performance was affected by (correlated with) their caste, level of education, gender, age, and the camp site they attended.

#### 3 To what extent would you characterise the methodology as 'participatory'?

Although evaluators did their best to involve learners in as many of the interactive sessions as possible, whether group, individual or focus group interviews, the authors themselves describe the process as 'only moderately participatory'. This was because learners and participating NGOs were not involved in finalising the objectives of the evaluation.

#### Nodal and sub-nodal

Nodal NGOs are the larger and national umbrella organisations of which the sub-nodal, smaller and local NGOs are members.

Although not fully participatory, because of the collegial and collaborative relationship between IGNOU and its NGO partners, and the fact that the

findings will be reviewed by the NGO partners before they go out to a wider public, the authors term the evaluative study 'democratic evaluation'. They note that future evaluation exercises will have to take the level of stakeholder participation into account and ensure that the process remains as participatory as possible.

#### 4 To what extent would you characterise the methodology as 'action oriented'?

An evaluative study, especially of a pilot version of a programme is, by definition, action-oriented. This is because the purpose of an evaluation is to feed back to the developers of the programme comments and suggestions that can be used to improve the programme before it goes out to a larger audience. The authors use the term 'deliberative action', which is action characterised by careful consideration of alternatives, with the intention of choosing the most appropriate and effective of those alternatives. The programme itself is clearly action-oriented, aimed as it is at using a participatory process of course development and delivery to build the capacity of staff in local and community-based NGOs to work with their communities in a more participatory, or empowering, way.

#### 5 What problems did the evaluators encounter in the evaluation process?

Just prior to their 'summary and conclusions' section, the authors list four 'challenges' that they faced in doing this evaluation:

- ▶ **resistance to questionnaires:** It appears that some respondents (we are not told which groups) felt that questionnaires were an extractive rather than participatory research tool and that they reduced the participants' sense of ownership of the process. The authors continue to feel that questionnaires can be a powerful tool in collaborative inquiry, but realise that they have more work to do in understanding the kinds of relations that obtain between directors and workers before they will be able to convince workers of this
- ▶ **language:** Not all those involved in the evaluation team spoke Hindi, necessitating the use of translators. This placed constraints on the depth and breadth to which issues that arose in the interviews could be pursued
- ▶ **timing:** The evaluators found it difficult at times to schedule interviews because of respondents' busy schedules. Meeting reporting deadlines also presented difficulties. There never seems to be enough time to do an evaluation as thoroughly as it needs to be done!
- ▶ **ensuring adequate representation of all learners:** Although there seems to be something missing from this section, we can assume from the subtitle that it was difficult to ensure that the voices of learners with the least education were heard as loudly and frequently as those of more highly educated and more articulate learners.

## 6 What problems did you encounter in reading the article? What changes or improvements would you suggest?

I would have liked to hear more about the evaluation methods – how many people were interviewed, who they were, and so on. The authors make reference to an appendix that contains this information, but we are not provided with it. This is only one example of some simple, mechanical errors that occur fairly frequently in the article and that interfered with my comprehension of the material. The authors also assume an understanding of the Indian context that I don't have: I struggled with some of the acronyms, for example, and had to turn to the Web to find out what was meant by 'scheduled caste'. It helped considerably to read Jain's article first – perhaps the two articles should have been published together, in a two-part article. I would also like to see more editorial control exercised by the journal in which the article is published, to ensure that simple grammatical and mechanical errors are corrected before the article goes to press.

Did your assessment point up additional items? Perhaps you are more familiar with the Indian context than I am and had fewer problems with the article than I did. Despite the problems I had with the article, however, I found the exercise of analysing the evaluation methods very useful. This is one of the very few articles generally available that deals with an explicitly participatory research project, in an ODL context, for marginalised learners. Doubtless there are others available in project reports and other such documents. These are not generally available as part of the ODL or research literature, however, and I am grateful to the authors for taking the time to write this article in a journal so that we can all read it. If only more project researchers and evaluators would do the same!

## Feedback to Activity 2

Here are some of the things I learned about participatory evaluation from analysing this example:

- ▶ There seems to be a limit to how extensively project team members can work with learners in defining the objectives of an evaluation. This is a major feature of participatory research (see Selener's phases in Unit 4), and important to do, yet it seems difficult. There could be a number of reasons for this.
  - the objectives of an evaluation are often set by the organisation that is funding the project. We are not told that this is the case here, but it might be. This would impose clear limits on the abilities of either project leaders or learner participants to do much definition
  - time may be too limited to allow for extensive consultation with learners. This does seem to have been the case in this evaluation. Project teams are always under a great deal of pressure to get the pilot done and evaluated and to make the required changes so that the full

version of the programme can be launched. There is no easy way around this, in my experience.

- ▶ Some methods, such as questionnaire surveys, don't seem to lend themselves happily to participatory research. For all the reasons that were set out in Unit 2, respondents often find questionnaires restricting and frustrating and would prefer to be able to state their opinions and feelings outright rather than be bound by pre-coded answers or questions that seem somewhat irrelevant to their concerns.
  - ▶ It seems important to draw members of a participatory evaluation team from amongst project participants themselves rather than from associated organisations. In this way problems of language and contextual understanding would not be an issue. This is not always possible, however, since the funding of a project may require that members of collaborating organisations that are connected closely to the project but that do not operate within the same context as the project – international organisations such as the Coady Institute, for example – be involved in the evaluation. Perhaps representatives of such organisations could serve in an advisory role in the development of the evaluation, rather than as members of the actual evaluation team?
  - ▶ One of the problems I mentioned early on in Unit 1, when we looked at the FEPPRA project for the first time, was my concern that despite their best intentions, participatory projects do not always manage to involve the poorest or least educated to as great an extent as those who have more resources or education. In the case of evaluation exercises, evaluation teams might try dividing groups of learners in terms of educational background, for example, and meet separately with those whose lack of education might make them particularly shy or reluctant to make their voices heard in the presence of the larger group.
  - ▶ Time continues to be a problem. This is not a new problem for me – I suspect it isn't new to any of us. But it is useful to have it reinforced. If only we could find a way to give ourselves enough time to do the thorough evaluation of a pilot version of a programme that it deserves. But this is probably not very realistic, given the pressures to get programmes up and running that exist in any institution I have ever encountered.
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# Project



## Unit overview

This unit provides you with a step-by-step procedure for planning, implementing and evaluating a small-scale research project using a PAR approach. Given the relative lack of research in ODL that uses PAR, we hope that you will be able to devise a project that focuses on learners who are presently involved in an ODL programme or who are potential learners in such a programme.

In carrying out your project, you will be organising a small research group, establishing relationships with a small group of marginalised learners with whom to work, defining your research question or questions, establishing a research plan, methodology and timeline, conducting ongoing progress checks, writing a final report, evaluating the effectiveness of your work, and then taking action. All these steps will be carried out in as participatory a manner as possible. Checklists will be provided at every stage to help you monitor the extent to which your work is participatory and collaborative.

There are no time guidelines for the activities in this unit since different projects will vary greatly in how long each activity takes to complete.

## Learning outcomes

When you have completed this unit you should be able to:

- 1 organise a research group
- 2 establish relationships with a group of marginalised learners with whom to work
- 3 define, with those learners, a research problem
- 4 work with learners to establish a methodology, work plan and timeline
- 5 monitor the work in participatory fashion
- 6 collaborate in producing the report on the work
- 7 evaluate the extent to which the project met its objectives
- 8 implement a programme of action.

## Step 1: Organising a research group

The first step is to get a small research group together. There are two reasons for our suggesting that you initiate and implement this work of participatory research as part of a group rather than on your own:

- ▶ Working from the start as a group of researchers rather than on your own will put you on the right, collaborative track of thinking in terms of 'we' rather than in terms of 'I'.
- ▶ Making contact with a group of learners whom you do not know and who do not know you can be quite intimidating; as a group of researchers you can support each other and keep each other motivated.

When we say 'small' we mean no more than two people in addition to yourself. Who might these people be? There is a wide range of possibilities. Some that come to mind are colleagues in your institution or workplace, or people with whom you have worked on a project, or staff members of an organisation that works with marginalised people. The main criterion is that these be people who you know share your interest and concern with marginalised people and how education programmes might help meet their needs.

### Activity 1



#### Gathering a group together

- 1 List some of the people who might be interested in working with you on this project.
- 2 Then contact them, describing what you have in mind to do, what kind of help you would like from them and why you have asked them in particular.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ▶*

The next activity is to meet with your colleagues.

### Activity 2



#### First meeting

This meeting should be face-to-face if possible. Once you get yourselves organised, subsequent meetings can be held at a distance, using a telephone conference or e-mail for your discussions. An initial face-to-face meeting, however, will be the most efficient way of getting your ideas together and establishing ground rules for working together. Here are some suggestions for your first meeting:

- 1 Do some brainstorming about what kind of research you would like to do. This is a small group, so the brainstorming can be very informal. Each of you should offer ideas and have them recorded, preferably on a piece of flip chart paper so that each member

can see what's being recorded. There must be no judgements made at this stage – the important thing is to get the group's ideas out into the open where they can be worked with.

- 2 Once you have all your ideas down in some visual form, you then discuss them, getting clarification and expanding on each of them, weighing the pros and cons of each.
- 3 Do some brainstorming also about the principles or ground rules that you will follow in working together. Again, the point is to get everyone's ideas out in the open, with no one commenting or making judgements until everyone has articulated every idea they have. Only then do you start sorting out which of these statements will become your rules or guiding principles.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

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### Resources

Another aspect of working together at this point is to gather together a set of resources to help you in your work. At the end of this unit we suggest some references on participatory approaches to research that you might find useful.

### Activity 3



#### Deciding on a group of learners

Eventually you will arrive at a tentative decision about what kind of learners you would like to work with. Who might they be? As an ODL practitioner you are doubtless aware of learners who face more than the usual barriers to getting access to and succeeding in education programmes. Their particular barriers might be poverty, low educational levels, remote location, gender, ethnic identity, or disability.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

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## Step 2: Establishing a relationships with the group

It is now time to make your first approach to the learners with whom you would like to work. The way in which you make your approach is very important. You are not coming to them with any agenda, other than an offer to work with them in some research that will help them solve some problem that they are encountering in accessing or succeeding in education. You must make this clear in your words, your gestures, your postures, and most of all, your ability to listen.

## Activity 4



### Making contact

Your task now is to make contact with your learners. The most efficient way is through some point of contact. It is likely that you thought of these learners as people with whom you could work because you already know some of them.

Perhaps they are already registered in programmes with your institution, or have been. In this case you might need permission, or at least a discussion, with the appropriate officer in your institution to contact them.

Perhaps they are being helped by some organisation of which you are a member, or with which you are acquainted. In this case you could ask an official of that organisation to help you contact the group.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

Once you have set up a meeting with the group or learners, proceed with the next activity.

## Activity 5



### First meeting

This is an important meeting. The humility and openness with which you approach these learners will determine the extent to which they will in turn be open with you.

Your first task will be to establish rapport with the group. Expect them to be suspicious at first: ‘Why should these strangers be interested in helping them? They must want some benefit out of this, otherwise they wouldn’t be here’. Be honest about your own intentions and why you are meeting with them. For example, if you are doing this project as part of a course or programme from which you will be getting credit, say so. Encourage participants to ask you questions – any question – about who you are, where you are from, and why you are meeting with them, and be as honest and straightforward as possible in your answers.

Once you have become reasonably comfortable with each other, your task now is to explore with these learners their problems as they see them. They have had an opportunity to ask you some questions. Now it is your turn to ask the questions. Your questions will focus on areas such as the following:

- What is it they want by way of education or training? What would they like to be able to do or accomplish, for which education or training is required?
- What attempts have they made at getting this training?
- What barriers are they facing in obtaining it?

The most important skills you will need at this point are listening skills. Listen as much as you can, rather than talking. You will learn a great deal more that way. Take notes, and be prepared to display them if necessary.

Your closing tasks are the following:

- ▶ sum up the meeting, listing the points that participants have made. Invite participants to correct this list or add to it. Emphasise that this is their list, and that it is important that everyone present agrees that it is accurate
- ▶ agree a time and place for another meeting, and an agenda for that meeting. Draw that agenda from the points that have arisen from this meeting; invite those present to suggest items for the agenda, and then work together with the group to agree the list
- ▶ thank everyone for coming and contributing. Depending on the kind of group you are meeting with, you might need to bring discussions to a more formal close as well, by calling on one or more of those present to speak. If there is someone present who is clearly a leader or important person, it is that person who should have the final word.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit* ▶

## Defining a research problem

At your next meeting or two, your task is to work with these learners in order to define one problem that they and you agree to work on. We say 'one problem' because these learners are likely to face a host of problems. Only some of them are problems that you might be able to help with, however, especially in the short time you have available. This is the essence of the 'critical' function that you must fulfil at this point, encouraging the learners to be critical of their own statements and perceptions. This is the next activity.

### Activity 6



#### Defining a problem

How do you facilitate the process of problem definition? As was the case in your first meeting, your primary task is to listen. In addition, however, you must encourage discussion. Here are some tips:

- ▶ It is essential to make the objective of the meeting clear and to keep returning to it: What problem could we – and should we – work on together? When the discussion starts getting confused, pull the group back by reminding them of their objective.
- ▶ Listen respectfully but critically. Suggest some reasons why it might be difficult to pursue a problem that is under discussion. Statements such as the following are respectful yet critical: 'I can understand that this is a big problem for you, but it might be too big for us to tackle; can we break it down a little and find some aspect of it that we probably could tackle within the next few weeks?' Or 'Yes, I can see that that is a

very important problem for you, but it's probably too much to take action on right now; perhaps there is a piece of it we could work on?'

- ▶ Act as though you are focusing a camera: you start out with a blurry image, but by progressively narrowing the focus, the image becomes clearer. Aim for an image so focused that everyone sees it clearly. Your objective is a problem that you and the group can come to grips with fairly readily and take action on in some immediate way.
- ▶ Keep testing understandings by asking questions such as 'I just want to stop a minute and make sure I understand this ... Do I have it right?'
- ▶ Very likely there will be one or two people who dominate the discussion at first. Politely suggest that you value what they are saying, and that this is an excellent start, and that you now want to hear from others as well. Try in particular to draw into the discussion people who have not said anything. As you get to know the group better, this will get easier – you will be able to address people by their names, and because you know something about them you can incorporate what you know into your questions. For example: 'Misha, I know that you have a very busy time with your three children and your large household; does it make sense to you that ...?' In this way, Misha can build on your reference to who she is and what she does in responding to your question.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit* ▶

## Establishing a methodology, work plan and timeline

Once you have your problem clearly defined, the discussion then turns to the way in which you will go about solving it. You need information about the problem: What methods will you use to gather that information? How will you record the information? Who will gather it? By what deadlines? What will happen to the information once it is gathered? This is the focus of your next activities.

### Activity 7



#### Methodology

You now know the problem you want to tackle. You will probably keep defining the problem as the research process goes on, but at least you have a place to start. You now need some information in order to tackle it.

What sort of information do you need?

The information you need may be contained in some kind of records or documents, in which case, documentary review is in order.

You may need to get some information about and from a wider group than just the learners you are working with. Perhaps they could be interviewed, either individually or in groups.

The information you need might have to be gathered by observation, for example, by going around counting things (such as the number of telephones in the community) or watching people doing some task for which they have asked for enhanced training.

You might need to do a survey – although given the limited amount of time you have, this will be difficult.

Remember that permissions are likely to be needed for access to certain documents, or from people who are going to be interviewed or observed. The project may well have positive and helpful objectives, but this by no means removes the need for ethical behaviour at all times with respect to everyone involved.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

## Objectivity

Another important aspect of deciding on methods is what conventional researchers term 'objectivity'. Remind yourself that you should not just collect data that you think will support the outcome you want. It is essential to encourage the group as a whole to gather all relevant data, even if they don't particularly agree with what they are hearing or like what they are seeing. The point of research is, at least in part, to be surprised by what you find; this is how new knowledge is created. This may be a difficult point to get across to all your participants, but it is important that you persist in the effort.

## Activity 8



### Recording data

You need to decide what the researchers – you and the learners who are your co-researchers – will do with the information when they get it. You will probably need to compile and distribute some materials to help them with this task:

- a set of interview questions, for example, with room for the answers, with enough copies to ensure they have one per interview
- notebooks in which to record observations
- tape recorders or video cameras if these can be borrowed or otherwise acquired in some cost-effective manner.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

## Activity 9



### Work plan and timeline

A work plan is a document that sets out four kinds of information:

- ▶ what activity is to be carried out
- ▶ how it is to be carried out. e.g. with what equipment
- ▶ who is to carry it out
- ▶ the deadline by which the activity is to be completed.

Determining who is to do what, how, and by when should be seen as a group task,

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit* ▶

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## Conducting ongoing progress checks

Researchers in any context need to be persistent about monitoring progress, to ensure that the research stays on track and that the objectives of the research are being fulfilled. The work plan is a useful tool in this regard, but a work plan on its own is no guarantee that monitoring will happen.

## Activity 10



### Monitoring progress

How will you monitor the progress that researchers are making in their tasks?

Through regular meetings, perhaps?

Meetings of the large group might take up too much time or be difficult to schedule, in which case the group might consider meeting in smaller clusters. For example, those who have taken responsibility for observing or counting might meet on a regular basis to check their progress and discuss any problems they are having. There will need to be ongoing meetings of the overall group that is doing the research, but there are ways of combining mini-meetings with larger meetings that can be even more effective than always insisting that everyone meet.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit* ▶

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### Producing the report

The information has all been gathered, the research records have been assembled in one place, and everyone in the group is agreed that it is time to write up the report. There are at least two aspects to report writing that need to be considered here, however:



- ▶ **the action plan.** This is not just participatory research, it is action research, and the report needs to make clear what actions will happen – or have already happened – as a consequence of this research. You need to put together an action plan as part of your report
- ▶ **writing the report.** It is notoriously difficult to write a report in a group. Some mechanism needs to be found that will make efficient report writing possible yet ensure full participation as well.

The following activities focus on these points – first, some tips for producing your action plan, and second, some guidelines for how to go about writing and structuring your report.

### Activity 11



#### The action plan

So you have gathered all this information. What now? What does it tell you about what needs to be done and what can be done and by whom? What is your action plan, and how will you implement it?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit* ▶

### Activity 12



#### Writing the report

Next comes the big task of writing the report.

This is best taken on by one or two people, who circulate versions of it amongst the group as a whole and then revise accordingly. You might need more meetings or it might be possible to circulate written copies and receive written feedback.

In terms of structure, research reports typically contain the following components:

- ▶ **title page** – Include the title of the study (another group decision), the name of the author(s) and the date. Participatory authorship can be claimed by giving your research group a name on the title page and then listing the members of the research team in the actual study
- ▶ **acknowledgements** – Note here the names of any individuals or organisations that have been particularly helpful
- ▶ **contents** – A table of contents, with page numbers
- ▶ **abstract or executive summary** – A brief summary of the highlights of the report. This usually focuses on the action points that arise from the research, since that is what decision-makers consider the heart of the matter

- ▶ **aims and purpose of the study** – A brief explanation of the purpose of the research. Explain the research problem in a few sentences. Provide any background that is necessary to place the study in context, including the process that led to the definition of the problem. Draw attention to any limitations of the study, such as the time and resources available
- ▶ **methodology** – This section explains how the problem was investigated, what methods were used and why. Any questionnaires or other protocols that were used are typically included in an appendix. Sometimes lists of those interviewed or observation sites are also included in an appendix
- ▶ **statement of findings** – This is the heart of the report, and will consist of tables, figures, and text, depending on the nature of the project. Include tables and charts, only if they are essential to portraying the reality of the findings; otherwise they just take up space
- ▶ **discussion** – Start this section with a restatement of the problem before discussing how the findings affect existing knowledge and perceptions of the topic. Any deficiencies in the research design should be mentioned, with suggestions about different approaches that might have been more appropriate. Implications for improved practice should be drawn out
- ▶ **conclusions and consequent actions** – The important thing here is to make clear the relationship between the research that has gone on and the actions that are being proposed or taken. Actions should arise clearly from the findings of the research
- ▶ **list of references** – If you have referred to any document in the body of the report, that document needs to be listed here
- ▶ **appendices** – This is the place for lists of things like people interviewed, documents consulted, questions asked, and so on.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit* ▶

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## Evaluation and action

Once your group has finished the report and circulated it to the relevant people, you can breathe a sigh of relief. Your job is not finished yet, however. You still have two remaining tasks: to evaluate the research process, and to implement the actions to which it gave rise.

### Activity 13



#### Evaluation

The primary objective of the evaluation process is to answer the question: Were the objectives of the research activity achieved? These are the objectives that were set out at the beginning of the process, in terms of solving the problem that the group identified. Has that problem been solved? To what extent?

It is essential that this evaluation process be participatory, in the way that all aspects of the research process have been participatory. How will you accomplish this? Probably with a group meeting, perhaps one in which everyone takes turns expressing an opinion as to whether the research met its objectives, what worked and what did not, and what else could be done.

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

## Activity 14



### Acting on the results

The research process is in itself action. Through it participants have learned some research skills, and have discovered in particular their own skills and abilities to ask useful questions and find ways of answering them. There will also be more specific outcomes of the research, however, as recorded in the action plan, that will need to be acted upon.

How will this plan be implemented?

How will the group, especially the learner-members, sustain a programme of activity?

*The feedback to this activity is at the end of the unit ►*

## Unit summary

This unit has offered you an opportunity to:

- organise
- implement
- and evaluate

a modest piece of research using a participatory and action approach.

You have been provided with guidance about how to:

- organise a research group
- establish relationships with a group of marginalised learners with whom to work
- define with those learners a research problem
- work with them to establish a methodology, work plan and timeline
- monitor the work in participatory fashion
- collaborate in compiling the report on the work
- evaluate the extent to which the project met its objectives; and implement a programme of action.

You have likely discovered both joys and frustrations in the process – plans typically go awry when so many people are participating in making and implementing them, despite the best intentions. Nonetheless, we hope that you will have found the process to be an empowering one, both for the learners with whom you have worked and for yourself as a researcher. That is the best result that one can hope for.

## Feedback to selected activities



### Feedback to Activity 1

Were you able to find one or two people who are willing to work with you on this project? Good. The next step is to meet to discuss your ideas and to establish some ground rules for your work together.

### Feedback to Activity 2

Were you able to reach agreement on what kind of research you want to do and on the principles that will guide your work? With a group this small you should be able to reach a consensus. In other words, no one in the group should feel that he or she is being 'outvoted' or strong-armed into doing something he or she is not keen on doing. Keep the discussion going until everyone feels comfortable with the decision that is made. This may take more than one meeting, depending on the kind of time you have available.

In terms of the tenets or principles that you agree will underlie your work together, here are some of the understandings that was reached by the CAP education group that was mentioned in Unit 3. We agreed in that group that

- ▶ we really learn only what we create or re-create for ourselves
- ▶ participatory work begins with and moves forward from the experience of participants and facilitators
- ▶ interaction and reflection, rather than one-way transmission of information or experience, are the fundamental learning processes
- ▶ participants' starting points are acceptable and accepted wherever they are
- ▶ anything participants or facilitators bring to the group is an offer – not a demand, not the only enlightened or best approach
- ▶ facilitators and participants share power and leadership; roles and responsibilities are negotiated rather than assigned
- ▶ openness and honesty are essential to building a climate of trust
- ▶ we build on each other's ideas, in a spirit of cooperation rather than competition.

Does your list look something like this one? What did you add? Whatever ends up on your list, it is important to keep your list active as a continuing

point of reference in your work together. Look back at it from time to time as a check to ensure that you are following your own guidelines.

You may also, in your discussions, have agreed that each of you would take on somewhat different roles and responsibilities. For example, one of you might have offered to maintain the records of your research activity; another might wish to be part of the group but in a primarily advisory capacity rather than as an active researcher. These are the kinds of understandings that you need to reach early on in your work together. All of you do not need to do everything!

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### Feedback to Activity 3

Here are some criteria for you to consider in your decision-making. It is important that the group you identify is

- ▶ small enough to be manageable within a research project that lasts only a few weeks rather than months or years – this might mean choosing a sample of a larger group
  - ▶ accessible to you, preferably face-to-face, unless you are working in a context where these learners, even though marginalised, still have access to means of communication whereby you could work with them at a distance
  - ▶ organised in some way so that an action programme once defined could actually be carried out – a community, perhaps, or a group that an NGO is working with (e.g. teenaged mothers who are being helped by a local charity).
- 

### Feedback to Activity 4

Once you have made contact with your learners, reflect on the process of making contact. What problems did you encounter? How might these have been avoided?

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### Feedback to Activity 5

When this first meeting is over, meet with your small research group to debrief on what happened at the meeting:

- ▶ What went well?
- ▶ What did not go well?
- ▶ What should you do at the next meeting to make things go better?

You will also need to consolidate your notes, and discuss what you need to do before your next meeting.

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### Feedback to Activity 6

Again, it is important for your small research group to keep monitoring what is happening at these meetings in terms of what is working and what is not. If

you are working with a group that is being served by a particular organisation and there is a representative of that organisation at your meetings, you can ask them to join your reflections in terms of what is working and what else you could be doing. You need also to ask the learners on a continuing basis how they feel about what is happening, and gauge from their responses how well the process is working.

### Feedback to Activity 7

Whatever sort of information you need, you will need to keep it within limits since you don't have months to gather it. It is also advisable to keep your methods as simple as possible. Stick to activities that you are confident the learners you are working with can actually do. They might need a little training, and certainly ongoing support, in conducting interviews or counting objects (making sure they are counting the right things) or observing interactions and behaviours, but essentially these should be procedures that they are comfortable with doing.

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### Feedback to Activity 8

You are probably more knowledgeable about research and recording methods than your learners are. Nonetheless, you must continually ensure that the learners are involved as much as possible in decisions about how to gather and record information. They are bound to have ideas about how it can best be done, and these ideas need to be incorporated into the overall group decision-making.

You will also need to establish as a group the principle of openness and how the information that is gathered is to be made available to the group as a whole – perhaps through reports from each researcher at group meetings, or by depositing research records in some central file or location that everyone has access to.

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### Feedback to Activity 9

Once you have your work plan determined, put it on a big chart and post it where everyone will have access to it. Remember, however, that this is a monitoring tool, not a prescription. You need to be somewhat flexible in keeping to your plan – the group's initial expectations may have been unrealistic and need to be revised and modified as time goes on. The point is not to let time get away from you, and to ensure accountability to the group. Experience shows that peer pressure is a wonderful motivating mechanism.

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### Feedback to Activity 10

You may have discovered that one or two people are falling down on the job and are not meeting their deadlines – or doing anything at all in the way of research despite their agreement to these tasks. What do you do?

The most direct approach is probably the best. Meet with the individual or individuals concerned to talk about why they have not been doing their tasks. Perhaps something in their lives has changed since they first agreed to the tasks. Perhaps the task is proving more difficult than they first thought and they are giving up. Perhaps they are losing interest. You need to be reasonably tolerant here – probably the research is not the major event in these people's lives. At the same time, if it is clear that they are not able or willing to participate within the timelines that the group has established, they might be better to drop out. This is a delicate matter, and one you will want to discuss with others in the group rather than take unilateral action. Go back to the ground rules that the group established for guidance, and seek advice.

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### Feedback to Activity 11

An action plan looks much like a work plan, except with a broader reach. The work plan you put together in Activity 9 involved only those people in your research group. The action plan, however, is likely to involve people outside the circle of researchers, such as the administrators of an educational institution that will need to be lobbied, using the research that has been done as a basis for the campaign.

As with the work plan, the action plan needs to be thoroughly discussed by all the researchers involved. Learners are likely to have a clear idea of the actions that will satisfy them in terms of meeting the needs identified at the start of the research exercise, and you as education practitioners are likely to have knowledge and experience of what kinds of actions are most likely to be effective.

Whatever the group decides on, it will need to be represented in the report in terms of actions, actors and timelines, in much the same way that the work plan was set out. The group will also need to decide on an appropriate tracking mechanism, one that will ensure that the actions are actually taken and the results are communicated back to the group as a whole.

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### Feedback to Activity 12

In writing your report, ask yourself the following questions:

- ▶ Who is the audience for this report?
  - ▶ What do they need to know?
  - ▶ What level and sophistication of language is appropriate?
  - ▶ Have terms been defined? Acronyms spelled out?
  - ▶ Is the length appropriate to the audience? Is it short enough to be readable yet long enough to get the necessary information and points across?
  - ▶ What will happen to the report? Who will it go to?
  - ▶ How will you ensure that those who need to read and respond to it will do so?
-

### Feedback to Activity 13

Hopefully by now the group will have established a sufficiently honest and open climate for members to be able to express their thoughts and reflections without fear or reluctance.

There are a couple of points to be taken into account here:

One is that there needs to be a record of the evaluative process, first as reinforcement that a good job has been done, and secondly as a record of what could have been done better or what remains to be done.

The other point is that, however you handle the process of evaluation, you may discover that, in the process of answering this question, there were other, unintended consequences of the research. These also need to be recorded. They may already have been included in the report. However, these consequences sometimes only become apparent after a period of time has elapsed, and if that is the case it is important that the evaluation process capture them.

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### Feedback to Activity 14

This is the final test of any piece of participatory action research – what action has it led to, and how effective has that action been? This is not a test that can be carried out immediately. Action, to be meaningful, will be to some extent immediate – otherwise those whose lives and needs are involved will lose heart – but it must also be sustained over a longer term. There are no easy answers here, but hopefully the process that has been started by this participatory approach is one that the group itself will sustain.

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