Participatory social inquiry: Problematizing research for ‘commons’ knowledge

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Introduction
As global financial structures continue crumbling and our planet continues warming, questions about the usefulness of research are far from abstract. Former political leaders in my home country have notoriously exploited research for ideological ends in the last decade. Fortunately, leaders in other nations have given quantitative and even qualitative research a more considered audience – one reason, perhaps, why so many countries are moving toward unprecedented levels of consensus on issues ranging from the Millennium Development Goals, to commitments advanced in recent CONFINTEA sessions, to new international agreements in response to accelerating global climate change. Nevertheless, the qualitative condition of over half the world’s people and most ecosystems remains perilous. Researchers feel the pressure as they raise critiques, and face them, about the relevance and applicability of their particular forms of inquiry.

Educational research is no exception. My focus on the informal, lifelong learning of adults highlights relations with the world of our experience and the ever growing imperative that we find more adaptive ways of being present in that world – versus extinguishing it. O’Sullivan (1999) is among those who suggest such teaching and learning is the most important task educators face. This paper makes a case for problematizing these concerns within an emerging context, most often designated by the familiar term the commons – reconceptualized within the contemporary world. I argue that, under conditions of rapid ecologic and sociologic change, research becomes far more useful when integrated within a continuous cycle of human learning that is essentially distributive of power, legitimacy, and multiple forms of agency. Such a cycle has the potential to create not just new and usable knowledge, but a co-sovereign knowledge commons. This framework requires researchers and participants to become more than collaborators – to become ‘commoners’ in a mutually reconfigured space of learning where people are authorized to act in their situated contexts, on the basis of their particular forms of knowledge, and consistent with their unique realms of agency.
Recent steps toward such inquiry on a global scale have demonstrated its challenges. I will review one example briefly and point to promising next steps. Despite the inherent difficulties, I believe the project of social inquiry holds great hope to the extent scholars can view their work and themselves as co-operative participants, learning to learn in a deliberative and evolving knowledge commons.

**Contours of Action and Participation in Research**

Academic dialogue on the philosophic distinctions between positivist, constructivist, interpretive, and participatory paradigms of research has been a valuable milestone in the evolution of structured inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln 2005; Polkinghorne 1983, Staller, Block & Horner 2008), yet it can miss a fundamental dimension of human experience mediated by the act of social research. Relationships enacted within settings of inquiry create inevitable tensions around existing and emerging patterns of power relations among actors (Delgado-Gaitán 1993). In both positivist and constructivist paradigms, these tensions were once managed by reliance on stable, even rigid social roles and the reproduction of historic power relations between ‘investigators’ and ‘subjects.’ Though constructivist and interpretive approaches to qualitative meaning-making eroded these positions somewhat, competing notions of power embedded within participatory and action research designs further destabilized such relations, raising possibilities for agency among research participants that were nearly unimaginable a few decades ago (McTaggart 1997). Such shifts have opened the way for broad reconsideration of the nature of power, authority, legitimacy, transparency, access, and voice in research. Likewise, they have permitted new structures of inquiry, analysis, and reporting to emerge, thus multiplying the faces of researchers and research.

**‘Decolonizing’ Social Inquiry**

Welcomed by some, this metamorphosis remains suspect for others and the critically reflective spaces it creates may be felt as excruciating, even for researchers. In *Country of My Skull* (1998), South African poet and radio journalist, Antjie Krog, relates her experiences reporting on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in the 1990s. In shattering detail, Krog describes her responses to the necessary task of immersing herself in the agonizing stories of those who testified:

> I walk into my house … stand in the dark kitchen for a long time. Everything has become unconnected and unfamiliar. I realize that I don’t know where the light switch is. … Every week we are stretched thinner and thinner over different pitches of grief…. My hair is falling out. My teeth are falling out. I have rashes. … I enter my house like a stranger. …. No poetry should come forth from this. May my hand fall off if I write this. … If I write this, I exploit and betray. If I don’t, I die. (pp.63-66)
Krog’s blended ethnographic-autoethnographic account has earned its status as the pre-eminent qualitative record of the Truth Commission hearings from the perspective of a white Afrikaaner. Her writing makes visible the powerful cultural milieu that permeates social inquiry, as well as the divergent, yet startlingly interwoven pain met by those who attempt to face and assimilate the brutal experiences qualitative research may reveal. Krog’s work exemplifies an aspect of participatory inquiry that too many researchers are loath to consider in depth: the vulnerability, as well as profound strength, demanded of all who become closely involved in social research processes where participation engages power, and begins to level privilege on the field of investigation.

Gonzalez y Gonzalez & Lincoln (2006) point to Krog’s work as an exemplar of ‘decolonizing’ expressions of qualitative research and reporting:

> It is no longer enough to present the "monumentalized" (Rosaldo, 1989) static cultural images desired by formerly unitary audiences. … What is necessary is a dynamic, interactive, dialectic set of images, reflecting change, exchange, interchange, galvanic and sometimes conflict-ridden processes … accomplishing research which is not only responsive to social scientists' needs, but more critically, shaped by the needs and questions of local peoples, as well as carried out under their direction.

> … Research conducted in this way—a close fit with participatory action research—will display … the exchange between cultures … [the] sense of conversation, of authentic listening … [and of] conflict.… (emphasis added)

While the characteristic often used to distinguish participatory action research (PAR) from other designs is its concern with producing emancipatory change in the system under study, there are broader conceptual distinctions between PAR and traditional exploratory social research. The classical scientific method relies on a notion of critical distance (the presumed separation between observer and observed) as a key to competent design, but action research demands critical engagement – and participatory research goes further, not only compressing objective distance, but scrutinizing the quality of engagement between researcher(s) and participant(s). The practice seldom looks pretty, as it necessarily externalizes power struggles encountered in the effort toward mutuality. Thus, Forester (1999) problematizes participation as presenting ‘well-known dangers of manipulation … but also … real political opportunities for deliberative, even transformative, learning and research’ (p.6).

**Dramas of Participatory Learning and Action**

Such shifts implicate far more than the identity, voice, or position of the researcher. They bear on the nature of participation itself, as well as the
learning and transformation effected across social networks within which all actors in a research project develop associations and deepen their inquiries. Yet while participatory and action researchers, as well as critical ethnographers are understood to be legitimate agents of change in their settings of inquiry (Foley & Valenzuela 2005; Stoecker 2005), the broader social experience of researchers, in relation to those whom they study, remains oddly at the margins of inquiry. It begs questions about what might happen were we to turn our attention more often, or at length, to those complex relations, the quite personal meanings we make from our own research experiences … would our hair and teeth fall out? Would we become lost in our own kitchens?

If we can abide such questions, more uncertainties await. Again, it is Forester (1999) who has charted, without romanticism, the further reaches of learning that becomes available through the ‘complex and messy situations of real life,’ as well as the sometimes ‘tragic choices [people] face in a world of deep conflict’ (p.15). He explains: ‘As individuals or as communities, our values conflict and cannot all be realized. This is the meaning of political plurality – our caring about many values’ (p.14). But our differences do not relieve us, he insists, from the imperative to co-operate for practical purposes, to provide food for the hungry and respect for the dignity of life. What is implicated lies beyond the scope of roles and resides in the realm of human sovereignty – notions about the nature and locus of legitimate authority.

ReVisioning the Commons
Clearly, this is terrain not just of social inquiry, but of political deliberation, social planning, and international policy as well. The language of the academy evidences such political awareness in calls for more ‘democratic’ teaching and research or ‘emancipatory’ outcomes for research ‘participants’ – contrasting more established or ‘colonizing’ discourses examining ‘compliance’ among the ‘subjects’ of research. If such debates echo human liberation struggles under kings or the lords of land and ‘resources’ that mark the ages, they persist no less urgently today.

At the heart of these struggles, as at the heart of social inquiry, are as-yet indeterminate ideas about sovereignty: where it resides, whether it can be transferred, and to what extent sovereignty is distributive – ie, whether or not it is essentially common to all people. These uncertainties, in turn, bring forward:

- questions about authority – who may direct others’ activities; who may challenge the way things are done; how does authority interface with control, power, and privilege; and how is it earned, invested, structured and challenged?
- questions about access – who is included in what, and on what terms; how is information stored and released; how is communication structured and what alternatives are available; how is marginalization
noted and located; and how can access, or its failures, be challenged, negotiated, and changed?

- questions about transparency and perspective (multi-focal, multi-voicedness) – what can be seen and who can be heard; what structures shape this seeing and hearing; what tolerance exists for conflicting or competing accounts of experience; how can space for alternatives be expanded; who controls such spaces; and how openly are decisions made that shape these factors?

Moreover, woven through these all considerations is the foundational issue of:

- governance – how are decisions made, who participates, and by what means? What is the nature of leadership and what is its role in decision-making? How are differences raised and negotiated, and how are agreements actualized? In what ways does leadership interface with authority, power and privilege, as well as with other roles and the social network of group relationships?

These questions point to assumptions and predispositions that bear enormous consequences in social inquiry. Under conditions of rapid geophysical and socio-historical change – like that already occurring in many regions of the world linked to shifting habitats, hunger, human migration and cultural dislocation – they acquire practical urgency as groups of people must learn how to co-operate, simply to survive. In the context of global initiatives, these questions hold equal relevance when international groups attempt to organize quickly and effectively, while honoring principles of fairness, openness, tolerance, and respect for diverse peoples. Across movements that draw on contemporary notions of the commons, however, all these questions ironically tap into competing understandings of the term itself. In his introduction to *The Global Idea of ‘the Commons’,* Nonini (2007) writes:

…throughout the global South and in the cities of the global North, large numbers of people have formed movements to defend the commons in all their variety. They have come together in diverse settings in struggles [for] … control of the common pool resources – natural, social, intellectual, and cultural – upon which their own social and personal survival depend. These conflicts are not only for control of common material resources, but also for control of the cultural meanings that define the commons and the processes that would preserve or destroy them. …[T]he claim … is not in dispute [that] the idea of the commons has emerged as a global idea and commons have emerged as sites of conflict around the world. (p.3, emphasis added)

Bollier (2003), Boyle (2003), Nelson (2004), Nonini (2007), Ostrom, et al. (1990, 2002) and others have identified commons across multiple dimensions of life, encompassing not only physical spaces and ecosystems, but also:

- the natural evolution and variety of gene pools on the planet;
orally-transmitted knowledges and cultural legacies of indigenous peoples;
- histories, arts and wisdom traditions of ancient societies;
- contemporary intellectual fields of pursuit, from the digital open source movement to the knowledge generated across local initiatives;
- complex, informal networks of relational knowledge embedded in communities;
- cultural milieus generated as people live in proximity, bringing together their artistic, historic and inter-subjective experience.

Yet the same scholars agree all these types of commons are under siege from an unprecedented array of sources, including runaway privatization, environmental degradation, and intellectual enclosure. Initiatives arising to confront modern threats, specifically in terms of commons principles, remain few although they are multiplying. One such movement, with which I have participated, is the Coalition for the Global Commons (CGC), a project that grew from the combined vision of international participants in the Global Marshall Plan (GMP) based in Europe. I will discuss my work with the CGC briefly as an illustrative case.

**Coalition for the Global Commons**

In June 2007, on the sixtieth anniversary the Marshall Plan for Europe’s launch, a group of international organizations introduced a new coalition (the CGC) to expand the vision of the GMP. In early documents, the CGC identified incursions on the ‘global commons’ as a key unifying theme across many of the world’s most urgent challenges. Yet rather than approach this at the level of international policy, early framers of the coalition sought to create a people’s movement that would reflect the spirit of its ultimate goal: realization by humanity of its common, essential sovereignty as citizens of a common earth. By creating broader structures through which people and organizations could convene, negotiate and act, CGC leaders sought to help make manifest a new expression of human sovereignty, mobilizing diverse peoples around the world to reach policymakers and lawmakers, educating them through worldwide campaigns and action programs about the global adjustments that are necessary’ (Finkbeiner & Quilligan 2007, p.4). In this way, the action of diverse peoples could form an effective basis for transformative change on behalf of the global commons, humanity, and the earth. Accordingly, the first public document announcing the CGC’s work called for opening:

... a major multi-stakeholder consultation process ... expanding this discussion beyond the present stage ... [to] open the dialogue and feedback process to a much larger number of individuals and organizations ... [involving] ... the participation of the people of the entire world....” (Finkbeiner & Quilligan 2007, p.22)
My role in the initiative focused on developing a framework for global consultation (Webb 2008). I approached the call for consultation as a project of engaged social inquiry that required integrated dimensions of participatory lifelong learning, critical reflection, and deliberative action. My position as a doctoral student focusing on historically emancipatory adult education movements shaped my understanding of the CGC’s intent, and I was quickly convinced the primary challenge facing the initiative was radically educational in nature, consistent with O’Sullivan’s (1999) manifesto: ‘The fundamental educational task of our times is to make the choice for a sustainable planetary habitat of interdependent life forms over and against the dysfunctional calling of the global competitive marketplace’ (p.2, emphasis added). The transformations required to manifest such a choice globally, however, seemed almost unimaginable – requiring a human learning process on a scale unparalleled in history. The closest exemplars I found were the work of Freire (1970, 1998) with his notion of conscientizacao, and the South African anti-apartheid movement along with that nation’s journey through the Truth Commission hearings.

Space does not permit detailed exploration of the challenges faced by the CGC as it worked to implement a consultation process, though many difficulties involved precisely the questions (above) of authority, transparency, access, and governance that so often complicate participatory inquiry. The notion that consultation itself could be designed to function as a sovereign, deliberative knowledge commons – capable of precipitating multiple streams of collaborative yet distributive local and regional action – this was a paradigm that seemed counter-intuitive for some CGC partners and perhaps unmanageable for others. By contrast, consultation designed to connect and empower global experts and leaders for sharing knowledge and developing policy comprised a familiar model that held more sway. Yet, a great deal of learning occurred across the initiative through multiple networks of relationships in the rich cultural milieu that developed – a force that both enlivened and destabilized the CGC’s internal processes over time. In my view, it was this learning, in particular, that catalyzed realizations of shared sovereignty and agency among active participants, by expanding decolonizing forms of awareness and experience around questions of power. When management or technology problems arose, they served to magnify paradigmatic differences among partners and highlight alternatives for sovereign action and co-governance.

In late autumn 2008, a CGC subgroup (of which I was part) convened an open-access study group to examine issues of leadership, transparency, and decision-making across the initiative. They have since formed a standing research cooperative, the Commons Governance Work Group (on the global forum www.WiserEarth.com), and now seek to develop effective models of co-governance, applicable to commons existing (and emerging) in a variety of contexts and at various stages of development.
Co-Sovereignty in a Learning Commons
A critical structure the CGC seemed to lack was a resilient approach to participatory deliberation. Critiquing Habermas’s work, Forester (1999) argues that the critical pragmatism of Habermas’s ‘account of communicative, performative action leads to many fruitful questions of … practical politics’ (p.204):

Readers of Habermas have assumed too easily that analyzing the conditions of justification tells us how to achieve justice. But it does not – any more than the analysis of Michael Jordan’s moves tells us how to move like Michael Jordan!

… [D]eliberations bring parties face to face across lines of class, race, gender, and territory – parties who bring histories of being doers and being done-to, histories of rights enjoyed and rights betrayed….

…[T]o envision public deliberations in which [people] will not just argue … but recognize the texture and often painful history of their social relatedness, we should [presume] no equality of power and instead prob[e] the precariously of inter-subjective understandings and agreements … [which] leads us directly to questions of power and hegemony, agenda setting and the contestable reproduction of [people’s] knowledge, consent, and social relationships…. (p.206-7)

Forester adds that achieving deliberative settings in which people can listen and act more equitably will require them to do more than deconstruct or theorize – but to ‘learn with one another, and learn how … [to] act together as well’ (p.207, emphasis added).

Was it a structure the CGC lacked or, more specifically, a commons for critical learning of this kind? Forester’s analysis suggests that, prior to realizing a functional knowledge commons like the collective capacity for consultation and action, a prerequisite commons must be generated where people can explore together – safely and reciprocally – their inter-subjective histories, identities, and ways of negotiating power and relationships to knowledge. In other words – if we are to move like Michael Jordan, we must learn these ways through secure, sustained processes of shared experience.

Commons movements will be inwardly congruent and, thereby, outwardly effective only as they find participatory modes of co-governance consistent with the vision they hold. To accomplish this, people require decolonizing, deliberative learning commons, where authority is distributive and agency is permeable to all. For teachers and researchers, this translates, ultimately, as a challenge to understand ourselves as ‘commoners’ –people who share a sometimes painful imperative to listen, learn and act with others. Toward this end, co-sovereign commons of knowing and learning are not only legitimate – they are pivotal if the present generation of global social research is to fulfill
the ‘fundamental educational task of our times … the choice for a sustainable planetary habitat’, to which O’Sullivan calls us.

_The author thanks participants in the Commons Governance Work Group for many safe, reciprocal explorations of our sovereignty in a learning commons._

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