Evaluation can be Liberating

Kate Roberts and Jess Jennings

Dr Kate Roberts
kroberts@robertsevaluation.com.au
Roberts Research and Evaluation Pty Ltd

Abstract

The contribution emancipatory research has made to the development of strong and open communities is to go beyond the notion of power sharing to a point where power does not become the operating paradigm but outcomes become the focus. It has been argued that the notion of power sharing still acknowledges implicit power structures and tries to work with them. Instead, emancipatory research relinquishes the control of the research to the participants who then make decisions about outcomes (Humphries et al, 2000 p3).

While the research referred to in this paper does not deal with groups as marginalised as some of those in the literature, the use of action research in projects involving farmers and rural producers takes the control away from research scientists and places it in the hands of those for whom the results are intended. Experience with a number of projects where this has been the object has both served to highlight the entrenchment of the dominant power oriented paradigm as well as indicating how well emancipatory research worked. A surprising feature was that there did not need to be a consciousness of and, therefore, dismantling of the dominate paradigm in order for emancipation to work. In many cases, the two can exist side by side while participants concentrated on the task at hand.

A role of evaluation in these projects was to articulate what was occurring. It clarified if true collaborative and thus emancipatory research was being implemented and to what extent. An indirect effect was that the process of evaluation increased an awareness of participants' actual, perceived and intended involvement in the projects and contributed to their 'liberation' - both from their own mindsets and from the pre-existing power structures.

Keywords

Background

The validation of experiential knowledge is at the heart of emancipatory research (Humphries et al, 2000, p3). McTaggart (1991) would agree. He described three types of knowledge: knowledge derived from workers (equivalent to experiential knowledge), knowledge derived from academics and knowledge derived from the group. These descriptions equate to terms used by the German philosopher Habermas' (in Bredo and Feinberg, 1982): 'practical knowledge (experiential knowledge)', 'technical knowledge' and 'emancipatory knowledge'.

Habermas stated that practical knowledge is accumulated by the application of a subjectively based, *constructivist* paradigm. Whereas, technical knowledge is accumulated by observation and experiment, using the scientific, rationalist, *positivist* paradigm. Technical knowledge is equated with empirical measurement, reproducibility and

proof (Bredo and Feinberg, 1982a, b). This type of knowledge can be equated to knowledge about content (facts). It accumulates facts about the thing being examined. The third category, emancipatory knowledge, Habermas maintained is accumulated through a combination of both the other forms. It is produced by an understanding of technical knowledge and its application. In the research projects presented in a later section of this paper, emancipation of the individual is only one of the intended outcomes. Another is that research results from scientific projects are meaningful and useful to the intended users. This became the primary focus for the projects rather than the relationship between members of the group. The method of collaboration often used to achieve this outcome is action research.

Action research

The action research approach was seen as important in countries where the researchers were very different from the communities in which they were working. The traditional and practical knowledge of the community members was seen as critical for the success of the projects where success was seen as use of the research results. There are many practical examples in the publication *PLA Notes* about the need, value and empowerment of collaborative research (see appendix 2). Syme and Eaton (1989); Syme and Sadler (1994) and McTaggart (1991) set out the need and value of collaboration in a researched and academic form in their papers.

Action research involves a group in collaborative research. It is guided by a structure (four step process of ACTION, OBSERVATION, REFLECTION AND CHANGE/PLAN) and a set of principles. One set of principles is articulated by McTaggart (1991). Others (Magill and Beaty,) are similar. The principles inlcude:

- The need for ndividual and collective commitment to the project. Individuals must commit themselves to improvement and change using a collaborative process with others.
- The need to uncover and deal with the inconsistencies within the group.
- It is assumed that everyone starts on an equal footing.
- Research work consists of taking action and then reflecting on it.
- Research work is about creating knowledge together as a group.
- An obligation to justify research to an outside audience by documenting and monitoring and evaluating methodically.

Individuals go beyond the sharing of power to learning together as equals. The need for a common language is part of learning together and referred to by Humphries et all (2000, p5) where the authors documented the history of emancipatory research. They also refer to reflecting on actions and creating knowledge.

Evaluation as liberator

Evaluation's role as liberator is through enlightenment where enlightenment means clarifying and documenting reality. It is the case, of course, that enlightenment does not always lead to liberation but further entrenchment. However, this paper concentrates on examples where clarification resulted in liberating experiences. Evaluation's role was that it provided data about practical and technical knowledge, examined context and articulated relationships. Evaluation can act as liberator on at least two levels. The first where participants collect and analyse their own data and the second where these functions are carried out by an external evaluator. This paper concentrates on the second.

The structure and principles of action research demand certain protocols, ethics, means of communication and information sharing. If, at least, principles are upheld, the relationship can be liberating. Liberation can mean from researchers' own strictures of scientific research, expectations individuals have of each other (negative and positive) and lack of awareness. For example, in an on farm trial in New South Wales recently exposing research results " critical analysis by farmers and extension workers" led one group of researchers to admit they learnt more about the agronomic factors of this pasture species than if it had been tested in a laboratory (Roberts et al, 2002). In the same project, farmers admitted that they increased in confidence to work with and talk to experts. This was also something observed by Foale et al (1996).

So what action research did in this project was set up a collaborative research environment where members of the group are treated as equals, where honest sharing was expected, and there was rigorous and systematic data collection and analysis carried out. What evaluation did was enlighten individuals within and outside the collaborative group about what was going.

For similar reasons, but from a different perspective, evaluation was enlightening during the delivery of a series of evaluation workshops to groups of dairy farmers in the Subtropical Dairy Program in 2000. Data from the evaluation pointed how much had been achieved. One group of dairy farmers from South East Queensland , who took part in this series, stated that they were quite despondent by what they thought was their lack of achievement. They felt that their projects had come to a halt. They were concerned that their inactivity was letting down the dairy industry and their colleagues. It was not until they were led through an exercise of measuring where they had been and what they had done for the past 12 months that it became clear that they had been very active earlier in the year. They had slowed down on many research projects more recently because of the impending deregulation of their industry and they were instead concentrating on the possible effects on the individual business (Roberts, 2000).

Group motivation and learning were also included as achievements. Although some would argue that to include these learning outcomes could be seen as manipulating the results just to make rural producers feel good about achieving. However, if one reviews the principles for action research set out by McTaggart above, then it can be seen that empowerment comes this sort of learning and creating knowledge. It comes from being aware of how a group working together as equals because individuals respect each other's skills and learn from each other. Therefore, what was liberating in these instances were the insights gained by the group into how each of them worked, that each was respected and that their knowledge contributed to the technical outcome of the projects they were running.

Members of self learning groups in the wool industry (Bestprac groups) modelling a form of action research, gained a lot from each other when they shared information about what they did, what worked and what did not. In these groups of producers, the action research ethos of open sharing and a commitment to review was of greater value to the group members than the action research structure of review (action, observation, reflection, plan/change) (Roberts 1999, 2000b, 2001a).

These snap shots are just some quick examples of how evaluation can contribute to liberation. Below is a more detailed example of the effects of evaluation.

Profitable Pastures Project
The Profitable Pastures Project (PPP) conducted its first phase across the NSW dairy industry from mid 1998 to October 2001, and is continuous to June 2003. Through the management of a multi-institutional leadership team, comprised of industry, government and university sectors, PPP implemented an action research methodology to achieve three proposed industry goals of:
1. Improving dairy pasture management and profitability;
2. Conducting farmer-participatory research to address pasture issues; and,
3. Improve farmer confidence to assess the suitability of technologies for adoption.

In addition to these contracted project outcomes, PPP phase one reported success in:
4. Reaching a significant proportion of the dairy farming population;
5. Supporting PhD studies in Extension and action research methodologies;
6. Bringing together three key institutions and other stakeholders on a cooperative approach to research; and
7. Creating a high level of support for PPP (Ison, 2001).

PPP implemented the action research process within six Regional Dairy Groups in key dairying areas in New South Wales located from Taree to Bega and as far west as Forbes. The first priority was to establish a healthy forum for farmer-driven discussion that did not inhibit farmer participation, or *turn a deaf ear* to their individual and collective voices. Over 18 months, this was successfully achieved by either establishing a new forum in areas where previously none had existed, or by enhancing existing farmer discussion forums with support from PPP, including financial and facilitation resources.

PPP was the first project in the NSW dairy industry of its kind (and probably Australia) to explicitly allocate 50% of its entire budget directly to the Regional Dairy Groups, each of which are run by farmers. This amounted to ten thousand dollars per group per year for three years. The impact of this method of distributing PPP funds was vast. When farmers became aware of PPP they were struck by the genuineness of the project's claim of being a project for farmers. This in itself was liberating to some farmers, but across the groups it created a sense of responsibility amongst farmers to spend their communal monies to best advantage, as well as generating an awareness of the need to be accountable for expenditure. In turn this accountability triggered a strong, although varying, degree of commitment by farmers to their local Regional Dairy Group.

What took place

The initial approach taken was to 'ask' farmers what concerned them most about their current pasture management practices, and why. Having established a group discussion forum, farmers were required to prioritise their self-expressed issues and effectively state their collective agenda for research, both at local and industry levels without significant interference from the usual industry players in research and development staff. After defining their agenda, farmers were expected to PLAN and ACT in order to implement their goals. As a method of REFLECTION, farmers were expected to report directly to each other as groups and pass on any significant outcomes to the leadership team. The four step processes of action research was implemented throughout PPP. However, there was not a powerful sense amongst farmers of the sequence of the four stages, or that it was important to them. The greater value was that the action research method was showing farmers how they learnt at a local level.

Results

The adherence by the leadership team to implement the key principles of action research proved a key driver for PPP reaching its aims, and indeed exceeding them. In essence, the notion of a democratic social structure through which farmers could conduct their discussion and interact on their own terms was paramount. In the context of agriculture, PPP aimed to re-instate farmers as experts in their own right – that is, as highly effective managers of extremely complex systems, commonly known as farms. PPP's explicitly stated respect for farmer's personal experience and accumulated indigenous knowledge tapped individual farmer's confidence to participate in local learning activities. This was particularly so because PPP - for the first time in NSW - was placing ordinary dairy farmers on (at least) an equal footing with scientists, academics and the traditional industry controllers of the processes of research and development. As far as PPP funding was concerned, farmers had the power of veto, which effectively placed them in the dominant position to control localised learning agenda and execution.

Observation

Greenwood and Levin (1998, p88) state that … "AR (action research) explicitly seeks to disrupt existing power relationships for the purpose of democratizing society. It also instrumentally seeks to incorporate the great diversity of knowledge and experience of all society's members in the solution of collective problems." A professional external evaluation of PPP provided opportunity to objectively clarify how these core principles of action research had come together in the field.

At the end of phase one an external evaluation was conducted on the entire operations of PPP in the NSW dairy industry. This evaluation found that:

> the research needs are generated by the (farmer) group;
> setting the agenda and ownership of the project rests with the (farmer) group;
> there is a close liaison between farmers and service providers such as universities and government agencies; and
> the project begins at the point of learning for that group rather than a point determined by others (Roberts 2001b, external evaluation report on PPP)

Of particular interest to funding bodies and managers of PPP was the way in which previously existing socio-political structures and traditional patterns of conducting learning and research in local communities were able to be suspended, without significant controversy or conflict. In general, across Regional Dairy Groups, the existing power structure did not have to be dismantled for collaborative research to take place, but rather the PPP *modus operandi* operated in an inclusive, pluralistic manner with traditional processes. This often took the form of default community leaders from government, science or industry sectors opting to 'take a back seat' at PPP's farmer-driven meetings, but who resumed their position of authority if, and only when, they were invited into discussion about their field of expertise. As a consequence improvement for all the relevant stakeholders was achieved through the promotion of the action research principle of respecting and using diversity within groups to meet communal goals.

Improvements (to increase participation in decision making)
The evaluation process contracted by PPP clearly benefited farmer participants. This benefit came in the form of farmers being made aware of the actual role they had been playing in PPP, and specifically, how their standing within pre-existing behavioral conventions had changed dramatically from one of typically passive recipients of an externally generated learning agenda to active determinants of that agenda. The PPP evaluation identified for farmers that their new-found role existed at both an individual and collective level – that is, individuals realised the power of their own voice, whilst also recognising the magnitude of the force created by pooling farmers' minds within an open, democratic social structure. Group power operated on several levels, including economic, with several groups using their unity to evoke supply discounts from agribusiness.

In essence the evaluation process within PPP provided both participants and managers with an understanding of what they had achieved in the first phase of the project. In an environment of uncertainty and under constant pressure to reform existing power relationships, both PPP farmers and managers had their paths of achievement illuminated by the evaluation process. This illumination, although not always positive, identified PPP's significant achievements that were previously not defined within local dairying communities and the industry at large – particularly that of providing a greater voice to farmers. By matching these achievements with PPP's project goals the achievements were validated and legitimised.

From a farmer perspective, their new role as active contributors to their own learning agenda was effectively normalised, which in turn spurned confidence to not only continue their involvement but in many cases to increase it. Evidence of this has emerged in PPP's second (and current) phase where farmers are actively calling from input to their research ideas from a wide range of professional fields, often at higher power levels within the various sectors and agencies, including those managing world-first innovations. As a noted characteristic of these groups, farmers are willing to take on greater risk through exposure to many more new ideas and the people that represent them, as well as looking to further overcome traditional political barriers for greater farmer membership in the pursuit of situation improvement for all concerned.

Not all good news
Collaboration through action research projects do not always result in emancipation. One such example, came from a farmer based, natural resource management project in the dairy industry in the sub tropics. Anecdotal evidence found that some extension staff in the implementation of some parts of this project found, what many other of their colleagues also found, that they did not have enough confidence in the action research process to allow it to take over from their preferred methods of extension. They were hesitant about taking a new way of doing things to their group of farmers whom they knew well, who knew them well and with whom they had worked for sometime according to an established pattern. They had established a relationship with their farmers they did not want to jeopardise for the sake of what they thought was an unconvincing process.

So what was needed in this project was confidence by the extension staff that their farmers would embrace the action research process. This confidence could be created by farmers as well as extension staff being trained in the process from the outset so that the whole group is aware of the principles and practice and then making a decision about the merits of the process as a group. What evaluation did for this project was to identify why extension staff were reluctant to implement the action research process.

Conclusion
In the course of evaluating action research projects, it has been obvious that learning and empowerment has taken place. When this was revealed to the participants and it became liberating. So not only was the process of engaging in action research empowering but that further illumination about the effects of this sort of collaborative work through evaluation was also empowering and liberating.

Evaluation also uncovers what the problem areas might be if collaboration is not taken place in an emancipatory way.

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Appendix 1: **McTaggart's principles**
McTaggart's principles show the level of change, good will and commitment required by the whole team to engage in this sort of collaborative research. They are:

> 1. *Identification of the Individual and Collective Project.* Individuals must commit themselves to improvement and change using a collaborative process with others. There is collective agreement about how the group will work together to bring about this individual and collective improvement.

> 2. *Changing and Studying Discourse, Practice, and Social Organisation: the Distribution of Power.* Here, reference was made to the behaviour within institutions and their match or lack of match with what is occurring outside. McTaggart quotes the practice and language of educational organisations compared with practice and language in schools where policies are implemented. He recommended that inconsistencies need to be uncovered so that effective implementation can take place. This is not unlike the notion of systematic distortion of communication described by Habermas (1982).

> 3. *Changing the Culture of Working Groups, Institutions, and Societies.* This principle echoed McTaggart's concern that the process of collaborative research could be taken over by the stronger members in the group. He stated that academics had the reputation for taking over control of a group of disparate individuals. He argued that where there were distinct power differences, these must be suspended and everyone start on an equal footing.

The next three principles of McTaggart (1991) deal with the process of **learning within the group** and the effects of the learning. They are:

> 4. *Action and Reflection.* This principle deals with the activities of learning that are part of an action learning cycle. McTaggart gave some advice on how to begin the cycles of action and reflection.

> 5. *Unifying the Intellectual and Practical Project.* This principle makes the point that action research is not just about learning; it is also about action, and creating and learning culture, and producing knowledge — the subject of the next principle.

> 6. *Knowledge Production.* McTaggart described three types of knowledge: knowledge derived from the workers, knowledge derived from the academics and knowledge derived from the group. These descriptions equate to Habermas' (in Bredo and Feinberg, 1982) 'practical knowledge', 'technical knowledge' and 'emancipatory knowledge' and Shirley Grundy's work (1992).

The final three principles deal with the effects of the **learning** on an **outside audience**. They were:

> 7. *Engaging the Politics of Research Action.* A change in the language and behaviour of individuals within the learning groups produces inevitable difficulties with the institutions from which the individuals come. Debate concentrates on ways of overcoming the difficulties such as involving the outsiders in collaborative research.

> 8. *Methodological Resources.* This principle deals with the need to document the activities of the group and the changes within the group and its individual members. Documentation is needed for many reasons, one of them being that at some point the group will need to justify its activities to an external audience.

> 9. *Creating the Theory of the Work.* This principle deals with the group's need to justify its activity of action research as a legitimate learning practice by documenting and justifying its methodology.

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