Chapter 8
From Practice to Theory: Participation as Learning in the Context of Sustainable Development Projects

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8.1 Introduction

This chapter starts with an autobiographical account of my experience of creating communication programmes within sustainable development projects in rural Africa. It charts the evolution of a participatory approach before turning to investigations into the way people learn in such settings. I then apply the resulting view of learning as a complex process of dialogue primarily relying on known and trusted sources to other rural communication programmes. Noting that accounts of these projects have largely relied on empirical evidence, the second part of the chapter represents a search for appropriate theoretical underpinning. I show that the concepts of zone of proximal development (ZPD) and legitimate peripheral participation are relevant to the project experience, while possible limitations in these approaches are tackled by the application of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). In conclusion, I note that the principles of situated learning and activity theory resonate strongly with real-world examples of education for sustainable development and suggest that although hitherto separate, they might become more closely aligned – albeit with a few words of caution.

8.2 Background

I never liked ‘theory’. I wanted to make a difference, so I went into the world to do something. Of course, one wants to do things well and like so many practitioners before me, I found myself thinking about what we were doing. And so, from being

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stuck on a rainforest track, scratching mosquito bites, I found myself starting to wade into theory, barely noticing the sleet on the library windows.

In writing this chapter, I have tried to make sense of these two worlds. Happily, the subject matter itself has helped me to understand that these are not two worlds at all. Starting points are always problematic; rather than beginning with a theoretical tradition, I have chosen to start my story in a time and place where I was most isolated from literature, whilst developing rural communication programmes in an increasingly participatory manner. After a foray into the world of research, the story returns to ‘the field’ where more ideas are put into action. The chapter concludes with an attempt to identify concepts that underpin these experiences of participation and learning. I have deliberately chosen to write in a style that reflects my perspective as ‘practitioner looking at theory’, rather than that of an academic researching practice.

8.3 Uganda 1991: Common Sense(s)

The Mount Elgon Conservation and Development Project was a joint venture of the Government of Uganda and IUCN, The World Conservation Union. They hired me (with a background in environmental education) as the Education/Extension Advisor. The project aimed to protect the threatened Forest Reserve (now a National Park) while supporting sustainable rural development among the 230,000 people living around the forest. The Terms of Reference for my involvement in the project focused on raising awareness, disseminating information, and training others to support the project aims.

As a trained teacher, it seemed self-evident or common sense that the best way to learn would be to encourage people to develop their own ideas and solutions rather than to present blueprints. The top-down education programme prescribed by the project document was quickly upended to become a programme of ‘finding out’, with the awareness-raising component shifting away from conveying information and towards placing ideas and suggestions into dialogue and debate.

Among our six strong senior team, there were conflicting views; it appeared that our common sense was not actually common to all of us. Our arguments revealed the tensions between project management with its concern for measurability and ‘rigour’, and the apparently haphazard human development processes taking place in our project area. Whilst we all wished to conserve biological diversity, there was resistance to the notion of a diversity of solutions arising from engagement with the numerous communities living around the protected area. This took place before the term ‘participation’ had found its way into every pore of the development world.

The context of the education programme

Education had the smallest budget on the project, most of which had been pre-designated to producing materials. The project area was remote and mountainous and literacy rates were low, particularly among the youth – a function of isolation and years