

Using Participatory Action Research with Episodic Volunteers: Learning from Urban Agriculture Initiatives

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Abstract : Many Urban Agriculture (UA) initiatives, including community/allotment gardens, Community Supported Agriculture, and community/social farms, depend on volunteers. However, initiatives supported or run by volunteers are often faced with a high turnover of labour as a result of the involvement of episodic volunteers (a term describing ad hoc, one-time, and seasonal volunteers), leading to challenges with maintaining project continuity and retaining skills/knowledge within the initiative. This is a notable challenge given that food growing is a knowledge intensive activity where the fruits of labour appear months or sometimes years after investment. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is increasingly advocated for in the field of UA as a solution-oriented approach to research, providing concrete results in addition to advancing theory. PAR is a cyclical methodological approach involving researchers and stakeholders collaboratively 'identifying' and 'theorising' an issue, 'planning' an action to address said issue, 'taking action', and 'reflecting' on the process. Through iterative cycles and prolonged engagement, the theory is developed and actions become better tailored to the issue. The demand for PAR in UA research means that understanding how to use PAR with episodic volunteers is of critical importance. The aim of this paper is to explore (1) the challenges of doing PAR in UA initiatives with episodic volunteers, and (2) how PAR can be harnessed to advance sustainable development of UA through theoretically-informed action. A 2.5 year qualitative PAR study on three English case study student-led food growing initiatives took place between 2014 and 2016. University UA initiatives were chosen as exemplars because most of their volunteers were episodic. Data were collected through 13 interviews, 6 workshops, and a research diary. The results were thematically analysed through eclectic coding using Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (NVivo). It was found that the challenges of doing PAR with transient participants were (1) a superficial understanding of issues by volunteers because of short term engagement, resulting in difficulties 'identifying'/'theorising' issues to research; (2) difficulties implementing 'actions' given those involved in the 'planning' phase often left by the 'action' phase; (3) a lack of capacity of participants to engage in research given the ongoing challenge of maintaining participation; and (4) that the introduction of the researcher acted as an 'intervention'. The involvement of a long-term stakeholder (the researcher) changed the group dynamics, prompted critical reflections that had not previously taken place, and improved continuity. This posed challenges for providing a genuine understanding the episodic volunteering PAR initiatives, and also challenged the notion of what constitutes an 'intervention' or 'action' in PAR. It is recommended that researchers working with episodic volunteers using PAR should (1) adopt a first-person approach by inquiring into the researcher's own experience to enable depth in theoretical analysis to manage the potentially superficial understandings by short-term participants; and (2) establish safety mechanisms to address the potential for the research to impose artificial project continuity and knowledge retention that will end when the research does. Through these means, we can more effectively use PAR to conduct solution-oriented research about UA.

Keywords : community garden, continuity, first-person research, higher education, knowledge retention, project management, transience, university

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