# Developing 'soft skills' in higher education

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## Introduction

### The deeper dimension of participation

In many cases, participatory approaches in agricultural research and development (R&D) are understood as tools and methods to better develop and introduce technology options to farmers. This perspective rarely takes into account the dimension of a whole system change towards emancipation and ownership of development processes by local people. In this perspective, participation falls short of one of its main objectives – people's empowerment. Instead, it has been used to make people merely good cooperators with development agencies. In our view, if participation is to make a difference to people's lives, it has to support them in building their confidence and self-esteem in their own capacities; support self-development and mobilise social energy and capacity for self-organised, often collective development/learning processes; and, explore opportunities and proactively seek to exploit those opportunities in a creative way.

In this view, 'doing' participation in R&D means dealing with relationships; understanding human behaviour; facilitating the reduction of social barriers to working together; and building capacity for people to deal with complex, dynamic, and often conflicting group or community processes. This requires a deep understanding of what 'drives' people, of what their aspirations, their values, and their principles in life are, and how development is linked to the personal and collective potentials of people. In the practice of development, it is about unblocking and creating social energy through facilitation. Founding development in social energy generated through participation can be considered a theory of bottom-up development. Unfortunately, however, capacity for this type of participation is often lacking in institutions that research participation and/or train professionals to 'do' participation.

### The need for competence in 'participation' and process in universities

Agricultural/development practitioners are now expected to work with multiple stakeholders, in arenas of negotiation and learning among individuals and groups. In a recent work-

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shop, a group of researchers and deans of agricultural universities in eastern and southern Africa concluded that university graduates require far more personal skills, complementing the disciplinary theory and expertise, than is recognised in today's mainstream education (Patel et al., 2001). The 'ideal' graduates would have the capacity to integrate across disciplines and skills (hard and soft skills). They would be creative and critical thinkers, team players, take responsibility for their own development, and be able to facilitate learning in groups and communities. They would also have substantial management capacities and excellent communication skills. Most of these 'soft' skills are not at all considered in the present curricula, and disciplines and major reorientation programmes are required to enable graduates to practise effective facilitation of participatory processes (Moyo & Hagmann, 2000).

The development of soft skills was articulated as a major challenge for these mostly technically and disciplinary oriented universities. In particular, competent and motivated lecturers were identified as a central requirement to meet future demands. To develop these competencies, education institutions need to go way beyond agricultural sciences to include learning theories, social psychology and behavioural science communication, facilitation (including group dynamics), and organisation and management science. Even more critical than cognitive abilities are elements of personal development. These need to be understood conceptually and mastered practically. Incorporating elements of personal development in the curriculum calls for teachers/lecturers with new ideas and competencies. In our opinion, this does not necessarily mean replacing existing disciplinary courses with soft skills-oriented courses, or introducing separate courses in soft skills, but interweaving them with existing courses.

This paper describes two processes which were designed to integrate personal mastery/soft skills development (see Box 1 below) into different academic settings. The first setting is

a PhD programme at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. The second is a two-year long learning process on personal mastery for research, training, and consultancy, involving university lecturers at Makerere University in Uganda[1]. Both experiences provide very encouraging lessons and insights for 'learning participation'.

## Case one: introducing personal mastery in a PhD programme at Wageningen University

### Rationale for a personal mastery learning workshop
In 2002, Wageningen Agricultural University and Research Centre initiated a PhD training and research programme on participatory approaches and up-scaling (PAU) for students from the South[2]. The students spend an initial training period of up to ten months at Wageningen, then undertake field research in their home country, before returning to Wageningen for a final 'wrapping up' and thesis writing period. The initial training aims to develop the capacity of the students in conceptual and analytical thinking, research design, and methodologies around the topic of participation.

Studying participatory processes implies unravelling the underlying principles and values of participation and developing a deep cognitive and emotional understanding of participation and process. This depth, particularly the emotional and behavioural side of it, demands active engage-

[2] For more information, visit www.sis.wau.nl/tad/Research/PAU/PAUhome.htm

ment in participatory processes by researchers. Our experience indicates that merely studying 'participation', rather than living through and facilitating such processes, is of limited practical usefulness. Studying participation in our understanding means interaction of the researchers with farmers, colleagues, and other stakeholders in the situation or process they study, engaging in the dynamics, and allowing variables to change.

In order to strengthen the capacity and skills needed for facilitating action research, the PAU programme implemented a tailor-made pilot ten-day workshop on personal mastery to complement the mainstream academic training. The pilot was designed and facilitated by two external process consultants/facilitators in October 2002, and 17 PhD student-researchers participated.

## Structure of the learning workshop

The pilot workshop was structured as a process around the subject of participatory approaches and up-scaling. The way the subject was handled integrated theory and practice, in various dimensions and at various levels. The workshop was built on two pillars: (a) conceptual understanding of participation/up-scaling and (b) personal development. Personal development had a central role, focusing on understanding self (own vision, values, behavioural patterns), understanding others, and using knowledge of these to facilitate interaction. Experiences of personal behaviour and attitudes were shared via group exercises. The group's experiences were then compared with the experiences of the PhD researchers in their working environment in the university, with colleagues and superiors back home, and with processes at the community level. Throughout, links were made with the theory of change, systems thinking, learning, and development. Continuous reflection on the facilitation methods used in the workshop, as well as practical exercises, helped build students' own facilitation skills and methods 'toolbox'.

## Impact of the workshop

The engagement and enthusiasm of the participants during and after the intensive ten-day working programme was far greater than anticipated. This was an indication that the workshop filled an important gap in the professional training of participants. Reflection on the impact of the workshop by participants seven months later gave the following insights:

- The integration of personal mastery and the development of facilitation skills as part of a PhD curriculum had initiated greater student-student learning and student-staff interaction, as well as a 'culture of feedback' which strengthens

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relationships and improves insights into students' own behaviour.
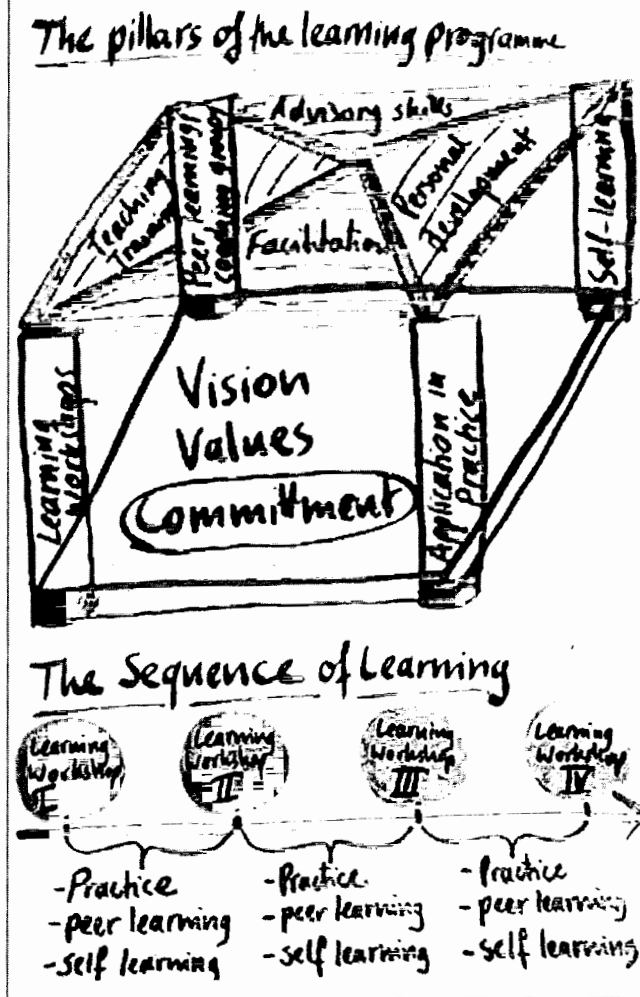
- It created a common foundation for the rationale of participatory approaches, which has enabled students to question the current understandings of participation and generated the desire to conduct research on participation in a different way – via action research.
- Development of PhD research proposals shifted considerably towards action research. This shift is linked to students' ambitions to carry out research that has a direct value for those farmers and colleagues they are working with.
- Change in the understanding and role of theory: participants felt that theory serves to improve practice but is not an end in itself and therefore should be grounded in practice. For the individual PhD studies, theory is useful to provide a conceptual framework, but ideally theory should be built from practice upwards.
- Traditionally, a considerable part of the academic community favours theory-based research over process-analysis of problem-solving research. It is a challenge for the students in the PAU programme to link the analysis of practice with theory, and conduct their analysis of processes within acceptable academic standards.
- Experience shows that the confidence of the PhD researchers as individuals and as a group makes them better equipped to deal with this challenge of 'learning to theorise' from practice. This increased confidence and group strength is part of the impact of the workshop.

Although the ten-day pilot workshop was successful, it has so far been a one-off event, and students feel that this needs to be followed up to strengthen their gains and build on those principles. The onus is now on the programme to think about follow-up and how to arrive at a mainstreamed formula that offers other students similar experiences.

## Case two: a competence development process in personal mastery for research, training/teaching, and consultancy

Following on from the workshop, which identified gaps in

**Figure 1: Elements of the personal mastery learning programme**

The pillars of the learning programme

Vision
Values
Commitment

The Sequence of Learning

Learning Workshop I — Practice, peer learning, self learning
Learning Workshop II — Practice, peer learning, self learning
Learning Workshop III — Practice, peer learning, self learning
Learning Workshop IV — Practice, peer learning, self learning

the development of 'soft' skills amongst university lecturers, a pilot learning programme on personal mastery for Makerere University staff in Uganda was designed, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. In contrast to the workshop in the PAU programme, the learning process was designed as a sequence of workshops with practice periods in between (Hagmann, 2002). Figure 1 illustrates the different elements of the programme. The foundation of the programme is shared values and vision and, particularly, the commitment of the participants to engage in the programme. The pillars are: learning workshops, application in practice, self-learning, and peer coaching/learning teams. The roof consists of competence in facilitation, teaching/training, advisory/consulting skills, personal development, etc.

The learning process design allows the incremental development of soft skills with various learning mechanisms at cognitive, emotional, and behavioural level. One challenge for lecturers was the lack of incentive to be a better teacher when money and reputation is earned through consultancy and research – a widespread problem in many universities. The idea in the process design was to use consultancy as the 'engine' since everybody would like to become a better consultant. Many consultancy skills that are in high demand are related to facilitation skills, e.g. supporting change in organisations; introducing ideas in projects/programmes and organisations through learning processes rather than through external recommendations. Most of these skills are also required when carrying out action research geared towards problem solving. Therefore, the set of skills required is similar in action research, consultancy, and teaching/lecturing in an interactive way. In order to acquire these, one needs to have a good learning platform, where one can make mistakes without losing face and losing the next job. The classroom is an ideal learning ground, where one can practice alternative ways of dealing with people, and facilitating learning and transferring knowledge in an interactive rather than prescriptive form. Using the classroom as a learning ground for these skills is greatly improving the quality of teaching as well as interaction with students – a typical win-win solution.

The process design was discussed and refined with the deans of faculties and staff, and a group of 26 lecturers was chosen by the different faculties. The programme was designed as a pilot, which the different faculties will evaluate in two years' time with regard to potential, and ways to scale up into the overall faculties and beyond. This open approach in setting up the programme has created a favourable institutional openness for a later scaling up.

So far, two learning workshops have been held at Makerere. The impact has been way beyond expectations. To name a few aspects mentioned by the lecturers in the second workshop:[3]

• On a personal level, most participants have introduced elements like the 'culture of giving and receiving feedback' (from superiors, subordinates, and other people with whom they relate closely), appreciation, etc. into their private life where they found surprisingly positive results (e.g. in families, among friends), and were highly energised by those experiences and personal enrichments to further open up.

• At classroom level, almost all lecturers have tried out new

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[3] The whole process is being intensively monitored by a PhD student from the PAU programme in Wageningen who studies the personal mastery process and inpacts at the level of lecturers, students, and farmers and communities (Kibwika 2003).

ways of teaching and interaction, including evaluation of lessons by students, and allowing students to come up with their own ideas for learning and co-designing lectures. One of the outputs is the development of their own course modules, which they can later use again. The incentive of using the classroom as learning ground for soft skills has really been effective so far, to the benefit of both students and lecturers.

- At consultancy level, many participants tried out the facilitation techniques in workshops, staff meetings, and with collaborators with great success, and this encouraged them to advance themselves further.
- At management level, many staff have tried using elements of personal mastery in the way they interact with their superiors and subordinates, to the extent that the group was asked to present their learning about change to faculty and cross-faculty meetings. The interest from senior management has been very high.
- At university level, other faculties who have heard of or were exposed to the programme have demanded the same processes. The high demand will be satisfied once the first group has the potential to be trainers themselves.

## Some key lessons from these experiences in 'learning participation'

From the above-mentioned pilot activities, a number of key lessons can be distilled.

- The focus on participatory methods and, to a certain degree, attitudes and behaviour in teaching/learning participation is insufficient to generate the required competences to facilitate participatory processes. Training and education in participatory approaches needs to be strongly interwoven with experiential personality and soft skills development.
- The need for the incorporation of these elements into the curricula of researchers/technicians who are studying and implementing participatory approaches is still not sufficiently recognised. Especially in the academic environment, personal development, and related values, attitudes, and soft skills, are approached with scepticism and insecurity as lecturers in all institutions see themselves as disciplinary experts rather than communicators.
- Our experiences indicate that it is a fallacy to think that competences in process approaches and skills are not essential for researchers involved in participatory research, or for academics who study such processes. The view that you can study participatory processes without being actively involved (i.e. as an observer) still prevails in most universities and often produces rather irrelevant research. Unless researchers engage themselves in the processes they will have a limited understanding of dynamic, complex realities.
- The skills and expertise of lecturers to develop and implement curricula that interweave soft and hard skills is generally lacking and needs to be developed through learning processes in which they engage over a time span of at least a year.
- Curricula for students need to include and integrate cognitive knowledge with soft skills. Participants exposed so far find it highly relevant to develop these core competences. This offers opportunities to develop course modules that can meet these learning objectives.

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