

## Chapter 2

# A New View of Participation: Participation in Public Spheres

### Participation in Communication

In this chapter, we describe some features of critical participatory action research that provide a theoretical framework and practical advice for conducting an action research project. These features provide a theoretically informed basis for the kinds of relationships that need to be developed among participants, institutions and other stakeholders in a critical participatory action research initiative. The chapter thus provides some guidance about how participants can and should expect to relate to one another in the conduct of their critical participatory action research.

We believe that one of the most important things that happens in critical participatory action research is simply that participants get together and talk about their work and lives. They explore whether things are going the way they hope, or whether things would be better if they acted otherwise. In this chapter, we describe the communicative space opened up by such discussions as ‘public spheres’, and outline ten key features of public spheres that have practical implications about how participants in critical participatory action research might relate to one another if they want to interrogate their practices together. While working relationships among colleagues often demonstrate some of the features of public spheres, participants in a critical participatory action research initiative may want to pay special attention to these features, in order to create safe conditions for open and self-critical discussion about their individual and, collective practices. By paying attention to the etiquette of public spheres (see *Resource 3, Critical participatory action research group protocols: Ethical agreements for participation in public spheres* in Chap. 7) and by following the principles of procedure for critical participatory action researchers (listed in *Resource 4*), participants in public spheres can think more carefully about the origins and current state of their understanding of their work, their developing skills, and changing values as they bring about change in their practice. This is especially important when the public sphere includes people with very different roles and responsibilities—like teachers, principals, students, parents and school district officers, for example.

As we indicated at the end of Chap. 1, critical participatory action research is more than a research methodology (Carr 2006). It brings people together to reflect

and act on their own social and educational practices in disciplined ways to make their practices, the way they understand their practices, and the conditions under which they practise more rational, more sustainable, and more just. This commitment means that critical participatory action research involves distinctive ideas about participation, about how to change educational practice, and about the research approaches that inform these activities as they proceed. Also distinctive is the way participants gather together specifically to understand how the ways in which their thoughts, actions, and relationships with people in their work settings have been shaped by pre-existing conditions in their situations.

The concepts of ‘communicative action’, ‘communicative space’, and the ‘public sphere’ outlined by German social theorist Jürgen Habermas (1987, 1996) and described in Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, 2005) helped to define a new generation of critical participatory action research and the conditions to support it. We think about the ways in which people come together to ensure the legitimacy and the validity of their practices, the way they understand their practices, and the conditions under which they practise.

## Communicative Action and Communicative Space

Drawing on ideas about public spheres described by Habermas (1996, see especially Chap. 8), Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, 2005) described *communicative action* as what happens when people interrupt what they are doing to ask ‘What is happening here?’ People frequently ask this question when they feel that something is not quite right about what is going on—when they encounter doubts or issues or problems about the *validity* or *legitimacy* of their understandings about what is going on. In a second example of critical participatory action research (see *Example 2: Self-directed Learning at Grace Elementary School* in Chap. 6), a principal, assistant principal and group of teachers who worked in a large elementary school located in a high socioeconomic area began their project by having informal conversations about heightened levels of student anxiety related to performance on academic tasks, especially standardized exams. What they felt ‘not quite right’ about were those heightened levels of student anxiety. In terms of Habermas’s (1979) view of the four *validity claims* that are presupposed by every utterance, people may feel uncertain about (a) whether they comprehend what is being said (*comprehensibility*), (b) whether what is being said is true in the sense of accurate (*truth*), (c) whether what is being said is sincerely stated and not deceptive (*sincerity*), and (d) whether what is said is morally right and appropriate in the situation (*moral appropriateness*). Or they may feel that what is happening is somehow *illegitimate* or that there is a *legitimation deficit* or even a *legitimation crisis* because some state of affairs has been imposed on them, and they have not given authentic assent to what has been imposed (Habermas 1975). This feeling is very widespread in many countries today, especially where governments enact legislation without building

sufficient consensus about the appropriateness of new laws or policies for the populace to feel that the laws or policies are legitimate.

In the example of critical participatory action research at Grace Elementary School, a more in-depth conversation amongst staff, administrators and Rhonda Nixon resulted in a review of the claim that students were anxious about their academic performance. The review took the form of analysing district satisfaction survey results that confirmed that the majority of students viewed increasingly negatively their abilities to do well in school and to be happy at school. Given what staff had observed and these results, it appeared that there was a genuine legitimation deficit that had to be addressed by the school community. Such a questioning and reflecting process that started with a felt dissatisfaction amongst staff resulted in two Grade Three teachers taking action and addressing students' anxieties about school.

When questions about validity and legitimacy arise, Habermas (1987) says, people stop and ask what is happening, and they enter a different kind of action from the usual *strategic action* of getting things done (Habermas 1984, p. 86) that characterises much of our lives. Instead, they enter a space of *communicative action*. Communicative action is that kind of action we take when we engage one another in genuine, open dialogue or (better) conversation. Put more precisely—and this will serve as a definition of communicative action—people engage in communicative action when they make a conscious and deliberate effort to reach (a) *intersubjective agreement* about the ideas and language they use among participants as a basis for (b) *mutual understanding* of one another's points of view in order to reach (c) *unforced consensus* about what to do in their particular situation.

We employ the principles of communicative action in various ways in everyday life. We try to develop intersubjective agreements with people we work with, and try to understand the views of others (mutual understanding). We often do come to some sort of consensus (preferably unforced consensus) about how we might proceed when we have to make a decision about what to do—in a school, for example, by agreeing to adopt a whole school approach to literacy, or assessment, or reporting to parents. But, over time, these agreements can become unstable and unsettled. At such moments, we seek to reopen discussions with others to work out what is the right thing to do under changed or new circumstances. At such moments, it is worth reminding ourselves of our commitment to the principles of communicative action: a commitment to reaching intersubjective agreement with one another about what we mean, to reaching mutual understanding of one another's points of view, and unforced consensus about what to do, collectively and individually. This is a time when ideas, working habits and ways of relating to each other can be unfrozen so we can examine what we might be able to do to make our practices more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and more inclusive.

The commitment to the principles of communicative action has another profound effect, which is sometimes overlooked because it is so obvious. Agreeing to participate in a conversation in accordance with the principles of communicative action opens a particular kind of *communicative space* between the partners to the conversation—a space where people will take their ideas, each other, and alternative

courses of action seriously, with the aim of acting for the best for everyone involved and affected. In the context of critical participatory action research, this means conducting conversations about what we are doing, and the consequences of what we are doing, in a particularly respectful kind of way. *Resource 1: Establishing an action research group and identifying a felt concern* and *Resource 3: Critical participatory action research group protocols* in Chap. 7 give a fairly concrete idea of the nature of the space being opened up between participants in a critical participatory action research initiative. It is a space where people can share views, be respected even though they may take different views or have different perspectives on things, and take seriously the commitment to finding lines of consensus about what should be done to address questions of validity and legitimacy that might arise in regard to what they currently do. Participating in this communicative space in accordance with the principles of communicative action is a discipline that is required of everyone who participates in critical participatory action research.

Because communicative action opens up this respectful and disciplined communicative space between people, participating in communicative action builds solidarity between participants, and underwrites their understandings and decisions with validity and legitimacy.

A crucial feature of the work of critical participatory action research is that it must be considered legitimate and valid *by participants themselves*—not on their behalf by their delegates or representatives, or on the advice or the judgement of experts, or the judgement or instructions of their supervisors or managers, for example. *Legitimacy* and *validity* can be achieved through communicative action, but it is only guaranteed when people are free to decide individually, for themselves (a) what is *comprehensible* to them; (b) what they believe to be *true* (in the sense of accurate) in the light of their own and shared knowledge; (c) what they believe to be *sincerely* stated (authentic; not deceptive), and (d) what seems to them to be *morally right and appropriate* under participants' current circumstances (the four validity claims). It is important to note here that, as we begin to define the work of critical participatory action research, we simultaneously put foremost participants' understandings, needs and willingness to act as the definitive criteria for the legitimacy of what they decide and do.

Given the primacy given to legitimacy and validity and participants' central role in accomplishing it, how do we go about creating legitimacy and validity? Following Habermas (1996), Kemmis and McTaggart (2000, 2005) argued that legitimacy arises in *public spheres*. Like communicative action, public spheres also occur freely in everyday life. Again, participation in public spheres requires understanding their features and attending to some principles to ensure that new understandings, ways of working, and ways of relating to each other do achieve validity and legitimacy in the hearts and minds of participants and those ultimately involved and affected.

The formation of public spheres creates the possibility that knowledge and action are nurtured together to have both validity and legitimacy (together) in the eyes of participants, and also among others. This defines the importance of participation in critical participatory action research. What, then, is the nature of *participation* in public spheres?

We now consider ten key features of public spheres, to indicate how people can create public spheres to encourage communicative action in critical participatory action research. To make things a little more concrete, we refer to how public spheres might be constructed in a school context generally and by referring to Braxton High School's recycling project.

## Ten Key Features of Public Spheres: Comments for Critical Participatory Action Researchers

*1. Public spheres are constituted as actual networks of communication among actual participants.*

We should not think of public spheres as entirely abstract, as if there were just one public sphere. In reality there are *many public spheres*.

Educators and other professionals are typically involved with many different kinds of support groups, for example among close colleagues within their schools, and a great variety of formal and informal associations. You can ask yourself whether they really function as public spheres with a strong sense of communicative action. Levels of participation in the communicative space of a public sphere can be constrained by lack of interest, lack of time, lack of resources, and modest institutional recognition. (Although the material support of institutions is not a necessary requirement to assist in the formation and maintenance of public spheres, it can help.)

### **Braxton High School**

The core group who developed a recycling program as a critical participatory action research project included Jane as the lead teacher and three science teachers who supported her. Jane led not only the recycling project but also the Students' Council. The six Grade 12 students on Students' Council chose to join the recycling group. As members of the recycling group, they engaged in planning for improving recycling habits in their community, purchasing and placing bins, gathering documentation that helped them to know whether and how the bins and publicizing efforts were helping, and reflecting with the larger group on how the program needed to grow and change. As members of the Students' Council, these students occupied roles such as Treasurer (determining resources that could support the recycling group), Publicist (determining how to message recycling efforts), Secretary (recording meeting notes and inviting recycling group members to particular meetings), and the President and Vice-President who helped to bring together the visions of the recycling group and the Students' Council to strengthen student involvement in recycling. Jane was an important bridge between these groups and the science department as well as the whole staff. All of these different individuals and groups worked from their diverse roles to develop and enact a shared vision of environmental stewardship.

This example illuminates how individuals often share roles in multiple groups that form public spheres. Jane and the Grade 12 students on Students' Council and the recycling group brokered relationships and bridged communication with the other group members to keep everyone clear about the goals and how to share responsibilities to enact them. Jane noted, "Without this crisscrossing between groups of the six Grade 12 students, I think I would have had to do a lot more to keep the recycling project moving forward. They were like my second memory about what we had to do and who was taking certain tasks on. They also found what we needed and didn't bug me to find all of the resources." Hence, brokers ease tensions that arise because of having too many things to do, a lack of time to do them, confusion that can arise about who agreed to do certain tasks, and a lack of resources to complete tasks.

## 2. *Public Spheres are self-constituted, voluntary and autonomous.*

People create public spheres by getting together voluntarily. Public spheres are also relatively autonomous: they are outside (or marginal or peripheral to) formal systems (like the formal administrative systems of the state or an organisation) and outside formal systems of influence (like political parties, the press or lobby groups) that mediate between civil society and the state. On another scale, they might be teachers, parents, environmentalists or university teacher educators, who choose to work together on community sustainability issues. When people get together to explore a particular problem or issue, they form a public sphere—that is, public spheres are constituted around a particular *theme* or *felt concern* for discussion. On this view of public spheres, communicative spaces or networks organised as part of the communicative apparatus of the economic or administrative sub-systems of government or business would *not* normally qualify as public spheres; and an administrative unit like the mathematics department of a high school would not normally be a public sphere.

Educators are often linked into groups and networks in order to do their work, and for professional development and support. However, this kind of involvement is not always voluntary and autonomous. Representing a year level or a school, being the 'literacy person', being the person responsible for discipline in the school, or being a 'curriculum coordinator' is not always addressing a deeply felt concern for the individual. Voluntarism can express an important commitment to service, but can be an institutional demand, not an education preference. Public spheres are a way of extricating oneself from the primacy of institutional imperatives in order to work on one's own concerns arising from practice.

### **Braxton High School**

The Principal, Matthew, was adamant that teachers volunteer, and not be ‘volunteered’ to engage in critical participatory action research around issues of importance to students. He did not ask or expect the whole staff to take up the opportunity to access \$ 12,500, which was the amount provided to each school to take up issues of concern to students to profile “students as agents of change,” a main criterion of the provincial government’s allocation of funding for the school improvement program. Instead, he began the process by conducting student focus groups and then holding a staff professional development session to discuss what students identified as felt concerns. If the staff hadn’t responded, he had decided to pursue his own critical participatory action research about the need for self-paced course options.

In this example, the Principal, who could have assigned teachers to engage in projects that addressed students’ concerns, chose not to do that. He realized that unless the teachers truly identified with students’ concerns that they might not participate genuinely to address them. Insincere and disingenuous participation would have been more harmful than helpful to students, which is why Matthew emphasized that he did not expect or want teachers to lead critical, participatory action research projects out of a sense of obligation.

### *3. Public spheres come into existence in response to legitimation deficits.*

Public spheres are frequently created because potential participants share a view that there are doubts, concerns, problems or unresolved issues about the legitimacy of people’s ideas or perspectives, or about the legitimacy of plans, proposals, policies or laws, or about the legitimacy of people’s practices, or about the legitimacy of the conditions under which people work. These are examples of *legitimation deficits*—cases where people feel that things are ‘not quite right’. In such cases, participants do not feel that they would necessarily have come to the decision to do things the ways they now do them, especially if they feel this way about how they are now *required* to do them. Their communication is aimed at exploring ways to overcome these legitimation deficits by finding alternatives that will attract their informed consent and commitment.

Like everyone else, educators often feel that things are not as they might or should be. Sometimes educators need prompting to see a lack of legitimacy. Public spheres can help in both situations by creating ways for participants to ‘unfreeze’ existing assumptions, sayings, doings and relatings—not just prompting reflection and a feeling that change is desirable, but also providing pathways to new sayings, doings and relatings. These changes in practice will help other educators recognise ideas that make their own practice problematic—creating legitimation deficits in their minds too.

### **Braxton High School**

The environmental group agreed with the student focus group results indicating that it was vital to do something to improve environmental stewardship in their local community. It wasn't hard for this group to see this felt concern as legitimate because of the volume of global press on climate change as related to Greenhouse Gas emissions, and because a long time science teacher emphasized the need for recycling bins since the school had opened.

This example illustrates how a group of individuals will mobilize their efforts to address gaps between what is happening and what they wish would be happening in their community. In this case, the staff professional development session was a chance to engage in such a problematising process to notice gaps and “to unfreeze” sayings and reflections on doings and relating to consider how to change practices.

#### *4. Public spheres are constituted for communicative action and for public discourse.*

Communication in public spheres is usually through face-to-face communication, but it can also include communications between participants who are unknown to one another or anonymous from the perspective of any one individual—digitally, via email or the internet, for example. Public discourse in public spheres is a form of ‘communicative action’ (Habermas 1987; Kemmis and McTaggart 2005): it aims to help us reach *intersubjective agreement* about what we mean by what we say (in the language we use), *mutual understanding* of one another’s points of view, and *unforced consensus* about what to do. On this view of public spheres, communicative spaces organised essentially for instrumental or functional purposes—for example, to command, to influence, or to exercise control over things—would *not* ordinarily qualify as public spheres.

In public spheres, people try to do their best to set aside their own personal self-interests in the interests of the wider community, and, in the case of education, to consider the extent to which their educational work is really in the best interests of the students, on the one hand, and, on the other, in the interests of the wider community (and the world). The point is to be vigilant that the focus of discussion is the concern that is ‘on the table’ (and not about furthering the self-interests of some participants at the expense of others). In education, this means focusing on the educational work people in the public sphere are concerned about. It means asking whether our educational work is really educational. To ask this is to ask whether our educational work conforms to our view of what education is. Following Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer and Bristol (2014), we (the authors of this book) adopt this definition of education:

Education, properly speaking, is the process by which children, young people and adults are initiated into (1) forms of understanding that foster individual and collective self-expression, (2) modes of action that foster individual and collective self-development, and (3) ways of relating to one another and the world that foster individual and collective self-determination, and that are, in these senses, oriented towards both the good for each person and the good for humankind.

In critical participatory action research in education, this definition gives a kind of criterion against which we can judge our educational practice, our understandings of our practice, and the conditions under which we practise. We can ask “Is what we are doing at the moment in our educational practice an example of doing what the definition says?”

In public spheres constituted for communicative action and public discourse, two dangers always appear: the danger of being swept up in advocacy (doing things because a whole school insists—forced rather than unforced consensus) or the danger of failing to develop a collective sense about what is worth doing together to address a shared felt concern, and what a collective agrees is a reasonable thing for an individual to do. Bureaucratic commitments roll into schools and other organisations in waves. There is a need to create some time and space for conversations about things that matter—for you and your co-participants in the life of the institution.

### **Braxton High School**

At one point when the environmental group reviewed comments online about garbage consumption, they debated about what to do when individuals stated ideas such as “I don’t really see the point of recycling when the biggest culprit of Greenhouse Gas emissions is [the industries that are right outside our backdoor]”. Some group members thought that the comment was correct and others thought that it illustrated a lack of understanding about the group’s ethical stance to address *all* the people and organisations responsible for Greenhouse Gas emissions. One member said, “If we just aimed to address the biggest offenders, we wouldn’t necessarily achieve anything so we need to say that as our response.” The group agreed and worked together to compose a respectful response.

This discussion illuminates how public spheres open up opportunities for communicative action when groups share different interpretations of an issue (in this case, about the meaning of the online comment in relation to the reasons for the recycling project); engage in thoughtful debate about their diverse stances to reach mutual understanding; and come to an unforced consensus about what is best to do.

### *5. Public spheres are inclusive and permeable.*

To the extent that communication between participants is *exclusive*, doubt arises about whether a communicative space is in fact a ‘public’ sphere. Public spheres are attempts to create communicative spaces that include not only the parties most obviously interested in and affected by decisions, but also other people who are involved or affected by whatever decisions are taken. Sometimes, these are groups that are peripheral or marginal to (or routinely excluded from) discussion in relation to the topics around which public spheres form. On this view, essentially private or privileged groups, organisations and communicative networks do *not* qualify as public spheres. In general, groups that have ‘members’ (with special rights or

privileges or pay or obligations) and that exclude ‘non-members’ (who don’t have those rights or privileges or pay or obligations) do *not* qualify as public spheres.

It is not always clear how inclusive and permeable a critical participatory action research initiative actually is in, for example, a school setting. Schools may confront high staff turnover, and this creates an enormous task to bring newcomers into shared understandings, which must be regularly renegotiated so that a new and shared consensus can emerge. The danger is that ‘latecomers’ to, or ‘old hands’ in a public sphere become subject to name-calling—as ‘conservatives’ or ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’ or ‘the originals’—which causes people to be isolated and insulated from ideas and critique, and from one another. The social-political arrangements of educational institutions also frequently mitigate against inclusiveness: many action research initiatives are exclusively undertaken by teachers, leaving out students or parents or community members who might have relevant perspectives to bring to the table in a more open public sphere.

At the same time, it is also often necessary to restrict the number of participants in an initiative simply in order to get the initiative under way, or to make sure there is sufficient ‘air-space’ so all participants have a realisable chance of having their voices heard in the conversation. Sometimes, it is useful to have smaller breakout groups in larger public spheres to ensure that many voices are heard.

In critical participatory action research in education, especially when teachers get together self-critically to examine sensitive issues about their own practices, the perspectives of students are often overlooked. Groundwater-Smith (2007) provides useful advice about gathering students’ perspectives, and ensuring that students’ voices are listened to.

### **Braxton High School**

After the four lead teachers presented their critical participatory action research projects at a provincial conference, a few of the lead teachers of the projects noted, “We are kind of outcasts now because many teachers think that there is no time for these kinds of projects and that we shouldn’t be doing them.” Another group member said, “If I didn’t have the principal behind me and you as a district person, I’m not sure that I would have stepped up to do a project.” Although the lead teachers volunteered and all teachers on staff had a chance to join into the groups at any time, the lead teachers felt that somehow they were perceived as ‘different’ or ‘not fitting the norm.’ On the other hand, the support teacher for the environmental group argued, “I am not a lead, but I am here. They have always been informed and welcomed into the process in casual ways so maybe there is a bit of sour grapes after the fact.”

### *6. In public spheres, people usually communicate in ordinary language.*

As part of their inclusive character, communication in public spheres often takes place in *ordinary language*. Public spheres frequently seek to break down the barriers and hierarchies formed by the use of specialist discourses and the modes

of address characteristic of bureaucracies that presume a ranking of the importance of speakers and what they say in terms of their positional authority (or lack of it). Public spheres also tend to make only a weak distinction between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ (they have relatively permeable boundaries), and between people who are relatively disinterested and those whose (self-)interests are significantly affected by the topics under discussion. On this view of public spheres, the communicative apparatuses of many government and business organisations, relying as they do on the specialist expertise and managerial responsibilities of some participants, do *not* ordinarily qualify as public spheres.

Many educators are careful not to import the complexities of theoretical or challenging ideas into their schools. This can be an excuse for inaction. Deferring to the expertise of certain people or authoritative texts can help to unfreeze current habits and customs, and is consistent with a willingness to learn. Although there are perennial tensions between academic language and teacher language, it is often worth the struggle of grappling with academic language to come to new understandings of issues. (The ease with which bureaucratic discourse slips into people’s lives is another similar issue.) Schools should be willing to call on specialist expertise in a variety of forms (professional reading, or expert consultants, for example) to assist their work with students. Moreover, teachers must ensure that they have the understandings, skills, and values to create conditions to learn from each other and to help other teachers learn from their experience—to question inadequate practice, for example.

### **Braxton High School**

When Jane decided to ask the Grade 12 students involved in the recycling group if they wanted to participate with The Center for Global Education to learn alongside other students about climate change through a video conference with an outside expert, she was attempting to focus attention on the students’ *sayings*. “I wanted the students to read more, think more and to take part in a conversation alongside an expert and other students. This was going to push their thinking in a way that I couldn’t do because they knew me and were comfortable to keep their learning at a certain level.”

Jane had created a very inclusive communicative space with students and students participated actively in all classroom, Students’ Council and environmental group dialogues. However, she wanted to introduce new ways of talking and thinking by taking advantage of an opportunity to involve students in a video conference with people who were outsiders to all of their school groups.

### *7. Public spheres presuppose communicative freedom.*

In public spheres, participants are free to occupy (or not occupy) the particular communicative roles of *speaker*, *listener* and *observer*, and they are free to *withdraw* from the communicative space of the discussion. Both participation and non-participation in communication are voluntary. On this view of public

spheres, communicative spaces and networks generally characterised by obligations or duties to lead, follow, direct, obey, remain silent or remain outside the group could *not* be characterised as public spheres.

This is a tricky principle to consider. In order to learn, or to understand the viewpoint of another, we must learn to listen—and, where necessary, to open spaces for others to contribute. We must also learn the skills of active listening. In short, we must learn both to speak and to defer to others. Sometimes, we will be fortunate to be able to learn from others who can give us new insights, show us new ways of practising, and new ways of relating to others. We can also speak with authority ourselves if our own experience is well informed (and not only by years of repetitive experience).

We also need to recognise that communicative spaces are frequently distorted by power, reputation and status. Frequently, those with the power, reputation and status dominate the space. Participants in a public sphere need to develop diplomatic (and sometimes undiplomatic) strategies to redress these kinds of domination, and to make space for different voices to be heard. This is especially important when participants are in different roles (teacher, student, principal, parent, community member) that give different perspectives on what goes on, and when particular interests are served by the ways things are currently arranged. There is need to create space where reputation and status in the organisation must be set aside if participants are to genuinely and authentically talk about whether and to what extent we are (for example) acting educationally, or listen and learn about new ways of working in informed and reasonable ways—and to consider whether and how things are not really working as hoped or expected.

### **Braxton High School**

Matthew, the Principal, floated in and out of Students' Council and recycling group meetings because, he explained, "I can change things without meaning to do it. I seem to want to share and my sharing can become the direction, you know, so sometimes I have to tell myself to be quiet or not stay too long."

Matthew is aware that his role as the principal is regarded as having a certain status that can pre-empt open discussion. He handles this problem by saying less and not staying too long in a meeting.

### *8. Public spheres generate communicative power.*

The communicative networks of public spheres constituted for public discourse generate *communicative power*—that is, the positions and viewpoints arrived at through open discussion and unforced consensus will command the respect of participants. Agreements reached through public discourse in public spheres command respect not by virtue of obligation, but by intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding and unforced consensus about what to do—in other words, by the force of argument alone, without coercion of any kind. Communication in public spheres thus creates *legitimacy* in the strongest sense—the shared belief among participants

that they can and do freely and authentically consent to the decisions, positions or viewpoints arrived at through their own participation in public discourse. On this view of public spheres, systems of command or influence, where decisions are formed on the basis of obedience or self-interests would *not* ordinarily qualify as public spheres.

Keeping the points mentioned immediately above in mind, it is worth recognising that schools and systems, groups and networks all generate their own discourses and cultures. These not only determine ‘what goes without saying’ but valorise or devalue particular ways in which things can be said or done, or particular people and groups. The conditions for reflection on practice must be created with a commitment to the idea of the public sphere, and these conditions must, for example, be ones in which it is possible to share bad news as well as good. This might include for example, the frightful failure of a particular kind of teaching strategy in a particular situation. The conditions for legitimacy can be most difficult when critical participatory action research is in its early days and struggling to find new ways of talking about the work and introducing others to it. Only when the theme of the public sphere is settling and its record of achievements begins can the principles for achieving legitimacy be worked out as a social practice.

### **Braxton High School**

Although the recycling group became an open space, Jane acknowledged that she had a good relationship with the students, and newcomers to the group who did not know her or the other students found it hard to participate. “The students were freely participating, but new students who were unsure of how to take part in an open dialogue tended to stay quiet and to leave the group.” After some reflecting, Jane considered that it would have been helpful to review the ways to participate in honest and open debate. “We took a lot for granted about how we got along and felt comfortable, so I think I would have to help newcomers know how to take part this way. We didn’t really review what it meant to take part in an honest and open debate and it’s necessary.” Even though Jane was considering ways to keep newcomers, it is clear from the number of diverse groups (Grade 10, 11 and 12 students, parents, staff, and outside organizations and agencies) that were involved in or affected by the recycling initiative, that the recycling group generated communicative power for their ideas and proposals, and earned the respect of their community.

### *9. Public spheres generally have an indirect, not direct, impact on social systems.*

Public spheres do not affect social systems (like government and administration, or the economy) directly; their impact on systems is more *indirect*, and mediated through systems of *influence* (like voluntary groups and associations in civil society). In public spheres, participants aim to change the climate of debate, the ways things are thought about, how situations are understood. They aim to generate a sense that alternative ways of doing things are possible and feasible—and to show

that some of these alternative ways actually work, or that the new ways do indeed resolve problems or overcome dissatisfactions or address issues. On this view of public spheres, groups organized primarily to pursue the particular self-interests of particular groups like lobby groups, the press and political parties would *not* ordinarily qualify as public spheres.

Critical participatory action researchers must do their best to ensure that they do good educational work and good research work. Their good work should be the basis of their reputation and their recognition. They should be aware that there are dangers in being recognised and rewarded for their work—they can be assimilated into institutional, administrative and economic systems of power and money that serve interests other than the interests of education, namely, the good for each person and the good for humankind. We also recognise, however, that people should be recognised and rewarded for the quality of their work. We think participants should aim to have a reputation for being excellent educators, and interesting and approachable interlocutors.

### **Braxton High School**

Once the environmental group was recognized as having done an excellent job presenting at the provincial conference, some staff members felt threatened by that recognition. On the one hand, the teachers who later watched the presentation said they were proud of this group, but, on the other hand, a few teachers said that the students' good work was an example of unequal treatment—an injustice. These critics complained that the teachers and students involved in the recycling initiative got substitute release time to plan and prepare when others did not always get the same level of support for their extra commitments. This tension became an object of discussion between the Principal and Rhonda, in her role as a district support member. They uncovered the tension as a potential location for open discussion with staff about how best to support teachers to engage in critical, participatory action research as an overall approach to professional development instead of a choice to do a "project." Although no decisions were made, this example illustrates how critical participatory action research groups often exist outside of institutional routines and structures. In this case, some teachers saw a 'different' allocation of resources as unfair because, usually, every person on staff is provided with the same amount of professional development dollars.

### *10. Public spheres are often associated with social movements.*

Public spheres frequently arise in practice through (or in relation to) the communication networks associated with *social movements*—that is, where voluntary groupings of participants emerge in response to a legitimation deficit, or a shared sense that a problem has arisen and needs to be addressed—for example, a social or environmental or community health problem. Important social movements of the last century or so, like the workers' movement, the civil rights movement, the

women's movement, and the green movement have all galvanised powerful and transformative action in educational practices and institutions. Not only has the green movement galvanised the formation of community climate action groups, for example, it has also galvanised transformative action in educational practice (Education for Sustainability, for example) and educational institutions (making schools' use of energy more sustainable, for example). In our view of public spheres however, organisations like political parties lobby groups do not ordinarily qualify as public spheres for reasons already outlined in relation to other items on this list, as well as because they are part of the *social order* of the state rather than social movements in civil society.

### **Braxton High School**

The recycling critical participatory action research project began because students, according to the focus group results, had underlined the importance of changing their school's apathetic attitude towards environmental stewardship. The students highlighted how they heard almost daily about climate change and weather disasters connected to Greenhouse Gas emissions. Because they realized that there was global attention given to this issue, they felt that it was as a good starting place for opening up discussions about how to break apathy about routines such as throwing recyclable items into the garbage. The recycling project shows that the well-recognised global social movement to mitigate climate change inspired this high school group.

The best critical participatory action research in education happens in networks of experienced educators and others concerned about education. Nevertheless, critical participatory action research usually starts small—participants need time to learn new ways of saying, doing and relating. Participants also need time to find where and how to make links with people who share their concerns—and who can help them. An important but tricky task is to maintain links with that general movement but not be swamped by its diversity or its contrary and competing arguments and advocacies. The difficulty is how to sustain engagement with the educational concern, while working within the machinery of schooling—policies, procedures, institutional requirements, administrative arrangements, curriculum requirements, professional standards, school and classroom layouts, and the rest. This calls for balance among the research role (what Habermas called “the extension of critical theorems”), the self-educational role of the public sphere (“the organization of enlightenment”), and the advocacy and practice-changing roles (“the conduct of the political struggle”) for which the public sphere is constituted (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Habermas 1974, 1996).

### **Braxton High School**

Once agencies and organizations devoted to youth action and climate change heard about Braxton High School's project, Jane was approached to take part in numerous educational activities connected to them. At one point, she went to the Principal and said that it was too much given her teaching and administrative load and the students' academic pressures. She had supported the Grade 12 students in the recycling group to take part in a videoconference opportunity offered through The Center for Global Education, but a secondary group, Cities As Green Leaders, were connected to The Center for Global Education, and approached Jane about having her students take part in a virtual town hall and the writing of a "white paper" for a climate change conference. Jane explained to the Principal that there was only one Grade 12 student who was willing to attend the virtual town hall, which was offered during a full school day, because the other students were worried about missing classes so close to exams. Therefore, the Principal suggested that she and the one student attend and decide after that what was reasonable to do. This example highlights how Jane appreciated the opportunities for her students as presented by advocates of the larger climate change movement, but the pressures of schooling made it challenging to take up all of the invitations by outside agencies and organizations.

## **Conclusion: 'Participation' in Critical Participatory Action Research is Participation in Public Spheres**

In this chapter, we have discussed 'participation' in critical participatory action research as something other than being a participant in the work or life going on in a local situation, and as something other than being a participant in the research process. Both of those forms of participation are relevant in critical participatory action research, but we have especially emphasised that the key form of participation in this kind of research is participation in a public sphere—participation with others in communicative action, which is a conversation in which people strive for intersubjective agreement about the ideas and the language they use, mutual understanding of one another's perspectives and points of view, and unforced consensus about what to do. The commitment to communicative action involves a suspension of the strategic action we are ordinarily caught up in (getting things done), and an openness to re-thinking what we are and could be doing so that our work and lives can be more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, and more just and inclusive. It also involves a suspension of some of the constraints on discussion that ordinarily occur in hierarchical organisations, where superiors get greater chances to put forward their views, say what will count to the organisation, and impose their will on others.

Once a public sphere has formed around a shared felt concern—once people are genuinely committed to understanding the nature and consequences of their

practices, and the conditions that hold their practices in place—they are in a position to begin doing critical participatory action research. To have established the public sphere is to have established a set of relationships in which people can think openly, respectfully and critically together, as a basis for deciding whether ‘the way we do things around here’ is in fact rational and reasonable, productive and sustainable, and just and inclusive. And it is to have established the conversational space—the communicative space—in which people can openly and civilly explore whether there might be better ways to do things, ways that might be less irrational or unreasonable, less unproductive or unsustainable, or less unjust or exclusive than ‘the way we do things’ now.

‘The ways we do things around here’ are practices. Before we leap into the ‘research’ part of critical participatory action research (which will be our concern in Chap. 4), in Chap. 3 we will examine the notion of ‘practice’. By exploring a new view of practices, we will better understand how our practices (‘the ways we do things around here’) are held in place by the conditions under which we practise, and how we hold ourselves and others in place in the familiar forms of understanding, the familiar modes of action, and the familiar ways of relating to one another and the world that constitute our current practices. If we cannot change the ways we constitute the familiar world of our current practices, then we will continue to reproduce the world as we know it through our practices. To transform our world, we need to transform our practices.

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