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Orality Journal

The Word Became Fresh

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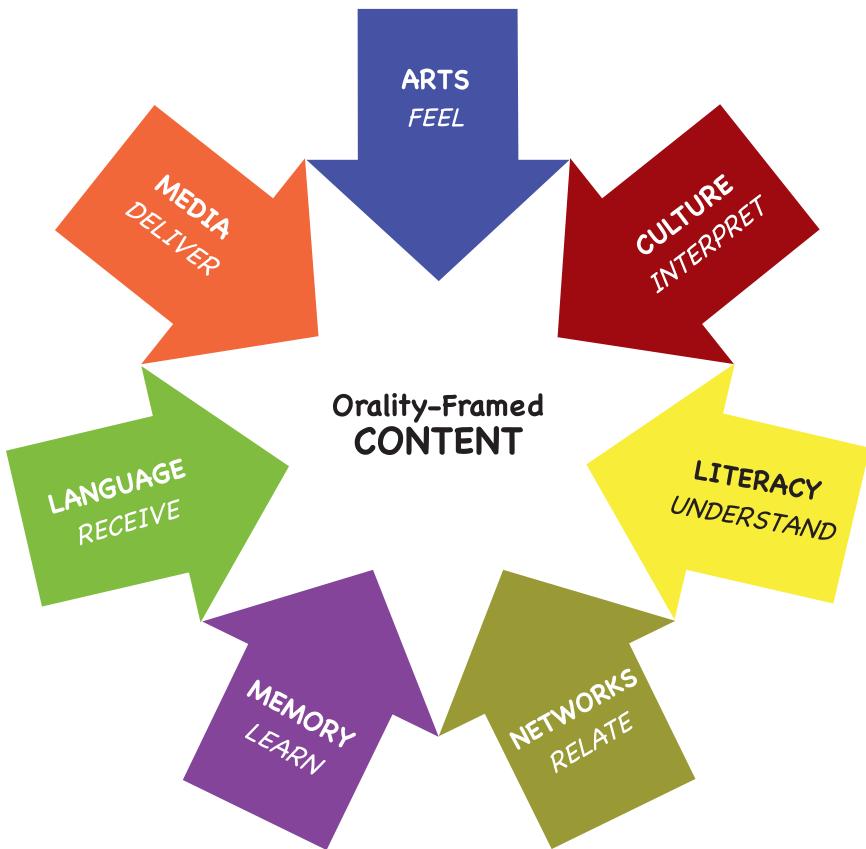
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Participatory
Learning and
Networks
Revisited

Keller • Azomo • Lim • Wise • Varghese • Handley
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The Seven Disciplines of Orality



Courtesy of Dr. Chuck Madinger who leads Global Impact Mission and serves on the International Orality Network's Leadership Team facilitating the Research Task Force.

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Cover Photo

Participatory Learning in a rodeo! The rider and the horse learns about each other, and the audience (the networks) while entertained is also learning and passing on the learning.

Your statutes have been my songs
in the house of my sojourning.

Psalm 119:54 ESV

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom
that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God
acceptable worship, with reverence and awe,
for our God is a consuming fire.

Hebrews 12:28—29 ESV

Orality Journal

The Word Became Fresh

Orality Journal is the journal of the International Orality Network. It is published online semi-annually and aims to provide a platform for scholarly discourse on the issues of orality, discoveries of innovations in orality, and praxis of effectiveness across multiple domains in society. This online journal is international and interdisciplinary, serving the interests of the orality movement through research articles, documentation, book reviews, and academic news. Occasionally, print editions will be provisioned. Submission of items that could contribute to the furtherance of the orality movement is welcomed.

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Editor's Note

Samuel E. Chiang

Participatory Learning and Networks

Less than two decades ago in small shops in large coastal cities of China, there were banks of computers set up for people to experience the arrival of computing power. By day it looked business-like; by night it was the domain of youths playing video games. I vividly recall how they would shout out across to each other upon the discovery of new strategies to advance to the next level, all with a focus of how to take down a foreign government or power.

Even today in MMOG (Massively Multiplayer Online Game) the players are tethered to a device connected to a gaming platform, which is, enabled by a network (internet), and together the players interact meaningfully with people across the world. They actually learn from each other, and in turn achieve an individual best, and more often a common agenda, collaboratively. At times one is the master, at other times one is the apprentice, all the while the learning is crafted into the individual through ultra high-definition images presented in a coherent imaginary storyline.

All this sounds very intuitive. It is oral, visual, collaborative, and purposeful. Embedded are assumptions and theories which drive the process, including but not limited to: 1. Adults learn better when knowledge is constructed through participation; 2. Adults are able to pass on “sticky” knowledge through their vast networks; 3. Knowledge gets passed on through personal relationships (networks) when it retains its “stickiness” in the form of how people normally receive, process, remember, and pass on information.

The practitioners who contributed articles to this volume are all experts in their own domain. They have gone through both the school of hard-knocks and the school of discoveries. While the case studies speak of how “orality—learning—participation” works in the field, the theories along with the nomenclature are both grounded and well established.

In assembling this volume, William Coppedge and myself encountered several sensitivities concerning case studies, field of service, and names.

Thus, where necessary we have used pseudonyms, or left out names entirely. The cases are all true. In this volume, we also attempted something new: we have endeavored to capture several threaded discussions from within a forum context. Theory and praxis often intersect in a community of practice supported through a public forum, and so we worked with one of the writers to distill material contributed within one of those forum contexts and craft it into an article. In this sense, we have tried to capture what was timely and casted it as what can become timeless.

Finally, in this issue there was so much good information—along with detailed discussions and concrete examples—that the submissions were much longer than the allotted space. Thus, while editing has been necessary, we have tried to ensure as smooth a reading as possible.

We continue in the exploration of how orality works within communities, both in the oral and digitoral generations. We desire to discover how vital information permeates networks as well as how participatory learning enables the delivery of that information and makes “it stick” in the individual and the community. We are certain you will find this issue interesting, and we invite your feedback.

On the journey together,



Samuel E. Chiang

From Knoxville, Tennessee, USA

Deciding and Planning Together: Engaging Oral-preference Communicators Using a Participatory Approach

Susan Keller

Photos by Susan Keller

Susan Keller is a consultant to faith-based NGOs, serving in Asia since 2006. She trains and mentors people who facilitate participatory discussions—within teams, churches and partnerships, with communities in rural settings, and during conferences. She was first trained in participatory methods in 2007. She also served in Africa for 13 years.

About 18 lay leaders and pastors from several local congregations in a town in the southern Philippines sat in a circle sharing stories about how using the Kinamayo language (rather than Cebuano, the regional language, or Filipino, the national language) was helping people in their community come to faith or grow in faith. Their rapt attention indicated that many were hearing for the first time about ways Kinamayo was being used within the various ministries of the different congregations.

After the first person shared, two or three key points were written in large letters, each on a separate strip of paper and placed in the center of the group under the heading “Good Things.” Then,

another person shared. Again, a phrase or two were written to document the good thing happening in that congregation or ministry. After sharing what was already happening, the group began discussing their hopes. What could be done in our congregations, community, or individually which would help people come to faith or grow in faith through using Kinamayo? Each idea shared was summarized on a piece of paper and laid under the heading “Hopes.”



The discussion participants were all Kinamayo speakers, but most were multilingual, speaking Cebuano as a second language, and Filipino as a third language. Several also spoke some English. The discussion facilitators, Chari Viloria and Mila Mata, were trilingual in Cebuano, Filipino, and English.

The most confident writers among the participants had the role of writing a summary of each person's ideas on paper. They wrote in whatever language or combination of languages they wanted to. The person sitting beside each of these "scribes" helped place the papers on the floor so all could see them and refer back to them as needed. Although 80% or more of the participants were literate in Cebuano or Filipino, the majority of the group was clearly oral-preference communicators. Those who had few or no literacy skills also eagerly joined in the discussion. Each watched where the paper with the words he had spoken was laid.

One participant read out all the Hopes which had been written. A few additional hopes were added. Participants then arranged the Hopes to show which could be

done soon and which would take time. As they arranged them, they thought of a few more Hopes. One paper was this: "Write Kinamayo newspapers, Sunday school materials, and Bible." Newspapers would not take long. Sunday school materials would take longer. The Bible would take the longest of all.

They decided to write three separate papers instead. Participants then began to discuss which three or four of the hopes were the most important ones for helping people in their community come to faith or grow in faith. An older woman stood up, knelt beside the diagram, pointed at a paper, and began to explain why she thought that was the most important Hope. As she talked, others in the group motioned for her to point to the paper next to the one she was indicating. She smiled, moved her hand, and continued to explain why that idea was so important. The group placed a plastic token on that paper to show that it was indeed one of the most important hopes.

What had happened? Here was a woman with low or perhaps no literacy skills, who, through the participatory process in which

she had been involved for over an hour, knew that her input was valuable and desired. She relied on her keen observation skills, good memory, and strong community relationships as she engaged. Yes, she was off by one paper as she pointed to and shared her insights about the Hope she felt was important, but the safe environment that was created resulted in her freely communicating her ideas.

The discussion did not end there. After marking several important Hopes, the group then talked about which Hopes they wanted to begin to work on. What could the group gathered in that place make plans for and begin to implement? The group selected three Hopes, divided themselves among those Hopes, and began to make plans—*what steps will help to assure that this particular Hope becomes a reality?* Again, the preference for oral communication was obvious.

The volume rose, the groups worked diligently. They eagerly shared with the whole group their initial plans, written in bullet points. The groups clearly owned the plans they had made: the participants' own names were listed as the ones responsible

for the implementation of the plans. Discussion participants had also identified others in their community whom they would invite to be part of the implementation—people whom they knew had interest or skills or resources to turn the Hope into reality. The facilitators' names were not mentioned in the plans. Through the whole process, people with varying levels of oral and literate preference worked together, affirming one another's ideas and abilities.

Similar things happened in each of the 17 groups with which Viloria, Mata, and Fabiosa facilitated participatory discussions (Hasselbring et.al 2011). Similar things happen regularly when a participatory approach is used: oral-preference communicators become actively involved in decision-making and planning for kingdom work.

What Is a Participatory Approach?

The Participatory Methods website says:

Participatory methods (PMs) include a range of activities with a common thread: enabling ordinary people to play an active and influential part in decisions which affect their lives. This

means that people are not just listened to, but also heard; and that their voices shape outcomes.

Researchers, community members, activists and donors all use PMs. Because respect for local knowledge and experience is paramount, the result is interventions that reflect local realities, often leading to better supported and longer lasting social change.¹

Another way of understanding a participatory approach is considering its three components: **a participatory mindset**, **participatory techniques**, and **participatory tools**. These are briefly introduced here and then explored in more depth in the sections below.

A person with a **participatory mindset** views other people as they really are: created in the image of God, and yet both a sinner and scarred by the sins of others. Someone with a participatory mindset focuses on doing with others, rather than doing things *to or for* others. A person with a participatory mindset believes that God has been at work in and through the people in that place before she got involved and believes that God will continue

to work in and through them in the future. As a result, she does not believe that she is ultimately responsible for change to happen among them, but trusts God to work in his timing.

Participatory techniques are a wide variety of ways of doing things which help people participate maximally, listen well to one another, and move toward consensus. These include asking open questions, allowing silence so people can formulate their thoughts, writing ideas in large letters (or drawings) on strips of paper, placing the papers into a diagram on the floor (or a table or wall), inviting the group to categorize, prioritize in other ways by moving the papers to make a diagram which is meaningful to them, using moveable tokens or markers as they analyze their ideas, and more.

A **participatory tool** is a step-by-step process which has had a history of use; each tool is usually well documented. Each helps a group to address a certain type of issue: describing their situation, analyzing deeper issues, deciding what to do, developing plans, or evaluating something which has already been done. Participatory tools can be adapted to fit other contexts. In

the introduction, a variety of the Appreciative Inquiry² tool was used. Hundreds of participatory tools have been developed.

When using a participatory approach, the person facilitating a discussion must have a participatory mindset. The facilitator uses participatory techniques appropriate to the dynamics of a specific event. If appropriate, a participatory tool is selected and used to help the group move toward its desired outcome.

The Origins of the Use of a Participatory Approach

The idea of using a participatory approach started to grow in the mid-1900s in diverse fields. In education, Paul Freire (1970) and others urged that adults should decide what they want to learn and how they will use what they learn. They also emphasized that learners already have a large amount of experience and wisdom which should be affirmed and valued.

In community development, Robert Chambers (1984) and others desired to see greater participation of local community members in development programs related to health, agriculture, sanitation, and

education. In business, those involved in planning and evaluation realized that people at all levels and in all departments have key insights which can help a company to improve.

In the social sciences, researchers have realized the value of involving those being researched in setting research goals, determining the methods to use, and analyzing the results. Over the years, a variety of models for using a participatory approach have developed.

Amidst various approaches used by different groups, two aspects of participation are helpful to maintain. The first is from *When Helping Hurts*³ and places the emphasis on the relationship between outsiders and the local people. Many who promote the use of an oral approach are outsiders to the communities, congregations, or ministries which they seek to influence.

As you read the continuum of participation, think about a ministry with which you are familiar. Identify where that ministry lies along the continuum. Consider also where you, or better yet, where God, might desire that ministry to be on the continuum.

| Participation Continuum <i>by Corbett and Fikkert</i> | | |
|--|--|---|
| Mode of Participation | Type of Involvement of Local People | Relationship of Outsiders to Local People |
| Coercion | Local people submit to predetermined plans developed by outsiders. | Doing TO |
| Compliance | Local people are assigned to tasks, often with incentives, by outsiders; the outsiders decide the agenda and direct the process. | Doing FOR |
| Consultation | Local people's opinions are asked; outsiders analyze and decide on a course of action. | Doing FOR |
| Cooperation | Local people work together with outsiders to determine priorities; responsibility remains with outsiders for directing the process. | Doing WITH |
| Co-leading | Local people and outsiders share their knowledge to create appropriate goals and plans, to execute those plans, and to evaluate the results. | Doing WITH |
| Community Initiated | Local people set their own agenda and mobilize to carry it out without outside initiators and facilitators | Responding TO |

The second continuum, found in *Methods for Community Participation*⁴ focuses more on the role of the community. While external institutions are mentioned occasionally, this continuum shows that even churches, communities, and ministries which have no outside involvement may not be participatory. Again, it is helpful to identify the location on the continuum of several organizations or ministries with which you are familiar.

| Kumar | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| Definition | Type of Participation |
| People participate by being told what is going to happen or what has already happened. | Passive Participation |
| People participate by answering questions by extractive researchers. | Participation in Information Giving |
| People participate by being consulted. External people listen to views and define the problems and solutions. | Participation by Consultation |
| People participate by providing resources (labour) in return for material incentives. | Participation for Material Incentives |
| People participate by forming groups to meet predetermined externally initiated objectives. | Functional participation |
| People participate in joint analysis, development of action plans, and formation of strengthening local institutions. | Interactive participation |
| People participate by taking initiative independent of external institutions to change systems. | Self-mobilization |

Two points of clarification may be helpful. First, what is appropriate for God to do is very different than what is appropriate for outside people to do. God does and should do things to and for his people. We were not able to create ourselves. We are not able to save ourselves.

Second, not everything should be done at the highest level of participation. In emergency situations, we all want a competent person to tell us “what is going on” and we are willing to “submit to predetermined plans.” However, the frequent mention by even the most authoritative leaders and pastors is that they desire congregational members or those under their leadership to take initiative or be more actively involved. This indicates that many opportunities exist for moving toward greater participation within the Body of Christ.

We will now explore the three aspects of a participatory approach in greater depth.

Participatory Mindset

My first significant exposure to a participatory mindset was during my second year of secondary school. Mr. Pepin was teaching us about non-Western thought. I was shocked that Mr. Pepin would ask deep, open questions of some of the “poorer” students in our class. I thought, “She doesn’t know the answer to that! Ask her an easy question!” I was amazed at the profound, insightful answers which that student gave!

I realized that I had misjudged other students.

Mr. Pepin did not consider anyone in the class to be stupid. He knew that God had given each student the ability to think. Students responded to his affirmation of who they were by thinking and sharing their insights. God used Mr. Pepin to help me to acknowledge the God-given abilities of my fellow students.

In his book *Walking with the Poor*⁵, Bryant Myers⁶ dedicates an entire chapter to exploring how God views people, what he has done for them, and what that means about how we as believers should relate to one another and to those who are not yet in God’s kingdom. I can only briefly summarize his thoughts here.

God created the world perfect and desired that each human would have good, healthy, and peaceful relations with God, other humans, the rest of creation, and oneself (Myers 2011, 61). Two diagrams show the broken human relationships which are a consequence of the fall and the relationships which God desires people to have with himself and each other.

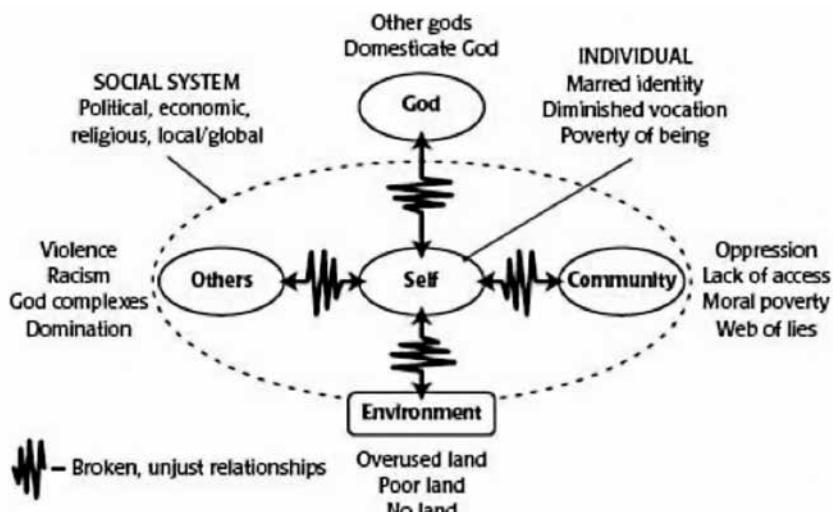


Figure 1: Myers diagram of a relational understanding of poverty (2011, 64).

Myers makes a distinction between people who are part of our community (family, friends, and neighbors) and those who we see as “other” (people of another social status, ethnic group, caste, religion, or political party). Relationships are damaged with both categories of people. Myers’ second diagram shows the peaceful and just relationships which God desires us to have with God, creation, and other people.

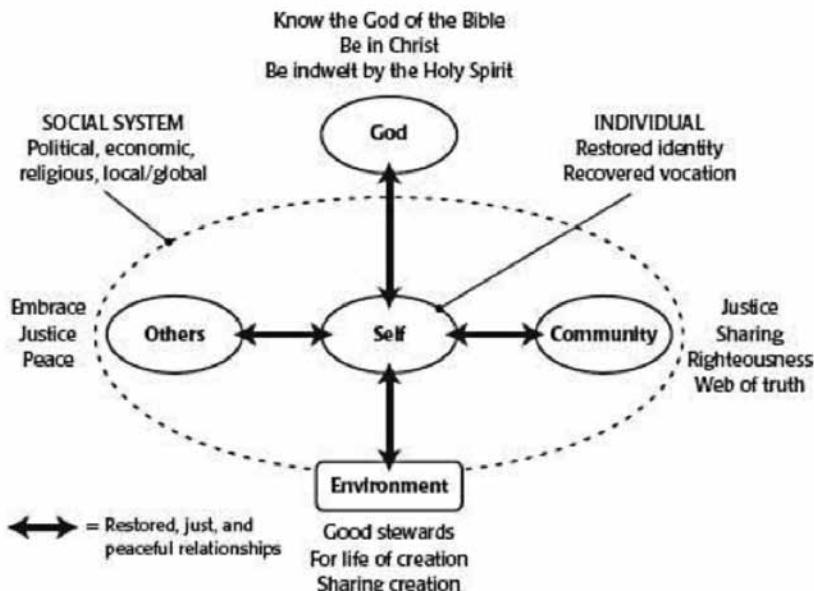


Figure 2: Myers diagram of restored relationships (2011, 181).

According to Myers, broken relationships have resulted in people lacking or being poor in many ways: broken relationships result in a lack of resources, health, knowledge, relationships, peace, goodness, freedom... The list goes on (2011, 114). In reality, each of us is poor in multiple ways. We are not perfect; our sin toward others and others' sin toward us results in each of us lacking—even those of us who are redeemed “know in part.”

Myers also explores how the fall damaged people's sense of identity and their sense of vocation. Two opposite things happened to people's identities. Some people develop a hopeless or “poor” identity (I can't..., I don't have..., I'm not...), while others develop a prideful “non-poor” identity (I can..., I have..., I am...). According to Myers,

The net result of the fall... is that...people learn to play god in the lives of the poor and the marginalized.... [The results are patterns of domination and oppression that mar the image and the potential productivity of the poor, while alienating the non-poor from their true identity as well. (2011, 67)

Think about this idea of the poor and non-poor and how that fits into whether and how people will participate. Put one person with a non-poor identity together with others and that person begins doing to and for everyone else—whether they desire it or not. Put a person with a poor identity with others and the person expects others to help him or her and do for him or her things that he or she might well be able to do for him or herself.

The solution is the work of Jesus in the lives of the poor and the non-poor alike. In neither case will high levels of participation occur.

Myers says that two things the poor need are to believe “that they are made in the image of God and are God's children” and “that they have gifts to contribute...[as] productive stewards of creation” (2011, 178). The non-poor also need two things: “laying down their god-complexes and believing that they are made in God's image and are not, themselves, gods” and “believing that their gifts are for sharing, not control...[as] they...lead as servants, not masters” (2011, 178).

The solution for both the poor and the non-poor is the same—restored relationships with God, self, and others through the

death and resurrection of Jesus and restored understandings of their identity and calling. That restoration does not result in perfect people, congregations, or communities, but rather people which have these values:

| |
|--|
| Loyalty to all in our community |
| All men, women and children matter |
| Compassion for those who are in need |
| Repentance which takes personal responsibility for wrong |
| Forgiveness to all who injure us |
| Sharing with all who are in need |
| Equality for all men and women |
| Justice for all, even the weakest |
| Peacemaking within the community and world |

Figure 3: Values moving toward the kingdom (taken from EFICOR in Myers 2011, 296)

The above is a brief introduction to a participatory mindset in which each participatory approach facilitator must continually be growing. None of us master it perfectly. We now move on to consider in more depth the various participatory techniques.

Participatory Techniques

Participatory techniques are many, varied, and flexible. In this section, I describe ten different techniques, as well as giving variations and the situations in which each variation may be more appropriate. The techniques can be thought about in two ways—the physical action which is done, or the benefit of doing those things. The physical action is most visible. The benefit is most important. The benefits are closely tied to the participatory mindset. Each physical action has several benefits or reasons. Thus, we start with a list of the reasons or benefits for using participatory techniques.

- a) **Value** what each person has said
- b) **Remember** what has been said
- c) **Understand** others well
- d) **Encourage** those who have been least heard
- e) **Communicate confidence in them**, their abilities, and gifts
- f) **Allow for changes** as the discussion progresses
- g) **Discussion participants decide** and plan for their own group (not the outsiders who may be facilitating)
- h) Create an environment in which it is safe to fail
- i) **Involve everyone** in viewing, moving, sharing, and deciding
- j) **Building consensus** among the participants

- k) No limits are set by the facilitators (or as few as possible)

Each physical technique is presented with several of the benefits listed in italics. The technique is then described in more detail.

#1. Participants document ideas on strips of paper (*value, remember, understand, allow change*)

In meetings in the West, a secretary usually takes notes for everyone; however, no one sees the notes until the next meeting.

In addition, it is common during meetings for someone to say, “A little while ago, Mary said something so clearly—what was it that she said?” But the group finds the idea has slipped away.

In a participatory discussion the whole group is responsible to assure that key points are documented as the meeting progresses. The documentation is flexible in form, with each idea being written on a separate strip of paper. Any concerns about how something is documented can be accounted for

by removing a strip and writing a corrected or improved version on another strip.

The documentation becomes “We have said” rather than “Ram said” or “Dinaledi said.” In many cultures, attributing words to a person may cause shame or may raise a person to a level that is inappropriate. Having ideas documented anonymously on paper makes it easier to discuss the ideas without the status of the person who said it influencing the response to the idea.



When documenting using words on paper, the words serve as a reminder to what was said. They are not verbatim notes. Thus, although words are often used, they are helpful for oral-preference communicators. Sometimes, the person who speaks will only say a short phrase. More often, the person will share several sentences. The facilitator would then ask the group, “How can what Abdul said be summarized?” or “What were the main points that Suresh shared?” This allows the group to think about what

was said and find an agreed upon way to document the ideas.

In some situations, drawings or icons are used to represent the ideas on the strips of paper rather than words. This makes the process even more favorable to oral-preference communicators. Because diagrams or icons are less standardized than words, it becomes even more important for the group to decide together how to symbolize the ideas that are shared. The drawings need not have great detail. Just as the words serve as reminders of larger ideas, so the drawing or icon is a reminder for a larger concept.

#2. Large enough to see (*value, understand, participants decide*)

The materials used need to be large enough for everyone to see and read/identify what is on each paper with minimum-to-no need to move. The number of participants, as well as their age (vision abilities) and the lighting influence the size of paper used and how large the writing is.

#3. Sitting in a circle (*involve everyone, understand, value, encourage least heard*)



Ideally, participants sit in a circle or a semi-circle during the discussion so they can all see each other easily. They may sit on chairs, or if culturally appropriate, on the floor. Sitting in a circle (rather than in three straight lines) enables everyone to see everyone else. The visual contact helps people understand what others are saying. It allows the facilitator to easily see everyone's face and read from the face whether each participant is being understood and is feeling valued.

Sitting in a circle usually assures that everyone is the same distance from the diagram. Being near the diagram encourages everyone to participate. Sitting in a circle helps the least-heard people to feel part of the group and may encourage them to share their thoughts.

#4. Accept all ideas (*value, encourage least heard, participants decide*)

During every discussion, there are one or more times when “all ideas are accepted.” This is sometimes called brainstorming or greenlighting. Questions can include “What are all of the good things that

are happening in your group?" or "What are all the things that are helping you to reach your goal?" or "What are all the tasks which are required for your church to carry out its mission?" Everyone in the group shares his or her idea. Every single idea is documented. Even ideas which seem to be "off track" are accepted at face value and written down. This prevents people from feeling ashamed about what they said. It also helps people to think more creatively, or to share ideas which are a bit unusual, but which may hold the key to helping the group move ahead.

As the group sees that all ideas are accepted, people gain courage to share some of their deeper thoughts, which they may have feared others would judge or criticize. Sometimes, a member of the group will ask a question of clarification. When this happens, the facilitator turns the question back to the group. Occasionally, some people in the group want to talk about one thing and others want to discuss another matter.

If the group decides to shift the focus of the discussion, it is up to them. It may be that one person had decided the meeting topic, but the open sharing of ideas allowed the preference of the group to be heard.

In many situations, the oral-preference communicators in a group feel that they are not as valuable as others. The free sharing of ideas often results in more open and honest sharing by all who are present.



#5. Read out what has been written (*value, remember, understand, involve everyone, allow change*)

Most discussions have several parts. At the end of each part of a discussion, the ideas that have been documented for that part of the discussion are read out. The group is encouraged to listen to determine whether all ideas have been documented, and whether any additional ideas should be added. One participant reads out all of the words, or all of the diagrams which have been

contributed. Participants may also ask for clarification about what has been written, or may recommend a rewording.

When some in the group have lower or no literacy skills, the person reading points to each paper as it is read. This allows all members of the group to see where papers are placed which refer to the ideas about which they are most interested or passionate.

#6. Sharing in small groups (encourage the least heard, value, understand)

A common participatory technique is to have the group get into smaller groups of three to five people in order to share their ideas. Sometimes, the groups are self-selected. Other times, the groups are assigned with all of the young women in one group, the older men in another, and so on.

Working part of the time in small groups is helpful if the whole group numbers more than 12, because it can be difficult for every person to get a chance to share. In small groups, each person is likely to

talk at least once. Sometimes, each small group documents on papers the ideas they discussed and only share the written form with the whole group. Other times, the small groups report back to the big group before writing, and the ideas are documented on papers at that point.

If the group has more than 25 participants, a second way of working in groups may be used. Multiple facilitators may lead smaller groups through the whole participatory tool, with each group discussing the same topic. After each group finishes the tool, they move around the room to look at the work other groups did.

These groups may also be self-selected or assigned, as is appropriate for the discussion topic. Depending on the nature and purpose of the discussion, the next steps would vary. In some cases, three key ideas from each group are collected. In others, a committee processes all the ideas of all the groups. In still others, each participant is encouraged to take notes on what he or she will do differently as a result of the discussion.



#7. Categorizing or prioritizing the ideas (*building consensus, value, understand*)



After brainstorming in either small groups or together, another step is for the group to process all of the ideas in some way. The group may identify those ideas which are most central, or most important. The group may put the ideas in order from easiest to hardest, or from those which they can do themselves to those which would require outside help. The group may categorize the ideas and determine headings for the different categories.

During this process of categorizing or prioritizing, the group may think of additional ideas that they had not considered previously. It is also common for the group to realize that they may need to be more specific in the wording they use. Sometimes, the group realizes that some individuals thought a

paper meant one thing, and others thought it meant something else. As a result, they may discard the one paper and write two separate papers instead.

Also during this process the group may realize that some papers are duplicates of others, or that a paper can be discarded because of a misunderstanding about the original question. By this point in the discussion, the group is working together in such a collaborative way that no one feels embarrassment when a paper is removed.

#8. Using locally available materials (*allow change, participants decide, safe to fail*)

As the group categorizes and prioritizes, strings may be used to show which items are in one category and which are in another. Tokens/markers can be used to mark papers. Examples of this include: showing which are the five most important ideas, showing the relative amount or strength of each item (using different numbers of tokens), or showing which items are in each category by using a different token for each category.

Different types of tokens are used in different contexts. Community development workers use stones,

sticks, leaves, or seeds of various types—materials selected by the participants themselves within their environment, often during the discussion itself. Those who facilitate planning discussions in businesses often use post-it notes or stickers.

A middle ground can be using free resources which can be found in communities, but which are re-usable. Tokens made of discarded plastic can be easily stored, transported, and reused. Such tokens can be made from colored plastic (detergent bottles, soda bottles, engine oil bottles, plastic folders, or packing strips). These can be cut into tokens about one to two centimeters in size and of different shapes.

The items used as tokens need to be clearly distinguishable to the participants and ideally should also be distinguishable to facilitators. While community members may clearly distinguish pumpkin seeds from squash seeds, the facilitators may not be able to distinguish them. Likewise, the facilitators may be able to distinguish blue rectangles from green rectangles, but in some cultures, green and blue are a single

color with a single name. Some discussions may require the use of four to six different colors or types of tokens.

#9. Create a diagram or visualize the discussion (*remember, build consensus, participants decide*)

As the participants document their ideas and categorize or prioritize their ideas using local materials,



they create a visual diagram representing what they are discussing. Each participatory tool provides some guidance as to how the ideas are visualized, but

the participants are the ones who ultimately decide how to arrange the diagram to show what they think, believe, or have decided. At the end of the discussion, the diagram is made permanent by doing one or more of the following: taping the pieces of paper together, gluing the papers onto a large sheet of paper, drawing the diagram on a large sheet of paper, or taking a high resolution photo of the diagram.

#10. Only participants touch and move the papers (*value, confidence in them, participants decide*)

As group participants write ideas, categorize them, and place tokens on them, the facilitator does not touch the



papers or other materials, except to initially hand them to group participants. The facilitator may invite them to make a heading for the categories they have made, but the group can decide how to arrange the categories. If someone in the group feels that what is written on one paper duplicates what is written on another, the group decides whether what is on the two papers is identical or not. They then decide what to do about it (some groups decide to remove one, others stack them, still others may place them side by side or tape them together). The facilitator never removes a paper from the group's diagram.

#11. Using the ground as the work area (*encourage least heard, involve everyone, no limits*)

During participatory discussions, the ground is often the work area. A table or a wall can also be used.

Advantages of using the ground include that the diagram can usually be expanded in any direction if there are more ideas. New participants can join the group easily.

In many cultures, it is the people who are least heard who are most comfortable doing things on the ground, while those who are most heard may be hesitant to do things on the ground. Using the ground often gives the least heard more courage. They will be the ones most willing to move the papers, and in the process they may gain confidence in expressing their ideas (even if others disagree with them).



#12. Give the participants time
(*participants decide, involve everyone*)

Often, a group (or the leaders of a group) allocates relatively small amounts of time for discussion and decision-making. This may be because the leaders feel that they are very close to reaching a decision and developing a plan. They may want the larger group to give approval. However, when the discussion is opened to a broader group of stakeholders, new insights, risks, and opportunities may be identified. Everyone realizes that more time is needed. Facilitators should take time before the event to understand the situation well, and recommend to the leaders the amount of time a discussion might take. Good facilitators always leave a margin in their schedule so that if the whole group decides to extend the meeting the facilitator can be adjust to the group's need.

#13. Ask open questions
(*understand, encourage least heard, value*)

The goal of a participatory discussion is that the participants will think and talk with one another in order to move toward their goals. Asking a yes/no question rarely promotes the desired type

of dialogue, but a well designed open question encourages thinking and sharing. Many open questions begin with who, what, where, when, or why. Some requests (e.g., “Please, share in small groups about good things you have seen happening as a result of people listening the Bible on their cellphones”) can also be considered to be open questions.

#14. Allow silence so people can formulate their thoughts
(*encourage the least heard, involve everyone*)

After a facilitator asks a question, he or she stops. He or she allows time for the participants to think. Sometimes, the facilitator will say, “We are going to take several minutes to silently reflect on this next question. If you want to, you can write some of your ideas or draw a picture about this.” Different people process ideas at different speeds. Many people think best when there is silence. If they are trying to listen to the ideas of the fast thinkers, they never have time to formulate their own thoughts. Often, the people in the group who are least heard are also the last ones to be told about new ideas. Allowing silence also helps the group to have the time needed to process ideas before they are discussed.

#15. Leave the diagrams they make with the participants (*participants decide, safe to fail*)

At the end of a participatory discussion, the group will have made one or more diagrams representing the things which they have discussed. There is often a diagram for each tool which was facilitated. These diagrams are the work of the group and are left with them. The diagram might be taped together, glued onto a large sheet of paper, or sketched by one of the participants. If the facilitator feels it is appropriate, he or she may request to take a photograph of the diagram so that he or she has a copy of what the participants did. It is up to the participants to decide how to preserve the diagram and where to display or store it.

#16. Decide how to share the results with others (*participants decide, involve everyone*)

Near the end of a discussion, the facilitator may ask the group two questions: “Who else might want to know about what you discussed today?” and “With whom would you like to share the results of this discussion?” The results of a participatory discussion belong to the participants. They are theirs to share with others as they decide.

Participatory Tools

A participatory tool is a set of steps which provides structure to a conversation. Most tools have some or all of the following steps:

- State, select, or refine the topic
- Brainstorm lots of ideas related to the topic
- Categorize, prioritize, or organize the ideas in some way
- Decide to act on certain ideas
- Develop action plans for those ideas
- Decide how to share the results with others

Some of these general steps may be repeated multiple times in a single tool. For example, in the tool Appreciative Inquiry, brainstorming is done both about the current situation and about the hoped-for future situation. In the SWOT Analysis tool, the steps of brainstorming, categorizing, and prioritizing are done four times: once each for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.

Each tool may focus on describing the current situation, analyzing the situation, deciding what to do, planning how to do it, or evaluating something that has been done. Some tools focus on several of these at once. The word cloud in Figure 4 shows the diversity of uses of 40 participatory tools.



Figure 4: Uses of 40 participatory tools in word cloud

Frequently, several tools are used in a sequence. One tool may build mutual understanding by helping a group to describe the current situation in their project, organization, or team. A second tool may help them to understand more deeply a problem they have been wrestling with. A third tool may help the group find a solution, or make decisions which help them move ahead. The tools may be used one after another during a single meeting, or one may be used during staff meeting one week, and another the next.

For many participatory tools the length of time it takes to

facilitate a discussion using a single tool is one to two hours. However, some tools can be facilitated in 20 minutes and others take at least three days, sometimes spread over several months. The length of time that it takes to facilitate a tool depends not only on the tool, but also on the complexity of the situation, the number of stakeholders, the level of trust in the group, and the goals of the group discussion.

include, but are not limited to: misunderstanding, addressing the wrong issue, teaching at the wrong level (either too high or too low), offense, rejection, and expulsion.

Using a participatory approach is about what Myers calls “learning our way to a better future” (2011, 287). When using a participatory approach, the facilitator learns with the community, and walks with the community as they decide, plan, implement, and evaluate. The roles of the facilitator and the participants in a participatory process are very different than the typical roles of leader and team, or committee chair and committee. They are also very different than the typical roles of teacher⁷ and learner. They are not the role of mentor and mentee.

The main role of the facilitator is to guide the process of the discussion. Discussion participants are the ones who bring the content to the discussion and make decisions. Some aspects of guiding the process of the discussion include:

- Sets a good order for the discussion topics
- Creates a safe environment for the group to share
- Invites each person to contribute information, perceptions or reactions related to the topic

- Helps the group members listen to each other well
- Gracefully handles tense moments, affirming that working as a group is challenging
- Remains neutral—providing for all ideas and perspectives to be adequately heard
- Adjusts the process to fit the needs and desires of the group, or the complexity of the topic
- Discerns when to move the group towards convergence of their ideas so they can reach appropriate decisions
- Encourages the group to decide on specific actionable steps

The facilitator does not know what the outcome of the meeting will be before it starts. If he or she is confident of the outcome, he or she may be manipulating the group rather than facilitating. In addition, the facilitator does not need to know very much about the topic being discussed. The facilitator does not contribute content to the discussion. It is often best if the person facilitating a discussion is not the supervisor, mentor, chairman, teacher, or other in an authority role.

If the person who will facilitate knows that he or she has important content to contribute to the discussion, several options should be considered. It might be better to:

- Change the event to a teaching event rather than a facilitated discussion
- Find a different facilitator so that the original facilitator can be a discussion participant
- Find a second/assistant facilitator who can temporarily switch roles with the facilitator at appropriate points in the discussion
- Rotate the facilitation

A frequent question with using a participatory approach is whether the facilitator should be an insider or an outsider to the topic, the process, and the group which is discussing the issue. Often, it is best for the facilitator to be as much of an insider as possible. Figure 5 shows the advantages and disadvantages for both internal and external facilitators.

| | Internal | External |
|---------------|--|---|
| Advantages | Already accepted and trusted Understands cultural norms and cues Knows how to communicate respectfully Can communicate in the local language Lower cost | May be more neutral May be more objective May be more respected due to status The group, knowing he or she is an outsider, may describe the situation more fully (which may help other participants) |
| Disadvantages | May want to influence the conversation. May show favoritism May be seen as on one side of an issue. It may seem strange to the group that an insider is not sharing his or her ideas May be fewer (no) internal facilitators available | May want to influence the conversation May make cultural mistakes May misunderstand cultural cues May cost more May not be able to communicate directly May impose outside norms |

Figure 5: Internal or external facilitators compared

Many of the advantages and disadvantages can be addressed through the careful selection and training of facilitators and through careful preparation for the event.

Participatory Approach and the Tendencies of Oral and Lettered Cultures

Having introduced a participatory approach, we now consider how it connects to some of the tendencies of Oral and Lettered Cultures, shared by Charles Madinger (2013,17) and adapted from William Parker. The figure below, taken from Madinger's 2013 article, highlights some preferences of people from oral cultures. Many of these connect well with using a participatory approach.

| LETTERED CULTURES | | ORAL CULTURES |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Literary | COMMUNICATION | Oral |
| Institutional | LIFESTYLE | Communal |
| Individualism | TIME AND SPACE | Individualized Groups |
| Deferred | GRATIFICATION | Immediate |
| Linear | LIFE PERSPECTIVE | Circular |
| Individually Oriented | LEARNING PATTERNS | Group Oriented |
| Word is not the “thing” | LEXICON | Word is the “thing” |

Figure 1. Tendencies⁶ of Oral and Lettered Cultures.
Adapted from Parker (1980, 45-48).

Communication is primarily **oral** when a participatory approach is used. Discussion participants think and talk together. Some literary forms may be used by the facilitator and the participants, but their role is a reminder, not the center.

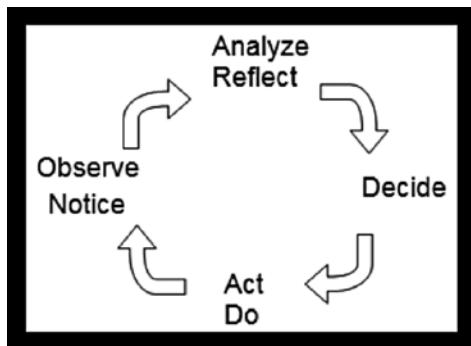
A **communal lifestyle** fits a participatory approach extremely well. The facilitator believes that the group can make more progress on their goals together than by each working separately. Many participatory techniques are such

that levels of power are equalized. The facilitator strives to have as minimal of a role as possible in the discussion, allowing the community to own the content, and at times, the process. However, a participatory approach can also be used within more institutionalized settings. It can be used within churches and other organizations, as well as within more hierarchical (less communal) cultures.

Regarding the use of time and space, a participatory approach

definitely values the group use of time and space. The use of time and space is flexible, not rigid. The discussion takes as much time as the group needs for it to take. The diagram fills the area that the group decides it should fill. Some groups make gigantic diagrams while others make relatively small ones. It is up to them.

A participatory approach uses a **circular** or cyclical life perspective, as evidenced by the action-reflection cycle. A group which has been engaged in some activity takes time to *observe* and *notice* what has been happening. They then dig deeper, *analyzing* and *reflecting* on why those things happened the way they did. At each step, a two-hour discussion might take place, with time between each step for further reflection. Next, the group *decides* what needs to be done. That decision could be a minor adjustment to the activity which is already being implemented. Or it might be a more major adjustment. The decision may even be one about taking a major change in direction based



on the discussions which occurred during the previous steps.

A key point is that the group is not going around in circles. Rather, each iteration of the cycle strengthens what the group knows, deepens their understanding, and improves their decisions. In some cases, each

iteration may result in more people being involved, or the goals being expanded. The literate approach to the life cycle

is linear—it can imply that one only gets a single chance to do something right. The cyclical approach has a focus on growth, forgiveness, and continual improvement.

A participatory approach also provides **immediate gratification**, while at the same time encouraging the group to plan for the future. The length of one cycle in the action-reflection cycle is usually quite short. The idea is that it is often better to discuss a little, plan a little, implement a little, observe a little, adjust the plans, etc., rather than spend much time planning and perhaps postpone any implementation.

A participatory approach can also be used for larger plans with longer term goals; however, such planning would usually take place after success with several smaller objectives. Within a larger plan, ongoing monitoring with flexibility to adjust the plan would be a key feature.

Learning patterns are definitely group-oriented when using a participatory approach. The focus in a facilitated discussion is not on learning, but on making progress on group goals through making decisions and implementing them. However, any time a group works together, learning takes place. Throughout a participatory process, the group is thinking and talking together. If all in the group already knew the same things, they would not need to think and talk together. Each person comes to the discussion knowing the situation well from his or her perspective. Each one has things to share with the others in the group and things to learn from them. As the group analyzes and decides, they are not so much learning from each other as they are learning together. As

"This has been so helpful for us" shared the youth leader after he and other congregational leaders had participated in a discussion about the good things happening in their congregation. "This was so encouraging! Could I use this with the youth in my congregation?" The immediate benefits of a participatory discussion resulted in this youth leader wanting to use it in other contexts.

they decide what to do and try something new, they are also learning together whether that approach will work, or whether they need to make further adjustments.

Using a Participatory Approach with Oral-preference Communicators

While the use of a participatory approach works well with oral-preference communicators, adjustments to several techniques can make them even more appropriate when oral communication is the only choice for many group members.

When documenting the group's ideas, participants can use no written words. They might draw something to represent each idea. Alternatively, participants might use a unique physical object to represent each idea. For example, if the group is discussing which people who would benefit from oral storytelling, they could choose one object to represent each category of people they name. They might also use a unique physical object to represent the tasks that need to be done to keep the Sunday School program operating.

The facilitator can mention that a lot of ideas have been mentioned, then ask what would help them remember the ideas. The group could choose what technique to use to help them remember their ideas and plans.

It may be that frequent repetition of ideas could be beneficial. The group may prefer repeating in unison, having one person repeat the all of the ideas, or having each person be responsible for remembering one idea. The arts can be used to help the group remember what has been discussed. The group might create a song about the five most important things. Another group may want to create a drama about the things that have been helping and hindering them.

Only small adjustments are needed to make a participatory approach even more appealing to oral-preference communicators.

Cautions in Using a Participatory Approach

A participatory approach does not miraculously solve problems. It can make things worse if used poorly. It should be used wisely and with adequate training and preparation. Some specific areas of caution follow.

#1. Facilitating well is difficult. Humble introverts often facilitate better and more naturally than confident extroverts. Why is this? Humble introverts find it easier to listen well, believe that others have important things to share, and, by their very nature, they communicate respect. Extroverts may find it more difficult to allow silence, and to not insert their own content into the discussion.

#2. Facilitating well requires the development of a participatory mindset and good facilitation skills. Some people felt they had a participatory mindset before they attended a workshop—they believed God was working in the community and they wanted the community, as led by God, to take the lead. However, by the end of the workshop, these same people said the most helpful part of the workshop was how they grew in their participatory mindset and in their commitment to do things with others.

#3. Reading a book is not enough to become a good participatory approach facilitator. People with higher levels of education often say, “Just give me a book and I will learn it.” A very small percentage of people who are natural facilitators may be able to pick up a book and become a good facilitator. Most

of us need to observe others and be mentored by someone who will help us see the areas where growth is needed. Contact information for some participatory approach training programs are given in Figure 6.

| Name of Training or Organization | Contact Information | Focus |
|--|---|--|
| Community Health Evangelism TOT training | www.chenetwork.org/ | Facilitating discussions about health pointing toward evangelism |
| Participatory Methods for Engaging Communities workshops | PMEC@kastanet.org | Facilitating discussions about Scripture engagement and language development |
| ICA-Associates Canada | http://ica-associates.ca/ | General facilitation training |

Figure 6: Facilitation training opportunities

#4. Facilitated discussions benefit from good planning. The facilitator does well to dialogue about the discussion with those who have requested the discussion, or with those who will participate in the discussion. Topics to cover include: the purpose of the discussion, the characteristics of the participants, and key events that have preceded or prompted this discussion. Using a Planning Guide for a Facilitation Event can help assure that key issues related to the discussion have been adequately addressed.

#5. One of the greatest temptations that face facilitators is to influence the content. The facilitator's role is to guide the process so that all voices

are heard, the group thinks deeply about issues, the group move towards consensus, and the group decides and plans. The participants are responsible for the content of the discussion, and especially the conclusions. When a group senses that the facilitator is trying to influence or persuade or manipulate the content or decision, trust decreases, participation drops, and relationships quickly become strained.

#6. Sometimes, the leaders of a group invite a facilitator to use a participatory approach, but the leaders do not intend to let the participants decide the group's future. This is a very dangerous situation. As a group of people engage in

a participatory discussion, mutual understanding grows, enthusiasm builds, and vision develops. If the leadership then decides to do something radically different, the members of the group may feel that all of their efforts and discussions were useless. They may also feel angry, or stop trusting either the leaders, or the facilitator. A good facilitator spends adequate time dialoguing with those who issued the invitation in order to assure that the leaders understand what a participatory approach is, and that they are willing to let the group reach a decision and make plans.

A facilitator was hired by a U.S. mission organization to facilitate a multi-day discussion with the home-based staff and over one-third of the field-based staff. As the event progressed, field staff felt they were being heard and the five top organizational seemed to resonate with all in the room. On the last day, the joy and enthusiasm was obvious. Some spoke of sharing the outcomes with the others where they served overseas. Then, a participant asked the director whether it was okay to share what had been discussed. “Please wait,” was the response. Two weeks later, when he shared about the organization’s direction, it differed greatly from what had been discussed and planned by the whole group. Many felt it would have been better to not have had such a discussion.

Learning More

Although books are no substitute for adequate training, the books in Figure 7 and the websites in Figure 8 are helpful resources.

| Title | Focus |
|--|---|
| Walking with the Poor | Participatory mindset, transformational development |
| Getting to Maybe: How the World Is Changed | Participatory mindset, social change |
| <i>Methods for Community Participation</i> | Basic set of participatory tools |
| <i>80 tools for participatory development</i> | Basic set of participatory tools |
| <i>Visualisation in Participatory Programmes</i> | Basic tools, facilitation process |
| Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making | Facilitation process |
| Participatory Workshops | Practical ideas |
| The Art of Focused Conversation | One very flexible tool |
| The Workshop Book | One very flexible tool |
| Open Space Technology | Single tool for big events |
| The World Café | Single tool for big events |
| The Search Conference | Multi-day process for organizational change |

Figure 7: Books about facilitating participatory discussions

| Recommended Websites | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Site | Focus |
| participatorymethods.org | Community development, academic |
| pm-wiki.net | Practical tools, scripture engagement, language development |
| www.chenetwork.org | Health and evangelism |

Figure 8: Webpages about facilitating participatory discussions

Closing Thought

Using a participatory approach to decide with local stakeholders what types of oral activities best meet the needs of a congregation, village, or an entire ethnic group can result in the activities better meeting the local needs. The use of a participatory approach in planning how to carry out activities allows the local people to contextualize the activities at an early stage. It also results in identifying and using local resources rather than

depending more than necessary on outside resources.

Using a participatory approach to monitor and evaluate activities can result in the ownership of the most appropriate activities being taken by the local church at the earliest possible date. Using a participatory approach affirms the gifts that God has given to his people to be salt and light in their own community.

¹Accessed March 2, 2015, from www.participatorymethods.org/page/about-participatory-methods

²A good resource on Appreciative Inquiry is available from the International Institute for Sustainable Development at www.iisd.org/ai/myrada.htm

³Corbett, Steve and B. Fikkert. 2014. When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor and Yourself. Chicago: Moody Publishers.

⁴Kumar, Somesh. 2002. Methods for Community Participation: A Complete Guide for Practitioners. New Delhi, Vistaar, 24.

⁵Myers, Bryant. 2011. Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.

⁶Myers draws on the work of many others. Much of what I attribute to him, he attributes to scholars such as Lesslie Newbigin, Paul Hiebert, Robert Chambers, John Friedmann, Isaac Prilleltensky, Jayakumar Christian, Ravi Jayakaran, Wayne Bragg, David Korten, Geoffrey Nelson, Amartya Sen, and others.

⁷Articles in the Orality Journal frequently refer to oral-preference learners. I have chosen in this article to consistently use oral-preference communicators to emphasize that a facilitated discussion is not primarily about learning. Nor is it about one-way communication toward the oral-preference communicators.

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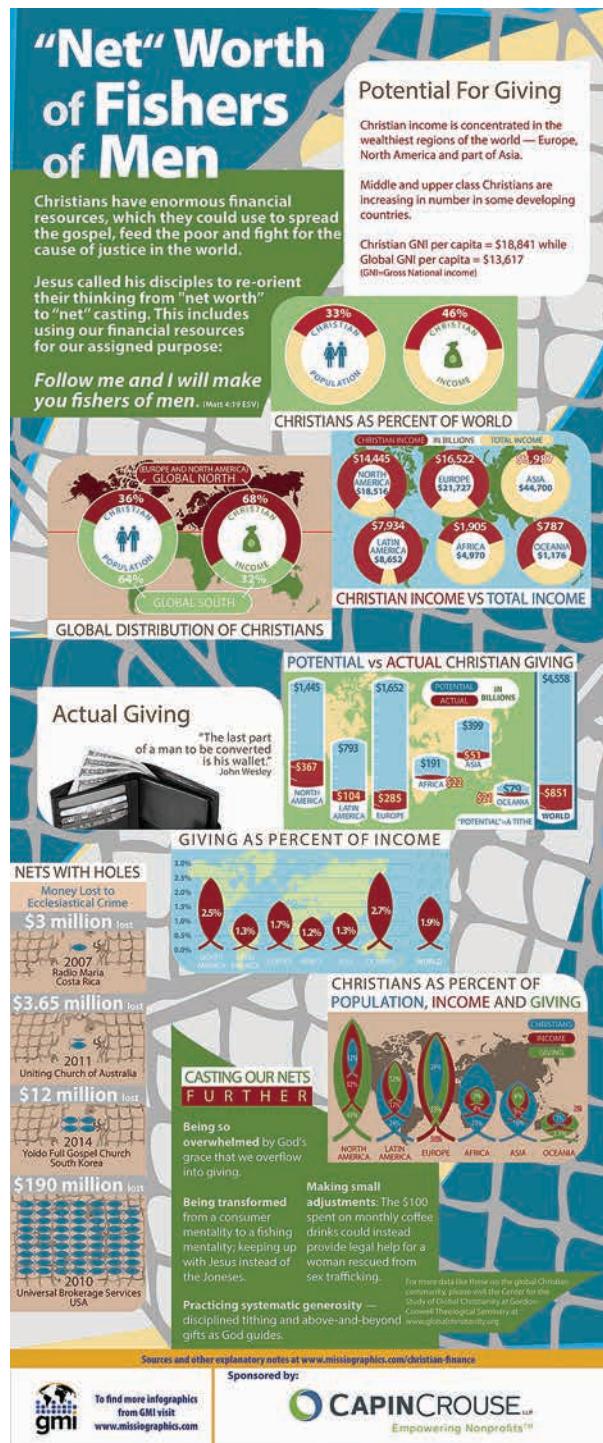
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| March 30th - April 2nd | Pre-EMDC Training Chiang Mai, Thailand |
| April 4th - 7th | EMDC 2016 Chiang Mai, Thailand |
| June 15th - 22nd | Global Proclamation Congress for Trainers of Pastors Bangkok, Thailand |
| June 27th - 30th | Call2All Seoul, Korea |
| August 3rd - 11th | Lausanne Younger Leaders Gathering By Invitation Only Jakarta, Indonesia |



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