

# 11.236 Participatory Action Research (PAR) 1

Fall 2019

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 5:00 to 6:30 PM

Room 9-451

Prerequisites: none

Units: 3-0-3

## Instructors

**Dayna Cunningham, Esq**

MIT CoLab 9-238

Phone: 646-327-3770

email: [dayna@mit.edu](mailto:dayna@mit.edu)

**Katrin Kaeufer, PhD**

MIT CoLab 9-238

Phone: 617-253-3216

email: [kaefuer@mit.edu](mailto:kaefuer@mit.edu)

**Antonio Moya-Latorre**

MIT CoLab 9-238

Phone: 617-710-2861

email: [amola@mit.edu](mailto:amola@mit.edu)

**TA: Natalia Vidigal Coachman**

email: [coachman@mit.edu](mailto:coachman@mit.edu)

## STELLAR SITE:

<https://learning-modules.mit.edu/class/index.html?uuid=/course/11/fa18/11.236#info>

**First class will meet on Thursday, September 5, 2019.** The class will run for six weeks.

## COURSE OVERVIEW

This course introduces students to Participatory Action Research (PAR), an approach to research and inquiry that enables communities to examine and address consequential societal problems. By bringing together community researchers and academics to investigate important problems and determine what ought to be done, PAR seeks to transform existing unequal power relationships between marginalized groups and those traditionally considered “expert” researchers. This six-week module will explore theoretical and practical questions at the heart of partnerships between applied social scientists and community partners. Our focus includes: the history of PAR and Action Research; debates regarding PAR as a form of applied social science; and practical, political, and ethical questions in the practice of PAR.

Students will be guided through an iterative process for developing their own personal theories of practice and will work in small groups to create a PAR Lexicon.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

**Class meetings:** The class will meet for 1.5 hours every Tuesday and Thursday from 5:00 to 6:30 PM from September 5th through October 17<sup>th</sup>. Students are expected to attend all class sessions and participate actively in class discussions and activities.

**Reading Assignments:** Readings will be available on Stellar. **Please check the stellar site and email communications from the teaching team on a regular basis;** additional readings may be posted as the semester progresses.

**Assignments & Expectations:** The teaching team and the MIT Community Innovator's Lab are involved in building a body of knowledge about PAR as a core democratic capacity and a critical practice in efforts for building economic democracy and self-determination. Through active engagement in class discussions and through quality written assignments/presentations, we expect students to play a role in helping to explore and build this body of knowledge. Over the course of the semester students will be expected to produce/participate in the following:

1. **Personal Theory of Practice: Students will produce their own personal theory of planning/research practice.** The assignment is expected to reflect your best thinking at this point in your education or career about the values, intentions, and methods that guide your work as a planner or researcher. Students will submit two iterations of this assignment and schedule an in-person meeting at CoLab's office to explore its evolution over the course of the module. Please see CoLab's website for [03 - Guiding Questions](#) and [04 - Techniques](#) for doing the PTOp. Please note that the format need not be written text.
  - a. Version 1 Due: September 13 by noon
  - b. In-person check-in: Before October 4 by noon
  - c. Final Version Due: October 18 by noon
2. **PAR Lexicon:** Students will work in groups of 3-4 to produce their own PAR Lexicon, which should contain the 10-12 most relevant concepts learned during the course of the semester. Besides written explanation of the concepts, students are asked to capture the essence of such concepts using what we call "other ways of knowing," ranging from drawings and pictures to poems, audio recordings, or any other language agreed by the group.
  - a. Proposal (list of concepts): September 20 by noon
  - b. Class presentation: October 17
  - c. Final Version Due: October 25 by noon
3. **Forum:** Each student is required to post at least once and reply to other students' posts at least once during the course of the semester. Topics will be timely current events and discussion should focus on analysis that confronts the difficulty of discernment in today's post-truth context.

Further directions for each of these assignments will be given in class.

### Grading:

Active participation:	30%
Personal Theory of Practice:	35%
PAR Lexicon:	35%

**Office Hours:** Office hours with members of the teaching team are available by appointment. Please reach out via email to schedule a time.

- Dayna: Wednesdays from 11h to 12h
- Katrin: Thursdays from 3h to 4h
- Antonio: Mondays from 12h to 2h

**Disabilities:** If you have a documented disability or any other problem you think may affect your ability to perform in class, please see one of the instructors early in the semester so that arrangements may be made to accommodate you.

**Academic Misconduct:** Plagiarism and cheating are both academic crimes. Never (1) turn in an assignment that you did not write yourself, (2) turn in an assignment for this class that you previously turned in for another class, or (3) cheat on an exam. If you do so, it may result in a failing grade for the class, and possibly even suspension from MIT. Please see Dayna Cunningham if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism. Anyone caught cheating will be reported in line with recognized university procedures.

**Final Exam:** There will be no final exam.

# Syllabus

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## **CLASS 1. Thursday, September 5: WHAT IS PAR?**

A core belief in PAR is that we study the world in order to transform it, and we understand society by trying to change it. What is Participatory Action Research, what are its origins, and what is its relationship to social justice? Overview of syllabus, course expectations, and the personal theories of practice and PAR maps we will develop as part of this course

### **Required Reading:**

- Greenwood & Levin (2007), Chapter 1
  - Reason & Bradbury (2008) Chapter 3 “Some Trends in the Praxis of Participatory Action Research”
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## **CLASS 2. Tuesday September 10: PRINCIPLES OF PAR: IS THIS SCIENCE?**

What principles guide PAR as an approach to research and in its orientation toward social justice? How do PAR practitioners operationalize these in practice? Does PAR have merit as a scientific enterprise? We will explore questions of objectivity, scientific versus values. rationality, and criteria for research credibility, in relation to PAR.

### **Required Reading:**

- Greenwood and Levin, Chapters 4 & 5
  - Flyvberg (2001), *Making Social Science Matter*, Chapters 1, 3, 5
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## **CLASS 3. Thursday, September 12: RESEARCH, SOCIAL JUSTICE & DEMOCRACY**

What is the relationship between knowledge, communication, and democracy? What role does power play? How does the construction of competing forms of knowledge advance democracy? These questions underlie Participatory Action Research’s (PAR) commitment to know the world by changing it or seeking to make it more just. We will explore key ideas underlying PAR’s orientation toward social justice, consciousness raising, and democracy.

### **Required Reading:**

- Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Chapter 2
- Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Chapters 1 & 2

### **Optional Reading:**

- Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, Chapters 4, 5
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#### **CLASS 4. Tuesday, September 17: EPISTEMOLOGICAL DIVERSITY OR OTHER WAYS OF KNOWING**

Beyond the debate between positivism (the world is objective and the social scientist is meant to observe and report on it) and hermeneutics (the world is socially constructed and can only be understood through interpretation), we must also consider the multiple forms of knowledge -- embodied, spiritual, ancestral, to name a few -- that exist and that can help to inform our understanding of the human and natural world. This class will explore what some of these knowledges are and the role they might play in seeking to create a more just world.

##### **Required Reading:**

- de Sousa Santos, *Another Knowledge is Possible*, Introduction: "Opening Up the Canon of Knowledge"
- Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera, The New Mestiza*. Chapter 6: *Tlilli, Tlapalli: the Path of the Red and the Black Ink*
- Anzaldúa, Gloria, [\*To Live in the Borderlands Means You\*](#) (poem)

##### **Optional Reading:**

- Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous, Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (1997), Ch. 4: Animism and the Alphabet.
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#### **CLASS 5. Thursday, September 19: GUEST PAR PRACTITIONER**

Gretchen Susi and student researchers: Community Care of Brooklyn PAR Research Project.

##### **Required Reading**

- Health Needs and Assets in Three Brooklyn Neighborhoods (TBD)
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#### **CLASS 6. Tuesday, September 24: KNOWLEDGE, DEMOCRACY & CITIZEN SCIENCE**

Whither knowledge in the Trump era? Has the project of decolonizing knowledge set the stage for the Right's construction of a world of alternative facts? What approaches will enable citizens now to discern what is true and what can be done to combat false information? What is the role of values rationality in the process of discernment? These questions are at the heart of knowledge creation within a PAR framework.

##### **Required Reading:**

- Appadurai, "The Right to Research," In (Journal of Globalisation, Societies and Education, Volume 4, No. 2, July 2006, pp. 167 – 177).
- Glassman, M. & Patton, R. "Capability Through Participatory Democracy: Sen, Freire, and Dewey." In Educational Philosophy and Theory
- [Pure Wind: Using '1984' To Understand Election 2016](#), on wbur Cognoscenti

##### **Optional Reading:**

- William James, What Is Pragmatism?  
<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/james.htm>

## **CLASS 7. Thursday, September 26: THE PAR RESEARCHER**

Reflective practice is a crucial tool in the PAR researcher's toolkit. The PAR practitioner must be able to turn the beam of observation back on herself to better understand her own role and responsibilities in efforts to shape reality and contribute to social justice. How does the researcher shape the social system she studies? How do we engage identity and positionality? What practices can PAR researchers draw upon to understand and situate themselves in the research?

### **Required Reading:**

- Schon (1983), *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Chapter 2  
Pages 37-69
  - Greenwood & Levin (2007), Chapter 8
  - Fine (1994), "Working the Hyphens: Reinventing Self and Other in Qualitative Research."
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## **CLASS 8. Tuesday, October 1: ETHICS & CO-PRODUCTION**

What does co-producing knowledge between community and academic researchers entail in practice? What needs to be in place to enable genuine co-production of knowledge? How do PAR researchers address and engage issues of power, perceived legitimacy, and difference? Who brings what type of knowledge and expertise to a PAR process?

### **Required Reading:**

- Public Science Project PAR Map
  - Greenwood & Levin (2007), *Introduction to Action Research*, Chapter 7
  - Torre (2009), "Participatory Action Research and Critical Race Theory: Fueling Spaces for *Nos-Otras* to Research"
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## **CLASS 9. Thursday, October 3: METHODS & COLLABORATIVE DATA ANALYSIS**

PAR requires disciplined inquiry to investigate consequential problems with real impact on people's lives. Rigor is therefore crucial. What are the diverse methods PAR practitioners draw upon to ensure rigor? How do PAR practitioners determine methods appropriate to the specific context they are working in? In PAR, how do academic and community researchers make sense of their findings collectively and collaboratively? How do politics of interpretation impact the analysis, conclusions, and our understandings of how knowledge is produced?

### **Required Reading:**

- Weis & Fine, *Compositional...Critical Theorizing and Analysis on Social (In)Justice*
  - Fine, et al., "Participatory Action Research From Within and Beyond Prison Bars"
  - Feilzer, "Doing Mixed Methods Research Pragmatically: Implications for the Rediscovery of Pragmatism as a Research Paradigm"
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**CLASS 10. Tuesday, Oct. 8: CONTEXT & THE POWER OF EXAMPLE**

Context matters in PAR. How do PAR researchers take context seriously in the design and implementation of research? What are the implications for this context-specific knowledge to contribute to broader debates and action? Can we generalize from a single case? This class will also cover criteria of research credibility, including validity, reliability, generalizability, and workability.

**Required Reading:**

- Flyvbjerg (2001), Chapters 4, 6
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**CLASS 11. Thursday, October 10: GUEST PAR PRACTITIONER**

TBD

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**Tuesday, October 15: NO CLASS – MIT STUDENT HOLIDAY**

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**CLASS 12. Thursday, October 17: PAR Lexicon Group Presentations**

**Required Reading:**

- Other groups' drafts / presentations
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