11.237 – Practice of Participatory Action Research (PAR)
Spring 2016
Tuesdays and Thursdays from 5:00 to 6:30 PM in 9-451

Prerequisite: Permission of the instructors
Units: 3-0-3

Instructors

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Teaching Assistant
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First class will meet on Tuesday, February 9, 2016. The class will run for six weeks in February and March.

(Doctoral students in Course XI who want to use 11.236 and 11.237 to meet their qualitative research requirement should talk with Professor Susskind as soon as possible.)

Objectives of the course
As planning students and professional practitioners, we work in and with communities on a variety of issues from health justice and climate change adaptation to affordable housing and immigration reform. However, in the rush to meet deadlines and finalize deliverables, we rarely devote sufficient time to reflecting on the processes and relationships we are part of in the communities in which we work. How can we truly collaborate with community members to co-generate knowledge for social change? What are the appropriate methods for doing this? And who owns the knowledge that is co-produced? What are the key ethical dilemmas at the heart of partnerships between applied social scientists and community members?

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a way of producing “actionable” knowledge that communities can use to solve the problems they face. PAR processes are place- or case-specific, place a premium on local ways of knowing, and gauge the success of research in terms of what partner-communities do with the knowledge that is co-produced. The objective of PAR is to generate what Aristotle would have called "practical wisdom:" the ideas, information, and understandings that ought to inform efforts to promote social change.

This course will introduce students to the practice of case study research (and competing ideas
about context-independent vs. context dependent knowledge), arguments for and against generating theory or public policy recommendations on the basis of a single case, and problems of verification (i.e. disconfirming the researcher’s preconceptions). Focusing on ways of co-producing knowledge using various forms of data collection and analysis, we will try to understand how the people and communities who are often university partners in applied social science research can use findings or results to address the challenges they confront.

Class meetings
The class will meet for 1.5 hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 5:00 to 6:30 PM beginning Tuesday, February 9, 2016 through Thursday, March 17, 2016 in 9-451. Students are expected to attend all class sessions.

Reading Assignments
Readings for each class are listed below. Most of the readings will be made available on Stellar: http://stellar.mit.edu/S/course/11/sp16/11.237. Please make a habit of checking the Stellar site since new readings may be posted as the semester progresses.

Assignments and Grading
1) In advance of each class session, students are required to post a one or two paragraph response to the assigned readings. These should be placed on the Stellar Class Forum. These posts should ensure that everyone is ready to engage in the discussion in each class session. If possible, please post your response at least two hours ahead of class so the teaching team and your classmates will have time to read what you have written.

2) Students must also complete a narrative analysis assignment in Week 3. Further direction will be given in class. Students are free to choose whatever narrative context they prefer; if nothing comes to mind, we suggest building on one of the following:
   - Persepolis, by Marjane Satrapi
   - The Arrival by Shaun Tan
   - Hashtag analysis (i.e., #blacklivesmatter; a selected presidential campaign)

3) In the final 2 weeks of the course, Weeks 5 and 6, students will be asked to prepare and present detailed analyses of an actual PAR case, with a particular focus on the methods used to gather and analyze data, the ways in which findings were validated and the ways in which the ethical dilemmas discussed in class were handled. Further guidance will be provided in class in Week 4.

The final grade will be based upon active participation in class discussions (25%), the reflective reading responses (20%), the narrative analysis (20%), and the final PAR case presentation. (35%).

Required Texts
Some of the required texts are available for short-term borrowing from the PAR Library in Room 9-324 (EPP Conference Room). These include Reason & Bradbury, Greenwood & Levin, and Flyvbjerg. When borrowing these books, please sign them out and do your best to return them promptly so that they’re available for others to use. Copies of the books should also be available in the reserve stacks at Rotch Library.
We strongly recommend as background reading John Van Maanen’s *Tales of the Field*. Try to finish reading this by Week 3. While not a PAR text, *Tales from the Field* is a classic in the field of ethnography and an excellent reflection on fieldwork by a master. The book should be particularly helpful for understanding the role of narratives in social science research and preparing for the narrative analysis assignment. Unfortunately, we are unable to post a digital version of Van Maanen’s book. Either purchase your own copy, or borrow a copy from the PAR library or from students who took the course in the Spring 2015—our TA may help in this regard. Throughout the syllabus several other suggested background readings are included for students who would like to delve more deeply into selected subjects. We will also distribute a PAR bibliography listing a set of background readings on PAR methods, ethics, and dilemmas more generally.

**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 arrangements can 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 submitted 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, suspension from MIT. Please talk to a member of the teaching staff if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism. Anyone caught cheating will be reported in line with recognized university procedures.

**Writing guidance**

The WCC at MIT (Writing and Communication Center) offers free one-on-one professional advice from communication experts (MIT lecturers who have advanced degrees and who are all are published writers). The WCC works with undergraduate and graduate students and with post-docs and faculty. The WCC helps you strategize about all types of academic and professional writing as well as about all aspects of oral presentations (including practicing presentations & designing slides). No matter what department or discipline you are in, we help you think your way more deeply into your topic, help you see new implications in your data, research and ideas. The WCC also helps with all English as Second Language issues, from writing and grammar to pronunciation and conversation practice. The WCC is located in Kendall Square (E39-115, 55 Hayward Street, in the same building that houses Rebecca’s Cafe). To register with our online scheduler and to make appointments, go to https://mit.mywconline.com/. To access the WCC’s many pages of advice about writing and oral presentations, go to http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/. The Center’s core hours are Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m.; evening hours vary by semester—check the online scheduler for up-to-date hours.
# SYLLABUS

## Week 1 – Defining PAR

**Tuesday, February 9th (first day of class)**

- Reason and Bradbury, eds. (2008). *Handbook of Action Research*, Introduction (pp. 1-9); Chapters 1 and 2.

Many PAR researchers define their work as inquiry grounded in lived experience and ideas. We will explore the philosophical and intellectual groundings of PAR, including its connection to Aristotle’s idea of *phronesis* (a Greek word for the intelligence that allows us to discern how and why to act virtuously).

We’ll also look at the history of PAR, particularly the way it has been used in the Global South.

**Thursday, February 11th**

- Dr. Quantum’s Double Slit Experiment: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9tV4nqvXqM

We will explore basic ideas about scientific knowledge and arguments for and against PAR/case study research as science. What is knowledge? How does social science research create knowledge? Is PAR scientific?

## Week 2 – Case Study Method, Data Gathering, Strategies and Principles of PAR

**Tuesday, February 16th**


PAR almost always focuses on one place or one group and the way it is trying to handle a problem or make a decision. Applied social scientists working in a PAR-like fashion have
a choice of methods they can use to help a client group or community. While both quantitative and qualitative methods can come into play, ethnographic methods are most often used in a case study fashion. Mixed methods, though, are certainly possible.

What is the case study method and for what is it most useful in social science research? What are the strategies and principles that ought to be used in selecting cases? What are good practices for data gathering in action research?

Thursday, February 18th


Week 3 – Narrative Analysis & Knowledge Co-Production; Ethical implications

Tuesday, February 23rd


Narrative analysis is a critical skill of the PAR researcher. It enables a systematic harvesting of knowledge from storytelling—one of the most basic forms of human communication.

We will focus on representativeness in narrative analysis and review thematic analysis, structural analysis, dialogic and performance analysis and visual analysis.

**Students should complete the narrative analysis assignment by 2/25.**
**Thursday, February 25th**

- Public Science Project PAR Map:  


- Background reading (not required):  

We will examine the Public Science Project’s PAR map and look closely at a variety of methods for co-producing knowledge with communities who are engaged in social justice projects. We will explore, the commitments and assumptions underlying the methods, and the critical/ethical questions that arise when researchers use these and other PAR methods.

**Week 4 - Reflective Practice**

**Tuesday, March 1st**


The skills of reflection are a crucial part of any PAR practitioner’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 bring about social justice.

**Thursday, March 3rd**

- Guide to Reflective Practice.

- Discussion of Malaysia Practicum student reflections (students from the Practicum will be continued.

Students will be asked to view the videos on
invited to attend). reflective practice produced by CoLab. We will try to summarize the tools of reflection that PAR practitioners can and should use.

### Week 5 – Case Analyses: Student Presentations

#### Tuesday, March 8th


In the final two weeks of the course students will do PAR case study presentations, providing analyses that return to the core questions of PAR as outlined in the course thus far. Issues to be considered include: placing power at the core of analysis; the normative stance of the research; getting close to the research subject without getting lost as a researcher; dilemmas of representation/engaging in dialogue with a ”polyphony of voices;” ethical dilemmas in PAR.

#### Thursday, March 10th


Continued.
### Week 6 – Case Analyses: Student Presentations

#### Tuesday, March 15th


#### Thursday, March 17th


Continued.