

Challenges in Participatory Course Design: The Rangelands Australia Experience¹

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Abstract

Rangelands Australia was established by Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA), and The University of Queensland (UQ) in 2002 to address specific learning needs for people living and working in the rangelands, identified by a national report in 1998.

In developing programs and courses for the rangelands, a participatory approach to course development was adopted. Participatory approaches to course development are ideally utilized in situations where target groups can be seen as marginalized and lacking a voice in the decisions that affect their learning and their lives. Such an approach to course development is predicated on community consultation and interaction at all stages of the development process. This approach aims to ensure that the people for whom educational programs are intended have a voice in deciding the content and delivery approach of such programs. However, this approach to course design and development can entail significant challenges.

This paper defines what is meant by the rangelands and describes the role of Rangelands Australia. It describes the concept of participatory approaches and the approach to participatory learning currently being undertaken by Rangelands Australia. The consultative activities employed by them in the process of course design and development is explored in some detail. The challenges experienced in this project are outlined as are some of the strategies employed to address these challenges. The paper concludes with some recommendations for successful participatory course development approaches in an Australian context.

Rangelands

Rangelands cover approximately 75% to 80% of the world's land area. 'Rangeland' is a term that has been in use for a long time and originated from the Scottish border country. From the 1400's, Scottish farmers 'ranged' their sheep on common or English owned lands, which eventually became known as rangelands (Taylor, 2004).

In Australia, common use of the term began about the 1960's to describe land areas that received insufficient water to support cropping activities. In the 1990's the term was used with reference to 'areas where domestic stock are grazed on native pasture' (LWRRDC 1994), and most recently has been used to refer to 'grasslands, shrublands, woodlands and savannas in arid and semi-arid temperate and tropical areas' (NLWRA 2001). Rangelands are considered to cover approximately 75% of Australia's land mass (Taylor, 2004).

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Rangelands Australia

Rangelands Australia (RA) was established in 2001 as a joint venture by Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA), The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and the University of Queensland (UQ) as a strategic response to a need for sustainable use of the rangelands identified in a National Report (Agtrans 1998). This report identified that the rangelands had a significant and increasing importance in relation to economic, environmental and social issues affecting Australia and that there was an urgent need to develop education for capacity building to address learning needs in the rangelands. In particular, this report highlighted the need for change in current management practices.

RA has the goal to develop innovative and practical education and training opportunities to ensure profitable and sustainable industries and vibrant communities in the rangelands. In particular, RA programs have a focus on developing learning experience to assist in developing better management practices in all aspects of rangeland management

In attempting to meet this goal and consequently the learning needs of people living and working in the rangelands, Rangelands Australia has adopted a participatory approach in identifying and prioritising learning needs and for the development of the subsequent educational programs.

Participation as a change mechanism

Participatory approaches are a 'family of methodologies that is supposed to enable stakeholders to learn and take action for positive change' (Driver & Kravatzky, 2000). Consequently, participatory methodologies are frequently adopted for community projects where it is deemed necessary to have stakeholder participation in the change process. This encourages both ownership of projects by all stakeholders involved and increases the likelihood of such projects being successful. These approaches grew out of the work of Friere in the 1950's (Driver & Kravatzky, 2000) to attempt to relieve the lives of the masses living in poverty through the empowerment that can be achieved through education. Participatory approaches are commonly utilised in underprivileged and poor areas of the world in an attempt to ensure that participants have some ownership of development projects and activities. However, participatory approaches are more commonly being adopted in developed countries to encourage community and stakeholder participation in projects, because top down processes have failed to achieve necessary change.

"Successful innovations and practice have resulted in participation being seen as a desirable end as well as a means with the potential for ...influencing policy-making, enhancing local governance and improving the accountability and responsiveness of institutions. (Taylor & Fransman, 2004)"

Although there can be considerable differences in the ways in which participatory approaches can be utilised and implemented they are underpinned by several common principles including:

- "A defined methodology and systematic learning process: the focus is on cumulative learning by all the participants;
- Multiple perspectives: a central objective is to seek diversity, rather than simplify complexity;

- Group learning process: all involve the recognition that the complexity of the world will only be revealed through group analysis and interaction;
- Context specific: the approaches are flexible enough to be adapted to suit each new set of conditions and actors;
- Facilitating experts and stakeholders: the methodology is concerned with the transformation of existing activities to try to improve people's situation; and,
- Leading to change: the process of joint analysis and dialogue helps to define changes which would bring about improvement and seeks to motivate people to take action to implement defined changes. (PLA Notes, 1998)"

However, while participatory approaches can be empowering, they can also be problematical in implementation.

Challenges of participatory approaches in

Challenges in participatory methodologies are well recognised. Indeed the very nature of participation challenges existing understandings of hierarchies and power relationships, particularly in institutions (Taylor & Fransman, 2004). Resolving issues of time and resources for planning, ensuring the inclusion of all stakeholders in the process and the different levels of commitment exhibited by participants can be problematical (Lennie & Hearn, 2003).

In institutional situations, (IDS Policy Briefing, 2003) obstacles can be seen to arise from both internal and external constraints. Internal constraints can be caused by incompatible sets of values, attitudes and beliefs. External constraints can arise where

'networking and collaboration are stalled or prevented due to unyielding bureaucracy and power hierarchies, shortages of resources and capacity and the absence of political will. (IDS Policy Briefing, 2003).

Kelly, 2001 outlines some further challenges including:

- variations in the degree of participation by stakeholders at different stages of the project
- the degree of the scale and complexity of the project
- ways in which the context can influence participation – different participatory approaches can be required at different stages
- the need to be flexible and sensitive to the complexity of relationships
- the need to design for specific contexts.

The Rangelands approach to participatory course design

Rangelands people have expressed frustration that current educational packages did not meet their needs in terms of appropriate content, delivery processes and relevance of material. Consequently, RA adopted a participatory approach as a means of involving rangelanders in having some power over their own destiny, in preparing them for future changes and in providing more relevant learning opportunities to build capacity for change.

The adoption of participatory approaches to course design involving all key stakeholders in development processes is a radical departure from the approach utilised in most Universities. Activities such as extensive market research, needs

analysis and canvassing of a wide variety of stakeholder opinions are the exception rather than the rule in course development activities.

To ensure the involvement of rangelands people in the course development process RA initially undertook a comprehensive needs analysis at a national level. The needs analysis was implemented to enable people living and working in the Rangelands to identify and prioritise their learning needs. In keeping with the philosophy of participation, RA made a determined effort to include all relevant stakeholders from all over Australia. The needs analysis involved undertaking 26 focus group discussions including all stakeholders at various locations around Australia. The majority of these locations were in the rangelands, but some were held in the major cities to capture the views of politics, government and business. The main purpose of the needs analysis was to:

- Identify current issues and challenges
- Define the possible scenario in 5-10 years and on the basis of this
 - Identify the key attributes for individual success
 - Identify the key areas of knowledge for enterprise and community success.

While it was initially intended to hold 35 focus groups, but as the same messages arose regardless of location or specific stakeholder input, it was decided to cut the processes short.

The needs analysis identified that stakeholders believed that the future situation in the rangelands would involve significant changes in the nature of enterprises including the need for more QA and demonstrating sustainability, more diversification, increasing complexity and larger enterprises. It was also identified that there would be significant change in the operating environment. The issues identified in relation to this included preparing for greater environmental awareness and regulation, the probability of greater scrutiny and accountability, the reality that policy affecting the rangelands would increasingly be driven by urban perceptions and more complex decision making.

In order to manage this complex environment it was felt that stakeholders would require the following attributes in decreasing order of importance:

- Commitment and passion
- Sensitivity to other values, aspirations
- Strong interpersonal skills
- Strong communication skills
- Practical
- Self confident
- Adaptable
- Positive attitude to change
- Thinking ability
- Willingness to learn
- Determination/persistence
- Open-minded
- Networked & connected
- Innovative

The needs analysis was followed up by a survey of 250 producers and agency staff (e.g. extension officers) to identify skill gaps.

Having identified the key attributes and the knowledge gaps RA identified priorities for course development.

Participatory course design

The participatory course design process involves several stages. Course scoping workshops are organised with identified experts in each of the content areas derived from the outputs of focus groups. These people are contacted re both participating in the workshop and for the purpose of providing balance between multiple stakeholder views. Groups of between 10 - 20 contributors are identified for each content area and participate in a workshop facilitated by the Director of RA and an educational designer. These workshops seek to identify the topic areas to be covered and the skills, knowledge and abilities considered necessary for the area. These workshops also seek to identify key useful resources that might be incorporated into the course packages. After the workshop the educational designer collates all the information collected in the workshop and sends it back to the participants to check for accuracy and any additional information. Participants are also asked if they are willing to commit to writing sections of the courses.

Feedback is returned to the educational designer along with any commitment to taking on a writer's role. In many cases, contributors are reluctant to commit to 'writing' as they already have full schedules in their work commitments. From this collated feedback the educational designer then works with identified writers to work out a plan for the course development. Once again this is sent out for feedback from stakeholders before developments starts. When the first written draft is completed, this is sent out to selected stakeholders for review. Once these reviewed comments are returned, the writing team makes any revisions before the course is finalised for offering to students. While this very comprehensive participatory process results in an excellent product, the process can be fraught with many difficulties which we will explore in the next section.

Challenges in using participatory processes

Kelly (2001) argues that the various dimensions of participation need to be considered equally in participative processes. The challenges faced by Rangelands Australia in implementing participative process are addressed using these dimensions

The term 'participation' is problematic within itself and has a variety of meanings for different stakeholders. There are different types of participation ranging from consultation with a one way flow of information to a partnership with mutual exchange of information and a partnership in the process. In the latter there is considerable co-learning with all stakeholders learning from each other in a flexible partnership. While this is the goal that Rangelands Australia attempts to achieve in its course development certain factors have often circumvented us from always reaching this goal.

What is the context of participation?

It has been experience of Rangelands Australia that time and commitments are factors that have a direct impact participation levels in the process of course development. This influence of time and commitments on participation is supported by other writers (e.g. Lennie and Hearn 2003). Most participants are willing to participate in the scoping workshop and reference group activities, including giving feedback on the developing course, but few have time to commit to the time-consuming task of course writing. This has proved to be the most challenging part in developing the participatory processes to this point in time. Rangelands Australia has reviewed its planning process and has now started to

identify potential course writers earlier in the planning process. This is done during the planning of the scoping workshops, when seeking expressions of interest for course facilitators and using its increasing network more extensively.

Time is also an issue when seeking comment on course outlines/content at various stages of the process. Stakeholders may not be able to review the materials because of other commitments in the timeframe allotted. The dilemma then arises as which direction to take - move on without this input and in so doing lose the diversity of viewpoints or wait for the input and lengthen the development process which then could impact on semester deadlines. This is a judgment that is made depending on the context at the time, the stage of course development and the impact on achieving the outcomes and the process. While a degree of flexibility is required in the management of the process, clear guidelines are also important to keep the process moving.

What is the purpose of participation?

Rangelands Australia's vision is to involve stakeholders in the Rangelands - end users of these courses - in the process of their development. It seeks to act as a knowledge broker by integrating a diversity of viewpoints into courses to assist people in the rangelands deal with complexity and change in the sustainable management of rangelands.

Different stages of the process require a different levels of engagement and Kelly (2001) states that the 'function of participation needs to be clearly stated' to avoid confusion during the process. RA attempts to communicate the purpose and function of participation and the processes involved at every possible opportunity. Following experiences where participatory interaction was unsuccessful or partially successful, RA includes a component on the role and function of the particular participatory process being employed for that session. This has gone some way to ensuring more appropriate participation

What is the appropriate scale?

The scale of participation at various stages of the process has implications for other dimensions of participation (Kelly, 2001). There are distinct connections between the scale of participation, the purpose of engagement and the design of the process.

The purpose of participation at the various stages determines the selection of an appropriate participatory process and the scale of participation. The large scale of the needs analysis contrasts with the processes used in course writing and review as each phase requires a different scale of participation. It is always challenging to know if all areas have been sufficiently covered when inviting representatives to attend course scoping workshops. As the process of developing these initial workshops progresses, it is not unusual for those contacted to refer us to other knowledgeable people in the area and so the network grows. The scale of the scoping workshops has been reduced from the initial two days to one because of time issues for many of the participants.

Managing the scale of the number of participants involved at developing, writing and referencing the actual development of the courses is a challenge for the designer as project manager. This can be problematic for the designer when several courses are underway. The complexity can be compounded when participants are unable to return feedback in the allotted time. A way of overcoming this is to have participants focus on their areas of expertise or identify the areas that matter and concentrate on this. Identifying a key writer

who can integrate the input of other writers without losing the individual voices is a way of sharing the load in the process.

The scale of participation during the process also has implications for maintaining effective communication both vertically and horizontally, with all those involved. Consultation, feedback and communication with all participants even if they are not directly involved in a particular stage of the process is both time consuming but important in maintaining the integrity of the process.

Who needs to be involved?

Stakeholders are not often familiar with the process of course design and will often hesitate to contribute because they are not certain what is expected of them. It is incorrect to make the assumption that all stakeholders understand the course development process - it is not their core business. The process can also be challenged by not being able to involve the people you want because of other commitments. Often the network of contributors can offer other names as a way of overcoming the issue.

Achieving participation depends on clarifying the process of course design and development to all stakeholders with an outline of the time and task requirements at each stage. These discussions need to take place as early as possible in the process. A suitable time is often at the scoping workshop when participants are often keen to contribute but unclear about the process and outcomes. Information at this point enables participants to assess where their area of expertise would be most useful and the time that they have to commit to the process. We have learnt from experience that asking for course writers at a scoping workshop is often overwhelming for the participants. It has been that experience of Rangelands Australia that it is very rare to have full participation of any stakeholder from the beginning of the process to the end mainly because of time commitments. Stakeholders are more likely to move in and out of the process participating and contributing at a variety of levels.

What degree of power is shared among participants?

The Rangelands Australia process considers all participants equal and fosters a climate of co-learning with each learning from the other. This is reflected in the diverse range of stakeholders who participate in the course development. The designers mentor course contributors as to the process and skills of course design and they in turn learn more about the ranglands context. Course writers come from a diversity of experience and are often mentored through the process. We are developing a course writers guide as a reference for writers to reduce time spent on generic issues e.g. bibliographies, course planning etc.

Distance from participants and between stakeholders can be challenging when mentoring writers and ensuring that communication is clear. Email, phone and teleconferences have been used to address this issue but it is expected as the number of multi-stakeholder processes increases that this will increase the pressure on the designers.

For the process to work well it is important to create a climate of trust so that people can feel free to contribute at whatever level and whatever their educational background. The transparency of the process is further enhanced by designers being prepared to put materials on the table for discussion instead of presenting people with a finished product.

What is the institutional capacity?

More time consuming than conventional institutional course development and 'takes time, costs money, usually more than expected' (Kelly 2001). Before embarking on a participative process of course development it is wise to ensure that there are sufficient funds to cover the initial needs analysis, course scoping workshops and communication processes and any meetings throughout the process. The length of time taken to produce courses with thorough consultation is generally longer than the normal time allotted in institutions. A timeline maybe developed and in spite of efforts, the very nature of the process may mean that it is difficult to keep to the goals.

University systems can work against the process. They don't reward collaborative processes and have inflexible procedures that impede and transpire against the process (Taylor & Fransman, 2004).

As with land management, participatory processes in institutions are directly impacted by the attributes of the participants. Indeed, the attributes of those involved are critical to the outcome of the participatory process. Effective communication skills, personality, attitude (Kelly, 2001) as well as flexibility are important attributes of those facilitating the process and are essential in minimising institutional constraints.

What design and process are appropriate for the circumstances?

As mentioned previously the processes that are selected need to suit the purpose and scope. Focus groups allow consultation with a wide variety of stakeholders while workshops allow people to focus on a common task and surveys have been undertaken to identify the gaps in personal qualities, knowledge and current adequacy of the information base of people in the rangelands. The workshop process has continued to be refined to deliver initial course scoping and reduce the time taken. However, the collation of the responses from the focus groups was a considerable time and labour consuming process.

Conclusion

A rigorous risk assessment needs to undertaken at the planning stage of course development in order to evaluate the possible risks to the development of the courses as planned. Along side this, a contingency plan to address the risks is a useful tool. The more stakeholders involved the higher the risks encountered but if successful, the rewards are great in terms of client's needs being met and courses that are embedded in the reality of the user's context.

Little research has been done in this area and much of the practice of participatory processes to date comes from the social sciences, particularly in community work and natural resource management.

For the process to be successful, there needs to be mutual respect and trust in the process for all involved. It also requires an acceptance of the fact that knowledge and expertise does not reside in one institution but in a diversity of sources and a willingness to engage in participatory processes, despite the challenges, in order to achieve desired learning outcomes.

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