Immigrant Faith Communities as Interpreters
Educating for Participatory Action

Faustino M. Cruz, S.M.

Participatory action strategies like Photo Voice and Creative Workshops enable ministers to meet immigrants where they are, engage in their daily struggle for survival, and work together to affirm, challenge, and transform immigrant identities and commitments.

United States immigrants have gentrified neighborhoods, provided start-up capital to new entrepreneurs, organized literacy and language mentoring programs, established senior citizen and youth centers, and offered health and legal aid to other newcomers. Through their multiple belonging and affiliation with groups such as neighborhood organizations, family benevolent associations, and civic and cultural clubs, they have purposefully acted as agent-subjects of their own transformation (Cruz). Their engagement in public life—at least within their own ethnic boundaries—poses a challenge for the church. I argue that the effectiveness of immigrant ministry depends on how intentionally immigrants become interpreters of their own daily life and struggle and the extent to which the church collaborates with other sectors of society that shape the ecology of immigrant life. This pastoral vision may be achieved by educating immigrants for participatory action.

Faustino M. Cruz, S.M., is associate professor of theology and education and academic dean and executive vice-president at Franciscan School of Theology at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California.
The pastoral care of immigrants has been, for the U.S. Catholic Church, a particular locus of prophetic challenge and hope. It is a concrete example of evangelizing and transforming “humanity from within and making it new” (Evangelii Nuntiandi [EN], no. 18), acting from within a culture in a “vital way, in depth and right to . . . the very root” of the lives of people in relationship with one another and with God (EN, no. 20). The church has called for solidarity to carry out this mission, particularly when public policy and societal indifference further relegate the poor, minorities, and immigrants to the margins of U.S. society (NCCB 1995, 22). “The Church . . . is required by the Gospel and by its long tradition to promote and defend the human rights and dignity of people on the move, to advocate social remedies to their problems and to foster opportunities for their spiritual and religious growth” (NCCB 1976). Toward this end, it engages in public discourse to influence government policy and to educate the public to respond to the Christian call (NCCB 1998, 1), “for I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matt 25:35).

Dioceses throughout the country have addressed the pastoral needs of immigrants by establishing hospitality centers; designing and implementing culturally accommodated educational, catechetical, and liturgical programs; and offering social and other related immigrant support services. In “Building Bridges: Profiles of Diocesan Ministry to Ethnic Groups,” Father Anthony McGuire, former director of the USCCB Office for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees, writes that dioceses throughout the United States vary in location and scope, in the intricacy of issues pertaining to specific ethnic groups, and in their pastoral strategy with new immigrants. McGuire explains: “There is no one model that serves every (arch)diocese. The only common factor for successful outreach is that there is some kind of central coordination, whether by full-time or part-time staff person or persons or by volunteer committees” (USCC 1999, 7).

However, central coordination does not always assure the active participation and involvement of the whole diocese in responding to the needs of newcomers. In some dioceses, an office of ethnic ministry or migration functions as a micro-diocese. De facto, ethnic ministry is segregated from the mainline functions and resources of other diocesan offices, such as family life, religious education, worship, or lay ministry. Consequently, ethnic and language specific issues, challenges, and
exigencies are relegated to a desk or department that must comprehensively attend
to the catechetical, liturgical, educational, and other pastoral care needs of new-
comers, mostly with limited staff and funding. While advancing unity and inclu-
sion—at least in principle—such structure could inadvertently advance a culture
of “separate but unequal.”

Therefore, to generate accurately the fundamental themes of immigrant life,
pastoral ministers must appropriately utilize indigenous and creative resources,
such as autochthonous languages, signs, symbols, and rituals (EN, no. 63). Second,
we must engage in problem-posing, codifying, and decodifying issues depicting
daily struggle and survival in light of the Gospel. Third, our reflective practice
must intentionally result in a deliberate action toward personal conversion and
social transformation; otherwise, our voice of challenge and hope “loses much of
its force and effectiveness” (EN, no. 63). Lastly, how we proclaim the Gospel must
be contingent upon “the different circumstances of time, place and culture, and
because they . . . present a certain challenge to our capacity for discovery and
adaptation” (EN, no. 40). Therefore, our proclamation must unquestionably take
place “where [people] are, not where [the church] would like them to be” (Donovan,
vii). To know where persons and communities are, we must provide a “theological
analysis of the total social situation in which the church finds itself” (Kinast, 874;
Bergant et al.). One strategic approach is by educating for participatory action.

Participatory Action

E
ducating for Participatory Action (EPA) is grounded in the theory and prac-
tice of Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is a strategy for under-
standing critically social issues and bringing about systemic change through
intentional, mutual action (Maguire; Fals-Borda and Rahman; Park et al.; Tandon).
It integrates and engages three activities for emancipatory or transformative
practice: education, research, and action (Hall, xiv).

Practitioners trace the earliest usage of the term participatory research to the
1970s in Tanzania (Tandon, 6). Adult educators in several emerging nations of
Africa (and subsequently in Latin America and Asia) began to examine the root
causes of societal disintegration, assess the impact of their educational efforts,
and understand more fully the process of adult learning. They discovered a grave
disparity between their method of research and their pedagogical creed. On one
hand, the *factories of knowledge* that privileged the elite of the new nation-states
determined the agenda of development and informed their method of inquiry (Park
et al., xiii). The process relied heavily on the natural sciences; subscribed to the
myths of neutrality, objectivity, and scientific absolutism; and advanced the para-
digm of behaviorism and empiricism. It indiscriminately diminished participants
Using pictures of and captions about their daily realities, the women have informed policymakers of what they have witnessed in their own words.

Freire's pedagogical efforts focus on the humanization of learners into subjects who know and act (capable of apprehending the reality of another), rather than objects that are known and acted upon (objective data). He explains: “If I perceive the reality as the dialectical relationship between subject and object, then I have to use methods of investigation which involve the people of the area being studied as researchers; they should take part in the investigation themselves and not serve as passive objects of the study” (Freire 1982). This liberating aspect of education is an intrinsic requirement for any proposal that promotes the inherent dignity and inalienable rights of all humans, especially those who are marginalized (Freire 1994, 31).

Freire asserts that persons learn to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions; to analyze their reality and become more aware of constraints on their lives; and to take actions to transform their human situation. They achieve this conscientization through praxis that involves the dialectical operation of critical thinking (reflection) and purposeful activity (action). Reflection and action inform each other, perform interactively, and lead to transformation (Freire 1994, 91).

Grounded in reflective action, PAR intentionally dismantles the privilege that researchers (as experts) traditionally maintain over their objectified learners/data. This paradigm shift requires the purposeful inclusion of diverse participants in the process of gaining and creating meaning. When this is carried out, educational research leads to knowledge production, as well as the development of consciousness and mobilization for action (Gaventa, 19). Knowledge construction becomes the creative and emancipatory work of the people that results in right action.

Therefore, PAR is fundamentally a collectivist rather than an individualistic process of inquiry (Tandon, 12; Gilligan 1992; Lyons, 124–45). It is a system of knowledge production of ordinary people, specifically those who are deprived, oppressed, or underprivileged. Knowledge is constructed for their daily struggle into objects of manipulation and reduced their experiences into objective data or a problem left only for experts to solve (Tandon, 5–6).

On the other hand, the same adult educators located their learners in the center. They emphasized the learners’ capacity to learn about, act within, and transform their reality by assuming control over their learning process. They grounded this approach in Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed that is essentially an instrument for promoting critical consciousness (Freire 1973).
and survival; it is not intended to give the elite or the dominant enclave a base of power and control. PAR emphasizes a collaborative commitment to investigate a problem, relies on indigenous knowledge to understand more fully the problem, and takes individual and/or communal action to deal with the stated problem (Tandon, 7).

To achieve its goals, PAR creates a “bridging environment” (Kegan, 294) between professional researchers and marginalized groups to perform a locally determined and controlled action for radical social change (Maguire, 29). In PAR, knowledge and power, life and work are dialectically engaged for emancipation. PAR informs and forms the oppressed to acquire and sustain sufficient transformative projects, actions, and struggles. It advances sociopolitical meaning-making processes compatible with and familiar to the grassroots (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 4). Thus, it legitimizes the knowledge competently produced by persons whom decision-makers and stakeholders traditionally exclude; this knowledge is a constitutive element of right action (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 15).

North American educators have incorporated various aspects of the PAR method into projects designed to address social and community issues (Forester et al.; McIntyre). PAR provides an alternative strategy for illuminating complex social phenomena in the context of systemic change. It addresses the following fundamental questions: What is knowledge production for? Who participates in setting the agenda, collecting and analyzing data, and monitoring the process? How is knowledge produced, and what necessary creative and indigenous resources are utilized and legitimized? Who owns and benefits from the knowledge produced? What action will be carried out, and what are its implications for the daily life and struggle of the community? Some practitioners have utilized PAR in conjunction with related participatory strategies. Two of the most widely applied approaches are Photo Voice, a method of community photography, and Creative Workshops.

**Photo Voice**

Caroline Wang draws from her experience of working with sixty-two Chinese village women as community photographers and develops a methodology that fosters large-scale participation for community photography called Photo Voice (Wang et al., 1995a). Wang and a team of public health workers placed cameras in the hands of village women and have advanced this approach in the face of a “pervasive assumption that peasant women lacked the intelligence and creativity to portray their lives in a meaningful way” (Wang 1995b, 8). Using pictures of and captions about their daily realities, the women have informed policymakers of what they have witnessed in their own words (Wang and Burris, 172), heightening their knowledge about women in an androcentric society. Since
then, children, grassroots workers, and other constituents with little access to systems that make decisions over their lives have made their knowledge public.

Rooted in Freire’s pedagogy for critical consciousness and perceived through the lenses of feminism and documentary photography, Photo Voice enables persons to codify and reflect critically on their lives as “they see them” (Wang and Burris, 171). Photographs serve as one kind of code or “representation of the existential situation of the learners,” borrowing Freire’s expression (Freire 1970, 14). These codes reflect the community back to itself, mirroring the sociopolitical realities that affect daily life.

In Wang’s project, images and words by and about women constitute the content of a curriculum for social change (Wang and Burris, 172). The caption of “Woman Postpartum,” a photo taken by twenty-five-year-old Fu Qiong reads as follows:

This woman gave birth to her baby three days ago at home. It isn’t that women don’t want to go to the hospital for delivery. The real reason is that many farmers who are not quite well-to-do can’t afford the medical bill. Because women carry a great burden in the field and in the house, they seldom have time to go to the hospital for a physical check-up, or to treat and cure illness. In poor mountain areas, home births are common. (Wang 1995a, 69)

Guided by a process of decodification, a community of interpreters is convened to reflect critically on Fu Qiong’s picture and address questions such as, What do you see in the picture? What does it mean for our lives and us? Why are things this way, and what are its consequences? What do we need to change, and how will we go about it? (Freire 1978, 54)

These questions have implications particularly for persons living under oppressive systems, who learn to view social problems as a normal abnormality or “terror as usual.” Mick Taussig describes the ambiguity and disorientation this tragedy creates: “I am referring to a state of doubleness of social being in which one moves in bursts between somehow accepting the situation as normal, only to be thrown into a panic or shocked into disorientation by an event, a rumor, a sight, something said, or not said—something that even while it requires the normal in order to make its impact, destroys it” (Taussig, 3–20).

In many oppressive societies, racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice and discrimination have become normal abnormalities. In effect, the reflective process facilitated by Photo Voice produces community-knowledge-for-action that enables persons who are powerless, underprivileged, and economically deprived to retrieve their suspended stories and confront policymakers about the dehumanizing consequences of institutionally legitimized normal abnormalities (Wang 1995b, 1, 9).

In the United States, Photo Voice can become a viable participatory action strategy for immigrant communities that are excluded from participating in making decisions that affect their lives (Wang and Burris, 171–86; Wang 1995c). It is
as a plausible method for expanding a collective understanding of thick descriptions seen through the eyes of youth, young adults, women, and those who are informally educated. Community photographers can identify daily practices, social issues, and societal challenges in order to generate analyses and explore solutions through interagency collaborations with university, church, school, and local neighborhoods. They can make meaning of and respond to *generative themes* such as urban violence, racial tension, and abject poverty. It is an innovative and participatory process of apprehending other people’s realities—as a possibility for ourselves—for right action and transformation (Wang and Burris, 171).

**Creative Workshops**

Community educators and psychologists working with children and adults affected by war and state-sponsored violence in Latin America developed the theoretical framework of Creative Workshops. This framework supports an action-reflection approach of theory development. Unlike most intrapsychic approaches to psychology, creative workshops shift the focus of therapy from the effects of war on the individual to its effects on family, community, and other psychosocial contexts. For more than twenty years, M. Brinton Lykes, one of the leading proponents of this approach, has developed mental health programs with Guatemalan rural health promoters and child care providers who attend to child and youth survivors of organized, state-sponsored violence (Lykes 1994, 543–52). Her team has selectively incorporated Mayan indigenous (Kim, 143) practices and cultural resources (e.g., plants, rocks, soil); creative arts; and insights and strategies from community psychology, participatory action research, and emancipatory education. Their work has resulted in creative workshops that have taken place in various cultural contexts with children, youth, and adults.

Workshop participants work collaboratively in processes using drama, movement, mask making, collages, storytelling, sound/silence, and drawing. The team prepares participants to serve as future coordinators and facilitators of psychosocial assistance workshops with survivors of terror, violence, and other forms of institutionalized oppression (Harran). These activities have created an environment of trust and security in which participant-survivors and participant-facilitators have reflexively socialized their *silenced narratives* of war and violence.

Creative workshop participants learn to negate a hidden curriculum of normal abnormalities in which they have been socialized, to engage collectively their suspended memory. Second, they explore indigenous and creative ways to apprehend the dehumanizing consequences of terror and oppression in their lives. Using their own resources—in addition to those brought in by outside facilitators—they begin to see their reality with their eyes and articulate their words with their own voices. Third, they facilitate community rituals that allow them to
unfreeze their grief and embrace forgiveness and reconciliation as a possibility for themselves—sometimes even for their perpetrators. Participatory action strategies, such as Photo Voice and Creative Workshops, impel them to renegotiate positions of power and privilege on the basis of age, gender, ordination, race, language, and so forth. These principles and practices shape the curriculum of educating for participatory action.

_Educating for Participatory Action_

Annabel Calilung and Cora Villaraza are among thousands of nurses recruited by U.S. hospitals since the 1960s. Typical of immigrants from the Philippines, they regularly remit money and goods to their homeland in a gesture of solidarity and gratitude. “That is why when you see Filipinos here, they tend to work, work, and work,” Annabel explains. Consumed by the daily challenges of immigrant life, many of them suffer from spiritual displacement (Rodriguez-Soto, A13).

Consequently, Annabel and Cora were inspired to gather a small group of nurses in South Florida to regularly participate in biblical reflections and prayer. While civic, regional, and professional affiliations had addressed many of their social needs, Annabel argued that “nothing really is being done about our spiritual growth.” “Slowly, our faith, our traditions are set aside,” she lamented (Rodriguez-Soto, A13). Cora and Annabel have deeply valued the assistance they have received from the church, but they also yearn to participate intentionally in performing right action, particularly in carrying out the church’s mission to welcome the stranger.

In July 1996, members of the prayer group decided to take action: they invited me to serve as a pastoral consultant and organize a town-hall meeting that I had proposed, which was held on August 26. Prior to the gathering, local organizers “thought maybe 50 people would show.” “We had 150,” they proudly disclosed to a local news reporter, celebrating the fact that families “came from as far north as Boca Raton and as far south as Kendall” (Rodriguez-Soto, A13). I had designed the meeting for about thirty participants, and as I watched more and more people walking into the parish hall at Saint Bartholomew Church, I relied on flexibility, improvisation, and God’s grace to facilitate a participatory process.

At the assembly, the participants collectively identified four fundamental categories of pastoral concerns: liturgy, family life, evangelization, and community center. Each of the four concerns created a space in which Filipino immigrants could reach into the very root of their lives in relatedness, locating a context for effective evangelization. They envisioned culturally inclusive liturgies presided by priests fluent in Tagalog or other regional languages. They affirmed the importance of promoting popular religiosity such as devotions to San Lorenzo Ruiz (the first Filipino saint), novenas to Our Lady of Perpetual Help and the Santo Niño, and
the Advent ritual of Simbang Gabi. They recognized that academic and spiritual formation was required to carry out their vision. Thus, they wished to establish a school of ministry that would provide competent training to future Filipino pastoral ministers, in partnership with the archdiocese. The participants underscored the need to serve all immigrants, regardless of their ethnicity and religious affiliation, clearly indicative of a commitment toward the common good.

Auxiliary Bishop Agustín Roman, himself an immigrant from Cuba, wrote on how the Archdiocese of Miami “reaches out to these wonderful and faith-filled people who, much on their own initiative, have been meeting in small groups to strengthen and support each other in their Catholic faith” (Roman). The phrases “small group” and “own initiative” provided vital clues for understanding the origins of Filipino Catholic ministry in South Florida. For “what began with a small prayer group of Filipino nurses grew into a first-ever archdiocesan retreat and Mass for Filipino Catholics” and laid the cornerstone for Filipino lay ministry in the archdiocese (Rodriguez-Soto, A13).

More than ten years since the first consultation, local pastoral leaders continue to utilize various creative workshop strategies such as brainstorming, dyads, creative drawing, dramatization, and storytelling. They have learned to use photographs not only to document significant events but more importantly to code vital “texts” of their lives as a community of interpreters. The various activities helped them to integrate diverse ways of knowing, advance empathic conversations, promote collaborative action, and uphold inclusion.

A pastoral approach that advances participatory action aims to affirm, challenge, and transform multiple immigrant identities and affiliations, legitimize a concrete reality that embodies their ultimate concern, and create alternative templates that foster an empathic relationship with God and the ecology of all creation. This right action must be carried out within the ecology of immigrant life (school-church-university-community) while advancing and sustaining disciple-citizenship. As a result, the church will not only utilize the gifts and talents brought by immigrants; rather, it will protect their human right to participate fully in making decisions that affect their lives, both private and public, toward the common good.

**References**


Wang, Caroline, and Mary Ann Burris. “Empowerment through Photo Novella: Portraits of Participation.” Health Education Quarterly 21, no. 2 (Summer 1994) 171–86.

