The Practice of Public Meetings: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

This special issue of IJP2 attempts to build linkages between public participation scholarship and communication research that emphasizes close attention to naturally-occurring interaction. The essays all investigate different aspects of the communication that occurs during one public meeting: a public forum that focused on issues of economic development in Omaha, Nebraska. Through their investigation of this common case, the essays in this issue provide detailed description of some communication processes common to public meetings such as nonverbal communication, question and answer behavior, storytelling, the use of the term "community," and the terms people use to talk about their own communication. These studies highlight how such interactive practices function in important ways to build or challenge notions of community, frame the purpose and outcome of the meeting, display power differences among participants, and clarify key community values. This collection of essays highlights how close attention to what happens during public meetings can have important implications for both the theory and practice of public participation. A full video of the meeting is available online.

Keywords: case study research, communication, Language and Social Interaction, public meetings

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This special issue of IJP2 attempts to build linkages between public participation scholarship and communication research that emphasizes close attention to naturally-occurring interaction. The essays all investigate different aspects of the communication that occurs during one public meeting. The meeting, described more fully below, was a public forum that focused on issues of economic development in Omaha, Nebraska specifically in area of the city known as North Omaha. Through their investigation of this common case, the essays in this issue provide detailed description of some communication processes common to public meetings and also offer insights and critiques that can have implications for public participation research and practice.

The idea for this special issue arose from three years of discussions among roughly this same group of scholars[1]. These discussions began in a double panel session co-sponsored by the Language and Social Interaction and Group Communication Divisions at the National Communication Association's 2005 annual convention, with follow-up sessions held in 2006 and 2007. This prolonged discussion has provided the special issue contributors with a unique perspective on the interactive processes --and problems-- that can occur in public meetings. This collection of essays demonstrates the power of multiple-scholar investigations of a single communicative event. More specifically, it demonstrates the power of a general interest in the moment-by-moment details of communication and public meeting discourse and, more broadly, public participation.

Public Meetings and Communication

Public meetings have a long history in the United States, and the practice of gathering citizens and officials together in a public meeting has nearly been accepted as a taken-for-granted method of civic participation. As the readers of IJP2 well know, public participation has a wide range of advantages to both participants and government (Irvin & Stansbury, 2007), a full review of which is beyond the scope of this essay. One archetypical form of public meeting is a public hearing (McComas, 2001) where officials make formal presentations to a seated, presumably

[1] Scholars who have contributed to these discussions in the past three years, but who did not write essays for this special issue include Karen Tracy (University of Colorado), Katherine McComas (Cornell University), and Rebecca Townsend (Manchester Community College). We owe special thanks to them for sharing their ideas and energy. This issue would not have come to fruition without the contributions of everyone who participated in this group.

passive, audience and provide some time at the end of the meeting for public comment and question. Although public participation efforts have diversified considerably to emphasize citizen deliberation and interaction (see Gastil & Levine, 2005), many public meetings still follow a format that is roughly based on a public hearing model.

The traditional scholarship on public meetings has focused on either the purpose and outcomes of public meetings (e.g., Berry et al., 1997; Cole & Caputo, 1984; McComas, 2001) or on participants' opinions about the meeting itself (e.g., McComas, 2001, 2003). Much of this work is critical of the standard "public hearing" model for public meetings (e.g., Berry et al., 1997; Checkoway, 1981; Richardson, Sherman, & Gismondi, 1993; Webler & Renn, 1995) for failing to take seriously the challenge and promise of public participation. For instance, studies show that citizens are often turned off by public meeting processes, and even those who participate in such meetings often feel that their voices will not make a difference (McComas, Besley, & Trumbo, 2006).

Despite the prevalence of public meetings and the documented dissatisfaction the public feels toward them, only a handful of recent studies have directly examined the specific communication processes involved (for example, see Buttny & Cohen, 2007; Kelshaw & Gastil, 2007, 2008; Tracy & Dimmock, 2004; and Townsend, 2006). A close look at the communicative strategies that meeting participants choose will be useful for public participation scholars and practitioners because it can provide a nuanced understanding of the public meeting process, identify how problems occur in the meeting, and offer insights into how such problems might be addressed.

In a recent series of editorial statements, the editors of IJP2 have argued that the field of public participation needs to "mature" institutionally, theoretically, and conceptually (Glock-Grueneich & Ross, 2008). One step toward theoretical maturation is developing rich, nuanced understandings of the practice of public participation. Rich empirical work can lead to insights about meeting processes and problems that cut across a variety of cases. The extant case studies of public participation efforts offer a good foundation for this theoretical maturation as scholars are able to test insights about the outcomes of public meeting structures.

However, the dearth of studies that look closely at the communication processes involved in public meetings indicates a substantial challenge to the theoretical maturation of the field of public participation. Because very few studies have looked closely at how people communicate during public meetings, it is difficult for public participation scholars to offer conceptual, let alone theoretical insights about public meeting communication. Furthering this conceptual and theoretical maturation is a significant challenge to public participation research (Pyser, 2008). This special issue offers one step toward developing conceptual and theoretical maturity by presenting a series of investigations into the details of communication patterns evident in a public meeting.

Some productive approaches to studying naturally-occurring communication are offered by the scholarly tradition known as "Language and Social Interaction" (LSI). Because most of the essays in this special issue are written from an LSI perspective, we introduce some of the aims and assumptions of this approach to help frame the essays that follow.

What We Mean by Language and Social Interaction

LSI research focuses on the naturally occurring instances of communication and interaction in everyday life. Scholars operating from an LSI approach observe communication in naturally occurring settings and attempt to describe and interpret the communicative elements of the situation as closely as possible. This means that analysts make use of empirical observation of everyday communication, rather than relying on data from experiments, questionnaires, or secondary sources.

LSI work is typically qualitative in nature. Although there are a variety of methodologies that can be organized under the umbrella of LSI, the cross-cutting questions that all LSI scholars tend to ask center around issues of the organization and pragmatics of communicative acts (Fitch & Sanders, 2004; Tracy & Haspell, 2004). Often LSI scholars focus attention on interaction patterns and micro-level language choices (see Hopper et al., 1986; Sacks, 1984; Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 1995). For example, analysts might look closely at the terms people use to name, identify and categorize their communication, the stories people tell during conversations, or the interaction sequences that people use to repair communication, align with each other, demonstrate preferences, and so forth (e.g., Lerner, 1991; Ochs, et al., 1996; Pomerantz, 1984).

It is important to note that LSI perspectives privilege the participants' perspectives (Fitch & Sanders, 2004). That is, when LSI scholars examine some aspect of communication, the evidence that matters arises from the participants' own communication behaviors. LSI investigations of public meetings, then, could examine particular segments of interaction where participants' communication behaviors indicate that they understand that something like decision-making, deliberation, social grouping, or trust and mistrust are occurring.

The usefulness of an LSI approach to the study of public participation lies in what it contributes to existing public meeting scholarship. While it is fruitful to examine participants' perceptions of public meetings, innovative meeting designs, and meeting outcomes, the analysis of the contours of the communication provides a new and useful way to examine public participation. LSI scholarship can provide insight into meeting processes by examining things like: how citizens participate, how communication is managed, who takes on a leadership role and how that gets negotiated by others, and participants' specific language choices (such as the manner in which requests are made, questions are answered, audience members are called upon to contribute, etc.). This attention to process complements what we already know about meeting format and outcomes.

Because LSI scholars typically transcribe interaction as part of the process of analysis and, then, display these transcriptions for making claims about the discourse, it is necessary for us to address the variability in the transcriptions found across the corpus of essays in this special issue. As a group, we did not arrange to account for transcription variability before this project began. On the one hand, we believe this is one of the virtues of the project: to display a range of representations and analyses of the meeting discourse. On the other hand, we feel it necessary to address issues created by variability in transcription across the corpus of essays.

Transcription practices typically account for four categories of features in talk: verbal, prosodic, paralinguistic and extralinguistic (O'Connell & Kowal, 1999). Below, we display examples of features in each category in order to introduce some of the symbols used to account for these features and to preview some of the variability in transcription practices that appear in this issue.

First, transcription symbols used to account for verbal features include, almost exclusively, the Roman alphabet. Though these representations may seem straightforward, transcripts often include ways to account for local phrasing or dialects. For example, Cockett (this issue) displays the speech of someone who shortened the word "because":

> Okay, with all due respect Mr. Davis, cause I do respect you.

Second, as O'Donnell and Kowal (1999) point out, the majority of transcription symbols (not including letters) in most transcription systems are designated for prosodic features. These features include pitch, loudness and duration of a sound. For example, Leighter and Castor (this issue) represent a speaker's emphasis on the words "same," "type," and "always" by underlining them:

> I've sat in I don't know how many o- these same type of meetings and it's always solution oriented

Third, paralinguistic features are those occurring in association with verbal features and include laughter, aspiration and sighing. For example, Jarmon (this issue) represents an audible "tongue smack" on the part of one speaker:

> particularly if you want all of our input and support in this endeavor (0.2)
> (tongue smack) just a suggestion

Finally, extralinguistic features include nonvocal and nonverbal phenomena occurring along with verbal behavior. These include gestures, gaze, applause, table pounding and the like. In most cases, the analyst will display these features with words embedded within the sequence of the transcription. For example, Witteborn and Sprain (this issue) account for a nonverbal reinforcement of a verbal message by describing the speaker's gesture:

> =ok but I am talking about the target area (drawing circles in the air to suggest a boundary)

Scholars disagree in practice and theory about the importance of these speech features for analysis and the ways in which these features can and should be represented for various audiences (Ochs, 1979; see O'Donnell and Kowal, 1999 for a comparison of five transcription systems). Nevertheless, there is general consensus in LSI scholarship that transcription (or producing a record of the interaction in some way) is vital. As is demonstrated in this special issue, analysts make choices about how to transcribe the visual and aural materials of a given interaction. In spite of the variance of transcription practices displayed in these essays, we believe the transcription segments 1) demonstrate with and in data the ways in which we built our analyses and 2) do so with attention toward readability without sacrificing sufficient precision. In short, we adhere to O'Donnell and Kowal's succinct advice for evaluation: "The usefulness of a transcription system must be judged in light of the purposes for which it is used" (p. 112).

The North Omaha Development Project (NODP) Public Meeting

All of the studies included in this special issue examine the same public meeting, a North Omaha Development Project (NODP) meeting convened by the Omaha Chamber of Commerce in April, 2007. Although one of the organizers of this special IJP2 issue was in attendance at the meeting, the data we analyzed consisted of an audio and video record of the public meeting[2].

Those who convened the meeting expressed, in the course of the meeting, its purpose. Some of the audience members who spoke up questioned the meeting's purpose later, however. Therefore, the purpose of the meeting is not something we can take for granted and, in many ways, it is a prominent aspect of the analysis provided in these essays. Despite the somewhat contested nature of the meeting in question, the Omaha Chamber of Commerce provides the basic tenor of the NODP project in a statement on a website entitled the Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership. It reads:

> The NODP brings business and community leaders together to find ways to positively impact the economic growth of the North Omaha community. The project will include an economic development strategy for North Omaha that will be project-oriented and packaged so that interested parties in the private sector will readily understand the opportunities available in North Omaha. Also included will be recommendations for infrastructure improvements, community development opportunities and housing initiatives and other quality of life initiatives that will make the economic development strategy successful. The community will be offered opportunities to provide input at various stages of the project. (Omaha Chamber, 2008)

The meeting that provides the data for this special issue was, from the point of view of the Chamber, an opportunity for "the community" "to provide input" on the NODP project.

A special note should be made about the audio-visual record of this particular NODP meeting. Some portions of the meeting were omitted by the videographer as he stopped recording to move around the room. However, our choice to analyze this meeting was solidified once we viewed the materials. Even if incomplete, they are compelling and offer an opportunity to examine a public meeting that was not recorded for broadcast purposes.

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[2] We would like to give special thanks to William King (Omaha, NE) for providing us a copy of the meeting he recorded, and for generously offering his time to speak with Jay Leighter at length about this project. William is a selfless individual who is remarkably committed to the community in which he lives, North Omaha.

All records of communicative conduct, audio or video, present problems for analysis but as Wieder, Mau, and Nicholas (2007) point out, there are four core aims and values that should guide selection of video data. First, concerns for fair rendering and adequate coverage are satisfied when the record of the event is captured from an angle and a distance that includes the "whole event" from beginning to end. As was mentioned, we do not have a recording of the whole event but we do have on record a good portion of the event and, as can be verified by one author who attended the event, we have a record of the most significant moments in the event from the participants' point of view, the question and answer period. Second, the recording is captured for analysis and not edited for presentation. In this case, we have raw, unedited footage. Third, the attention-holding, pleasing, followable, and entertaining qualities of the recording are important but low priorities. Fourth, the criteria for what constitutes "good shots" and "good sound" are that the interactions are seeable and hearable for analysis. For the most part, the materials used for this examination meet these general criteria and, we believe, offer the ability to make defensible claims about the communication that occurs in this meeting. Additionally, because of their commitments to an LSI approach, the authors of these essays purposefully avoid drawing conclusions beyond what can be seen and heard in the video-recording.

One advantage of submitting these essays to an online journal is that others who wish to investigate, verify and evaluate our data-based claims may view the materials we used for analysis. Readers of IJP2 may view and hear the NODP meeting recording here.

Preview of this Special Issue

The contributors to this special issue address a wide range of questions. The first six articles take an LSI approach to studying the communication processes that occur in the meeting. These articles pay close attention to some feature of the participants' communication, and then reflect on the implications these communication patterns have for our understanding of public meeting processes and problems. The final essay synthesizes what was learned in the previous six and offers generalized advice for community leaders and officials who are committed to quality public participation. What unifies contributions to this special issue is a commitment to learning about public participation by examining (together) the details of communication found in a real public meeting with real people and real problems.

Witteborn and Sprain examine grouping processes as they are enacted through communicative practices in this public meeting. They show how the tensions between the public and the Chamber of Commerce persist in differences about what constitutes the community and disagreement about the appropriate ways to manage problems in the neighborhood.

Black's analysis also focuses on classifications of people. She examines how meeting participants and speakers used narrative in their questions and answers, and her analysis demonstrates that the stories displayed a sharp distinction between "insiders" and "outsiders" to the neighborhood. The stories told by meeting participants also provided competing notions of the community's values and what actions should be taken to address poverty and crime in the area.

Leighter and Castor examine the ways in which differences in perspective about the public meeting manifest in the talk of the participants. Specifically, they analyze the words "talk," "say," "tell" and "meeting" to demonstrate how the public participants and the NODP team shape and evaluate the meeting in different ways. Leighter and Castor show how the examination of such talk about talk can be a powerful way to examine and deal with conflict in a public meeting.

Cockett's essay on the natural history of the meeting takes a unique approach to the qualitative materials available by first quantifying key features of the interaction to build a case that there is a unique and significant portion of the interaction worthy of examination. Then, the author examines the qualitative features of that interaction to draw conclusions about the centrality of *place* as a marker of identity in a community dispute. Cockett provides substantial evidence about where to look in this particular public meeting if the aim is to explain citizen and expert interaction in public participation. Moreover, she provides evidence about the significance of particular moments in the meeting that many of the essays in this special issue examine.

Jarmon's essay connects the themes that brought this group of scholars together from the beginning: Group communication and LSI approaches. Her analysis shows how the participants in the North Omaha meeting form groups in interaction, how the expectations of interaction are made salient in the public meeting, and how participants display trust and mistrust in the meeting.

Plummer extends the discussion of what LSI contributes to an understanding of public meetings but asks more specifically about decision-making and deliberative processes. Plummer maintains that the real value of an LSI perspective of public participation is post-event analysis of the moment-by-moment interactions, but she also demonstrates how a skilled practitioner may benefit from an LSI perspective and modify her or his personal performance in the course of a decision-making meeting.

In the final essay, Black, Leighter and Gastil comment on three themes that run through all of the articles in this special issue: communicating trust, notions of community, and meeting process. In so doing, they demonstrate how collaborative and intense focus on the moment-by-moment unfolding of a public meeting from an LSI perspective teaches us about the nature of public participation. They conclude by offering advice generated from the collective findings of this special issue for community leaders who intend to foster public participation by convening public meetings. Taken together, the articles in this special issue of IJP2 offer valuable insights into the NODP public meeting and public participation more generally.

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