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This essay explains how ethnography of communication informed a model of public participation designed to engage underserved populations in culturally sensitive deliberative discussions. Community college students successfully served as coresearchers to pilot test and assess the effectiveness of a community-service learning model of civic engagement research.

Keywords: Ethnography of Communication; Public Participation; Transportation; Community; Deliberation; Service Learning; Civic Engagement

"They" are "hard to reach," complain many planners charged by law to involve the public in government. Both who "they" are, and whether they even can be "reached," are difficult questions from planners' perspectives. From someone whose voice is barely audible in public planning efforts, one hears instead that "they don't care about us." Each has "othered" (Said, 1979) yet one group has the ear of government and access to greater financial resources. Bridging the two groups—planners and the transit-dependent public—can be done and can provide illuminating clues about what separates them. I will discuss a model that brings those communities together and develops leadership.

Public involvement practices in transportation planning aims for meaningful engagement but often falls short. Giering (2011) notes that the 2005 Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users created "requirements including formal Public Involvement Plans for MPOs [Metropolitan Planning

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Organizations], consultation with 'interested parties'...Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice requires agencies to explicitly consider the impacts of federal actions on minority and low-income communities" (p. 9). How to reach those who are "hard-to-reach" is a complicated problem. Key barriers to public participation include lack of public interest, cost, and difficulty engaging youth, low-income and minority populations. Public participation can be costly, especially participation beyond public meetings, which do not involve collaboration with the people who have the greatest needs (Transportation Research Board, 2009).

The Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG), the planning agency for the Greater Hartford, CT region, shares these concerns about improving public involvement in transit planning. There is pervasive poverty and transit-dependence. The region has dramatic income disparities, increasing minority populations, increasing percentages of people who have limited English proficiency, and decreasing job opportunities.

The FTA's Public Transportation Participation Pilot Program was designed to address the improvement of transportation planning data collection and analysis and how public participation can be strengthened. I sought to improve the public participation practice by creating and piloting a model—the Partnership for Inclusive, Cost-Effective Public Participation (PICEP2)—whereby students are taught how to conduct culturally-sensitive and locally-situated deliberative discussions in their own communities to meaningfully engage people in transit planning who are young, racial or ethnic minorities, or have low incomes. The model can be applied in various locales through similar partnerships with the system of over 1000 community colleges which serve every community in the country. The International Association for Public Participation awarded this project its 2011 Core Values Awards first-runner-up position. It also resulted in the author's recognition by the White House as a "Champion of Change for Transportation Innovation" in 2012.

The main research question was: Are community college students able to collaborate with youth, minority, and people with low incomes on their own terms, for the purposes of transportation planning? Ethnography of communication provided a framework for the model, helped to make sense of the data collected, and guided the research evaluating its effectiveness.

Ethnography of Communication

Approaching communities of people as people, "as beings making sense out of disparate experiences, using reason to maintain a sphere of integrity in an immediate world" and not as demographic category representatives was a main way this project used Hymes' (1996) claim that "it is in the nature of meanings to be subject to change, re-interpretation, re-creation" (p. 9). The approach best suited to understanding the meanings people have for their experiences is one that places importance on people's meaning system itself. Recognizing that each community has distinct ways of speaking means that a public engagement strategy must employ methods that respect that fact. My approach "embraces cultural diversity and uses this diversity to

understand what is particular and what is general in discourse and communication across cultures" (Scollo, 2011, p. 5). Students, who are members of the communities that planners want to engage, can act as informants and as coresearchers.

The design of the PICEP2 recognized that culture is relevant to any form of human interaction. As student-ethnographers, students "look[ed] at communication from the standpoint and interests of a community itself, and [saw] its members as sources of shared knowledge and insight" (Hymes, 1974, p. 8). Students were trained to focus on "the relationships among speech events, acts, and styles, . . . and personal abilities, roles, contexts and institutions, beliefs, values, and attitudes" (Hymes, 1972, p. 45). The PICEP2 worked directly with the people who have been underrepresented in planning discussions in a way that respects their values, attitudes, beliefs, roles, and contexts. The research is conducted face-to-face, by members of the community. Members of the networks planners need can serve as informants; they best know the intangible ways of speaking that will enable participation.

Public Participation, Transportation, and Community Colleges

Students at community colleges reside in the community. When they achieve their academic goals, they remain in the community. This distinguishes them from the more transient population at most universities and makes the community college the natural link for connecting planners with "hard-to-reach" people. Community colleges educate students toward the first two years of a bachelor's degree in preparation for transfer to a bachelor's degree-granting school. They also provide workforce development and courses for personal enrichment. Their students are commuters, whose needs are not fully addressed by existing infrastructure. Manchester Community College (MCC) is in Manchester, Connecticut and serves 7500 students from 15 towns and cities east of the Connecticut River. Most apply for financial aid, and a third are minorities. One-quarter are first generation college students, and 85% remain in Connecticut after graduation. The college offers many academic programs that include a service learning (i.e., service to the community as an integral component of learning the course material) requirement or other community engagement component.

The Process

The ethnography of communication (EC) serves as a framework for public participation, a mode of analysis, and a heuristic for evaluation of participation. A public that is part of the planning process is invested in the outcome and will contribute to its success. Culturally-sensitive communication strategies that enable members of historically disadvantaged communities to participate in the planning of transportation services will best meet the needs of likely riders. Community members already know how to talk with one another. My role as a professor was to use the Hymesian SPEAKING mnemonic to discover engagement approaches that would suit them and to analyze results.

The project began with a kick-off event held in March 2010 to design the nature and direction for the project. Participants brainstormed focus areas for Fall 2010 activities, voted on top three priorities, judged pros and cons of each priority, and reached consensus about focus area: Student-led deliberation sessions would center on transit needs assessment in the Greater Hartford region. Having stakeholders participate in choosing the direction of the deliberation sessions held in Fall 2010 and Spring 2011 built ownership, trust, and a sense of efficacy.

Public Speaking and Group Communication curricula were adapted to include EC and training for the project. Guest speakers from government and industry oriented students to transportation issues. The EC components of communication (using the SPEAKING framework) guided the collaborative development of a discussion guide and questionnaire. Once I developed a draft of a discussion guide, students revised it extensively based on what they knew would work. Students read, discussed, and agreed to abide by ethical guidelines, IAP2 Code of Ethics for Public Participation Practitioners, and Core Values. Students were taught ethnographic note taking and use of an audiorecorder.

Working in research teams based on geographical proximity, teams made lists of community groups with which members had a connection. Using students' social networks, teams engaged community groups to which they belonged or those who had indicated willingness to work with my students—like clubs, workplaces, houses of worship, and homeless shelters. Students contacted the groups, requesting permission to conduct a discussion about transportation needs. They went on-site to where the groups were already meeting and facilitated and recorded discussions about transportation. Participants focused on what mattered most to them—sharing stories, experiences, advice, and ideas for transportation. Students took field notes and wrote memos that contained nascent analyses of the meetings.

In-depth EC analysis of the findings was beyond the scope of students' work; however, by participating and observing, recording discussions, reflecting on and analyzing of the discussions, students had a strong basis to understand people's transportation needs and to facilitate communication situations in which those needs can be expressed. Student field notes, reports, accounts, and interpretations helped to shape the results, which were presented to planners at free on-campus fall and spring dinner symposia.

To illustrate the data gathering and analysis process, one example comes from the New Dimension Christian Center in downtown Hartford, which is comprised of people of who are of Black (African American, West Indian, and Jamaican) and Latino (Dominican Republican and Puerto Rican) heritage and recent immigrants. A member and student approached her Pastor about having a discussion. She translated materials, held the discussion in Spanish, and wrote notes afterward. Fellow team members also took notes. Her team reviewed field notes for transportation needs, chiefly focusing on the components of settings, participants, and act sequences. One woman described a friend who was nearly raped, emphasizing, "Because she has to wait for the schedule, it's the wait, the wait." In their teams, students noted how timing, bus stops' relative safety, and who is nearby affect who will ride and what is at stake.

Conclusions

As a framework for civic engagement, EC enabled students to be scholarly in their research of community transportation needs. As a mode of analysis, EC permits researchers to address the complicated factors that make participating in discussions about such transportation needs important. As a way to evaluate the success of the PICEP2's curricular approach, EC informs communities of transportation planners of a new way to engage the public. In these ways, it demonstrates how having the trust of "hard-to-reach" groups eased their participation. Evidence for this trust is in multiple forms: First, that nearly all groups agreed to participate in the project signals a hope that something good can come of it. Second, the comments participants shared were personal, and occasionally, stories of troubling interactions (e.g., experiencing racism or assault). On the whole, students were intermediaries who could be trusted to both receive the opinions and then transmit them to the transit providers and planners. The degree of acceptance and kind of information provided demonstrates that students were treated as if they would listen carefully. Transportation planners will be using the findings to improve transportation services and have already used the Partnership in a subsequent, nonpilot project. The Capitol Region Council of Governments directed their consultant on the Manchester Transit Enhancement Study (a HUD-funded project) to apply the PICEP2 strategy in Spring 2012.

Numerous participants and planners told me how impressed they were with the students' research. Students were rightfully proud of their work, beaming at the positive feedback they received. Planners now have a local resource to assist with public participation, and a replication package is available to any organization that wishes to form similar partnerships. Notably, mid-way through the project, and referring to the PICEP2 project, CRCOG concluded in its assessment of its public participation efforts that "new public outreach methodologies" may result. Indeed, their "primary recommendation" involves "customized efforts to engage the public" and the "use of existing neighborhood groups and organizations to increase awareness of its projects and programs within the community" (p. 1).

Time and again, participants expressed little faith that their voices would be heard. A primary concern holding them from full expression of democratic rights to speech was the perception that they are unimportant to transit providers or to the government more broadly. A major finding is that participating in these engagement sessions allows people to feel worthwhile. Meeting at participants' preferred locations and times is often luxury is reserved for high-status "stakeholders" who are perceived to have busy schedules that must be accommodated. According the same status to transit-dependent riders is a sign of respect and interest in what the participants will have to say. Participants at all levels must be involved in the leadership of the process. Having the ability to check whether the researchers accurately captured their opinions gave participants the sense that the students cared. Community members also mingled with transit planners and providers at symposiums and poster sessions.

Officials need be available to, and interested in, participants; participants need to see officials as interested in their perspectives. At the start and end of a meeting, if planners are off to the side, the perception is that the people who they have ostensibly come to hear are not worth engaging socially. Such stratification is easy to witness, especially if one is on the lower end (or perceived to be). Participants who do not dress up in business attire may seem unimportant to some planners. Students did not have such expectations; instead, they felt obliged to the people and groups who were so generous to give their time to help them complete a college project.

One of the project's premises was that people will talk with people they know and trust. Students themselves are part of the underheard population; many are members of the community groups they spoke with. Participation as coresearchers ensured that those most affected by transportation planning issues were involved. Community colleges' existing connections and trust in the community provided a way to galvanize involvement. Unlike veteran planners who routinely hear similar kinds of concerns, students were hearing the comments for the first time. This freshness of perspective comes across in the audio recordings and transcripts. One participant at a homeless shelter described going to another meeting, not part of this project: "Yeah, it was, you know, you voiced your opinion but it was like running ... into a brick wall, you know. You know, they're going to do what they want to do anyway." In this meeting, however, a respondent said to the student-moderators, "What you're doing helps. You know, it's helping everybody." They explain that they feel respected, and it's demonstrated in the talk (e.g., reflecting on being asked to participate: "I felt like something was actually of value to me, like they actually cared about what I say."). They are then able to develop and deepen trust. Trust that someone will listen is essential to democratic practice.

A second premise of the model, and reaffirmed by the findings, was of cultural variability of communication. Local knowledge and ways of speaking are essential to the outcomes. Some groups included people who had experienced violence in their lives; others involved people who were more sheltered. The project sought input from participants on how they wished to participate and worked with them in ways that were most appealing to them. Communication of results is enmeshed with the participants' lives, since students are both the researchers and members of the target populations themselves.

From preliminary analysis using cultural discourse analysis (Carbaugh, 2007) in the ways participants discussed bus ridership, at the core was a latent conflict between concerns for independence and community. Respect for persons is an essential prerequisite for cultivation of community, for without respect for others, no one would want to share the space provided by "mass" transit. Community transit entails respect for individuals that comprise the community. This relates to both convenience and uses of time. People feel disrespected when they lack dependable, predictable service. If potential passengers and transit-dependent passengers experience punctuality of arrivals and departures, they will, however, believe they are respected and worthwhile, important to society. This promotes independence and success, for if one cannot get to a job reliably, the job will be lost.

EC proved a supple framework for civic engagement research. Eliciting public commentaries through deliberative engagement was successful. Student researchers learned about transportation needs, culture, communication, and much more.

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