

Identifying Expansive Learning in Democratic Activity: A CHAT/DBR Approach to Community-Based Design Partnerships

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Introduction

My research uses interdisciplinary approaches to investigate the nexus of theory and practice regarding issues of social justice, equity, access, and learning in democratic activity. My research is a response to the ways in which the public is increasingly asked to engage in participatory processes. This is a paradigm shift for the planning field (Forester, 1993; Habermas, 1996; Healy, 1996) that has resulted in increased public participation, where participants from various social demographics are learning in real time the processes, as well as the civic capacities, that is the skills, identities and dispositions (Martinez-Cosio, 2006; Price et al., 2011) necessary for civic engagement. This new responsibility of decision-making power comes with both risks and rewards, as power differentials in decision-making practices have real-world consequences for communities (Taylor, 2007), and especially for under-represented communities such as Latino immigrants (May, 2017; Rocco, 2004). To better understand this phenomenon, my scholarship focuses on how under-represented communities engage civically in these processes and how collective civic participation influences the systemic evolution of said processes.

Literature review and methods

In studying participatory processes, I use Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), and design-based research to investigate the emergence of new forms of participation and the activity structures required for underrepresented communities to engage. Thus, I look at the internal capacities of a community over multiple years to understand its ways of knowledge building and expansive learning. I use CHAT inspired DBR, henceforth referred to as CHAT/DBR, since it “embrac[es] open-ended partnerships driven more by long term social aims” (O’Neill, 2016, p. 1) and because of the critical role that context plays to further understand development and learning (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Penuel, Cole, & O’Neill, 2016). Specifically, in my research, participatory democratic processes provides rich contexts of the “forces that construct and challenge social barriers to learning” (Tabak & Radinsky, 2014, p. 269) in a community setting. As such, my research joins the growing number of learning scientists placing equity and social justice as central to their research endeavors (e.g. see Tabak & Radinsky, 2014 for a literature review; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016).

Carrying out this kind of research is interdisciplinary and longitudinal and therefore entails collaborating with communities and stakeholders to design and re-design participatory processes for robust, inclusive, and equitable decision-making practices (Meléndez, et al, 2018). Specifically, my research explores the ways power and inequity are produced, challenged, and reproduced when underprivileged communities, such as Latino immigrants, claim a space in participatory democratic processes. For example, my dissertation was a three-year ethnographic case study of the Participatory Budgeting process in Chicago’s 49th Ward (PB49) (Meléndez, 2016). PB began in Brazil in 1989 as an initiative of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, (PT). This innovation expands democratic participation through a process that gives the public direct say in how to spend public funds in their community (Cabannes, 2004). In the spring of 2009, the 49th Ward alderman initiated the first ever PB process in the U.S. in the highly diverse area that he represents. Thus, providing a unique study of how a process initially designed for equity and social justice goals evolved as it migrated north.

To investigate how PB49 materialized, public meetings where videotaped and segments related to Latino immigrant participation were transcribed. Following Wortham and Reyes (2015), analysis of participants’ discourse (in English and Spanish) was done to present a way to “see” learning in democratic activity. The focus here was on collective and system-level learning across multiple scales of time (Lemke, 2000). Providing methods to “see” learning in democratic activity is key, as the scarcity of methods and detailed analysis of participants’ engagement in participatory processes has prevented planning (Holden, 2008) and other related researchers from developing theories about how the learning of civic processes happens in practice (Mansbridge, 2003). Given the diversity of participants in this context, I took into account multiple mediating factors (e.g., language, education, race/ethnicity, immigration status) that influenced participation. I approached the PB49 process as a complex and evolving activity system (Engeström, 1990), in this case, an example of the emerging literature on fourth generation activity theory (Engeström, 2018).

As an active research participant, the ability to cross multiple identities (e.g. resident, Latino immigrant, etc.) enabled me to be sensitive to the competing identities and positions at play in the activity of PB49. It was through direct observation and participation in the activity system itself that I come close enough

to characterize the *lived-in* social worlds and lives of participants in the PB49 process (e.g. Lave, 1988). In this way, I was able to engage in the development of a flexible collaboration between the various stakeholders and constituents for refining the implementation of the PB49 process to better meet its ideals and goals (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Penuel, Cole & O'Neill, 2016; O'Neill, 2016). As part of my analytical approach, I identified tensions/contradictions (Engeström & Sannino, 2011) that emerged between participation and the structures of the environment to determine how and why these tensions/contradictions were resolved or not.

Findings

Findings revealed insights about how the dialectic of the environment and participation can be reconstituted to support under-represented communities in sustaining their civic engagement over time. Additionally, I identified key civic capacities that appear to play a role in enacting collective and system-level changes in democratic activity. Furthermore, my findings also add to theories of adult learning in community settings, design principles of participatory processes, and theories of civic engagement and leadership that contribute to the literature on cultural citizenship. My findings support a developing argument that approaching the design of participatory processes as learning environments can lead to greater clarity and transparency about how such contexts both afford and constrain civic participation, especially for under-represented communities. My findings and theorizing what they mean are further described and explained in my publications, which represent my emergent research agenda.

Emerging research agenda

My research agenda has taken off with publications that focus on four themes. First, the analytical approach used in my dissertation is an example of the potential that qualitative methods hold to capture the nuance and complexity that survey-based research often misses when looking at participation in community-based initiatives (Meléndez, 2017; 2018). Secondly, my research initiates a dialogue between the learning sciences and urban planning that benefits both fields. In doing so I aim to introduce the concepts of learning environments, interventions, and the methods of design-based research in order to argue for more iterative design of participatory process for equity using the toolbox of CHAT/DBR (Meléndez & Parker, 2018). In the learning sciences, by focusing on participatory processes, democratic activity itself is conceptualized as up for re-design (Meléndez & Radinsky, 2018). In so doing, I add my voice to the increase in calls in the learning sciences to focus on learning in community settings. The community settings are contexts where collaborative design can happen and is happening, with a focus on theorizing issues of power and equity in relation to the *praxis* or expansive learning that we should aim for when working with underrepresented communities.

Thirdly, I argue that even though most participatory processes are designed with equal participation as the aim, designing for equality sometimes inadvertently ignores the fact that participants from different communities come to participatory processes with power differentials. As such, these processes, I claim, should be more explicitly designed to foster equitable participation (Meléndez & Martinez-Cosio, 2018). Lastly, while critically assessing participatory budgeting in the United States, I look to describe and explain how as PB migrated from the global south to the global north, it has lost its emancipatory potential, as it is now used and marketed as part of the deliberate democratic movement. As such, I seek to engage and push on much of the research that is reported on PB in the U.S. that describes its successes without differentiating participation. (For an example of positive descriptors of participation writ large, see Ganuza *et al.*, 2016, while an example addressing differentiated participation can be found in Bherer *et al.*, 2016).

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