

# 9P Planning: Overcoming Roadblocks to Collaboration in Intercultural Community Contexts

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## ABSTRACT

Encouraging involvement in local, regional and national communities in order to develop a healthy democracy is a laudable goal for society. The present paper investigates positions of power and dominant ideologies as they relate to communication roadblocks that inhibit the representation of marginalized cultural groups in collaboration and decision-making processes in multi-cultural communities. In this research, interviews with professional planners working in intercultural community contexts were analyzed utilizing a framework of five actions identified by Paolo Freire that must be taken by the oppressor in order to enter into solidarity with the oppressed. From this analysis I describe a holistic planning model for overcoming communication barriers in order to increase social inclusion of marginalized cultural groups in collaborative efforts.

## Keywords

Inclusion, dialogue, planning, oppression

## ACM Categories

A.2 General Literature; REFERENCE

## INTRODUCTION

Within current public decision-making processes, there is generally an expectation of assimilation for aboriginal, immigrant, refugee and other cultural groups experiencing Diaspora. For example, in North America there is generally an expectation that individuals will speak up and take a public stand if they have something important to say [6]. For many groups this is not a culturally appropriate way to deliberate on issues. Differing communication norms such as this one are exasperated by feelings of being an outsider and result in a reluctance to become publicly involved in community development processes. The issue of non-participation impacts local, municipal, state, provincial, national and international communities in planning, development and decision making processes.

Utilizing data from in-depth interviews, the purpose of the present paper is to identify and analyze issues of power and oppression as they act to sustain dominant culture interests as groups attempt to create structures that empower co-culture<sup>1</sup> participants in public dialogue and decision-making. I am not interested in assimilation of non-dominant co-cultures into the dominant culture but rather ways that communication structures can be changed in the dominant culture to equalize the ability to participate from all community members. Therefore the research question in the present study is: How must communication processes in traditional public planning be changed in order to increase social inclusion of non-dominant cultural groups in public decision-making?

## COLLABORATION AND PUBLIC DECISION-MAKING

Communication, as a whole, can be described as a social process that constructs a meaningful cultural world and serves to produce, maintain, and understand reality as a system or container for human action. For example, within group decision-making, a decision is constituted through interaction, mediated by member's reactions as influenced by the social process and individual background. Each individual has a set of identities, beliefs, values, goals and ideologies by which they interpret the objects and actions around them [11]. Because each individual is different, there must be interaction with others to come to a common understanding of any particular object or act. Communication is a process of socially constructing common meanings and norms for interaction between individuals and groups [10]. This social construction of meaning is mediated by societal systems, historical context, and cultural background.

When people come from a widely varying set of societal systems, historical contexts, and cultural backgrounds, the

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<sup>1</sup> The term co-culture is taken from co-culture communication theory as presented by theorist Mark Orbe [9] who explains that it is "based on the belief that [North America] is a [continent] of many cultures, each of which exists simultaneously within and apart from other cultures...over time one co-culture...has acquired dominant group status in the major societal institutions."

ability to communicate effectively is problematic. Under these circumstances there is a greater effort needed to come to a common understanding [2; 3; 8]. Communication structures of the dominant culture support those who already hold power within that culture and communication must be studied from the perspective of the non-dominant group [9]. Collaboration is a particular process of communication that requires all members to participate equally and therefore special steps must be taken to make this happen in an intercultural context.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

In this study, six individuals who were intimately involved in public dialogues of an intercultural nature provided face-to-face, in depth interviews about their personal experiences and insights. Three interviews explored Canadian experiences and three involved experiences in the United States. All of the processes about which I interviewed the participants ranged from at least a two-year period to one that had been developed over more than ten years. All names used in quoting the participants for this paper are pseudonyms.

**Data Gathering**

I utilized a face-to-face, semi-structured interview format to elicit participant’s understandings and insights into the public dialogue situations in which they were involved. Commonality and differences of meaning and structure were then derived utilizing a framework of five axioms found in the work of Paolo Freire. Analysis concentrated on explicating data that identified a communication strategy and matching it to the framework.

The five axioms extracted from Freire’s work by R. Allen [1] are dialogical actions that must be taken by the oppressor in order to enter into solidarity with the oppressed were: 1) that the oppressor must be willing to be re-educated in regards to the myths they carry about the oppressed, 2) that the oppressor must be willing to experience negative effects, 3) that the oppressor must demonstrate trust in the oppressed, 4) that the oppressor must remain engaged in the process of solidarity even when the oppressed are not present, and 5) the oppressor must engage in a praxis that does not allow the oppressor to perpetuate their system of oppression. The analysis of the data resulted in a theoretical model constituting the optimal cycle of interaction and participation of the dominant and non-dominant co-cultures as portrayed by the interviewees, both in actions that they recognized as being necessary and in identifying gaps where actions were inadequate (9P Planning: Figure 1).

**FINDINGS**

Paulo Freire’s theory of dialogical action is posited in his most often cited book: *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* [4]. In this treatise Freire posits that the problem of oppression cannot be resolved without also resolving the problem of

humanization. The humanization of oppressor and oppressed is inseparable and can only be accomplished through dialogical action involving all of the noted five actions [1].

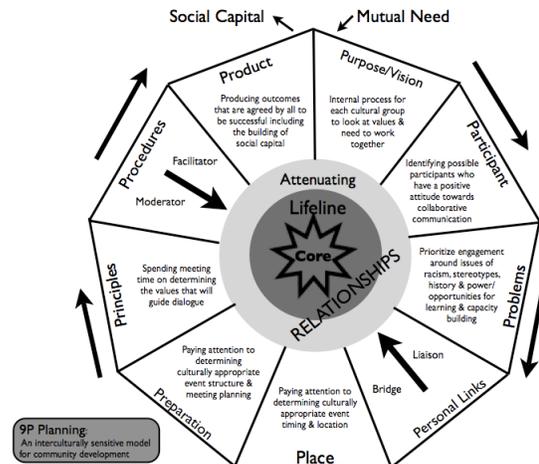


Figure 1

**Re-education of the Oppressor**

Essentially, the oppressor (dominant culture participant) does not see their own privilege of “having more” as something that dehumanizes others and in turn, themselves. Understanding this is the main object of the need to be re-educated. The following example comes from one of the study participants who had been involved in a long process of dialogue and could see some of the effect of this realization:

John: We had a number of cross-cultural awareness sessions. Taking the time to get to understand their perspective on things helped. We had an invitation extended to us, probably because we were there, listening and showing a commitment, and being able to talk. They would say “you don’t really understand us. You see the stereotype of a Native sitting under a park bench on Saturday morning and that’s not what we’re about.” I remember saying “well how do we do that (become reeducated)?” They said, “we have some people who are prepared to come and talk to you and give you a session or two.” The First Nation themselves made that recommendation (to have a learning session).

The oppressed in this situation said, very clearly, that nothing would move forward in terms of collaboration until this step had been taken. First the oppressor must be willing to hear, to comprehend, and to incorporate their learning into a new view of the world.

**Experiencing Negative Effects**

The experiencing of negative effects seems to be inextricably tied to the act of being re-educated and the act of listening. Another participant who was also involved in a dialogue that

was concerned with the inclusion of voices of First Nation's members, was having a much harder time understanding the need to be re-educated and voices an experience of negative effects without understanding the connection to the need to change her view of the world.

Diane: What I find is really frustrating in the process is that it seems that the First Nations...when its an issue that involves First Nations...those people who are involved with the board are really focused on their First Nations stuff but when it comes to talking social rights and environmental rights, or even industrial rights (for other than First Nations)...its almost as if they haven't been listening to everything else that's been going on, but when its their turn, we all have to stand up and take notice. Everything should stop. OK now we're talking about indigenous people's stuff...everything should stop.

Diane doesn't want to have to suffer through listening to something that a historically marginalized person is compelled to voice as part of his or her own process of humanization.

### **Demonstrating Trust**

Freire [5] speaks about demonstrating trust in several different ways. He speaks specifically of learning to listen. Freire states that if we do not truly learn to listen to each different group we can never really learn how to speak. Learning to listen entails the need of the dominant "to silence themselves so that the voice of those who must be listened to is allowed to emerge...[because] none of this would make sense if the educator does not understand the power of his or her own discourse in silencing others (p. 306)."

For example Diane stated that she had a problem with First Nations people came to the table with what she assumed would be values about 'preserving mother earth' and that she saw her group as "bringing everybody together so that we can have a common goal and we can have a good understanding of moving things forward for the betterment of the entire (global) community or family" and was disappointed when it seemed the First Nations member's goal was to "get the forest and get the economic rights to it".

Trusting, through the process of listening, came up in several of the interviews during this research project. Primarily because non-dominant groups engaged in or demanded to have, their own processes of dialogue, involving exclusively their own members, before coming to the table with the dominant group. Not only do these entities have to have processes that connect listening to results but the dominant culture members must remain engaged with the processes even when the non-dominant co-culture is not present.

### **Remaining Engaged**

One piece that is essential is recognition of the long-term nature of the relationship between dominant and non-dominant [7]. The concept of relationship as central is

demonstrated in what Freire says about not being tourists of the oppressed.. The relationship upon which the dialogue must pivot is one of long-term solidarity, not one where the dominant group can just pick up and leave when the hardships get to be too much.

The following example ties the act of listening and experiencing negative effects, to the tendency of the dominant group to withdraw from any process that they do not like.

Jaime: There were probably between 150 to 200 (Native American) participants who actually came... we decided to take it to the nations and Navajo opted to host us so we went to Window Rock. We spent an entire day listening to their needs and their concerns... It was very strenuous for our executive. They will never do that again. They'll never convince them to do that again.

The dominant group made some effort to broaden the method of participation and were willing to let that process be determined by the non-dominant group, but they *suffered*, and were not willing to do it again even if it was productive and worked for the non-dominant participants.

### **Praxis**

For Freire there is no such thing as dialogue that does not include action. The combination of reflection and action is the essence of praxis. Praxis is tied to trusting of the oppressed in that when trust is lacking, any initiation of what is supposed to be dialogue will quickly become talking at or instructing the non-dominant, therefore continuing the oppression. Praxis encompasses many issues, including communication structures, ideologies, individual stakes, and conflict.

One way of creating this undesired monologue is to utilize bureaucracy in the process of hearing. Two examples come out of my research:

Jaime: I think the third (public dialogue forum) really tied everything together...The sad part about it was that the timing of it was so terrible The regional executive committee changed it five times because they wanted a format...show us a format of what this thing is going to look like; what's this summit conference going to look like? What are you going to try and do? So every time it got sent back for revisions, redoing, they changed the date.

and from another's experience:

Will: We had a lady on our board of directors, from (a nearby town), just recently resigned...[She] was always frustrated by [the use of parliamentary procedure] because that wasn't part of her culture. Our North American culture limits them within the organization, because she wanted to chair a

subcommittee but didn't want to use the rules that we were using. We never resolved it.

Unwillingness to change communication structures to adapt to a different way of engaging in dialogue acted as a way of silencing non-dominant groups and maintaining the power and privilege of the dominant culture.

Freire also states, "we must explore every possibility to change reality democratically. We have to take advantage of the space we have in order to challenge...Dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship. I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individual character of the process of knowing. 6, p. 379]". In the democracy of North American societies we have the best opportunity to take advantage of having the kind of dialogue that Freire talks about. If we can utilize underlying principles of our societies that say we need to have everyone involved in the creation of a just society then let us use every means we can to get rid of the culture of conflict.

### DISCUSSION

The topic of public dialogue for collaboration among dominant and non-dominant co-cultures is an important one, especially in the context of preventing and ameliorating situations of conflict in planning for community social and economic development. The intercultural communication situation in North America may be unique among places in the world due to a combination of long established principles of democratic participation, pluralism in public life, the nature of immigrant and refugee communities, as well as the special attention that is called for in supporting the efforts of African American and First Nations to overcome the Euro and ethnocentric attitudes of the past in order to truly reach economic and social potential. The existence of this milieu, however, does not in itself provide the means to humanize both the oppressor and the oppressed and the struggle is the same whether it is in North America or elsewhere.

### Limitations

As with any research there are limitations to the present study that must be taken into consideration when utilizing the findings and conclusions. In this short article the primary limitation is the inability to explicate a thorough explanation of all the elements that are essential to an understanding of the issue of social inclusion of marginalized cultural groups. Specifically, the variety of communication norms across the variety of cultural groups in North America is too extensive to be able to provide adequate examples. It is essential that for any 9P planning process that is undertaken by a community, that an assessment of communication norms be done that is specific to the needs of that community.

### Future Directions

This study and the 9P Planning model provide a theoretical framework for future research in intercultural collaboration for community, social and economic development. It is my hope that any individual or group that is sincerely interested in increasing the inclusion of marginalized cultural group members in collaborative efforts will utilize the information that is offered herein, to both validate and to expand on the concepts.

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