Sharing stories of place to foster social learning

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Place research underscores a need to facilitate social learning. This need arises in recognition of the complexity of place meanings and landscape values (Manzo, 2005), to humanize stakeholders and facilitate a sense of community (Fine, 2002), and to create value for places through civic science (Kruger & Shannon, 2000). Forums for social learning allow stakeholders to locate themselves in a larger context of community and place with consequences of understanding shared connections to each other and their environments. The increase in diversity of place meanings for public lands has given rise to "wicked problems", those problems not given to technical solutions or agency-based control (Allen & Gould, 1986; Yaffee, 1994). Place research has been a contrasting response to expert-based land management.

Place asserts the primacy of locality and community-based meanings. Accordingly, the place literature has a history of exploring the nature of human relationships to environments, with major streams of research devoted to felt value and emotions of place (Manzo, 2003; Schroeder, 1996; 2000), attachment to place (Williams, et al., 1992; Kyle, et al., 2004), and values and meanings of place (Stokowski, 2002; Stedman, et al., 2004). The research on these concepts implies dialogic processes for planning that allow representation of place meanings, values, and emotions.

Since the 1980s, trends in land-use planning have moved in the direction of processes that sustain dialogue among various kinds of stakeholders. Government agents, scientists, special interest groups, and citizens become engaged in processes that center decision-making on their dialogue. Ecosystem management, adaptive management, and community-based conservation are examples of stakeholder involvement strategies wherein meanings, values, and emotions of place emerge in decision-making. However, the need to develop planning strategies that link directly to place and foster social learning remains.

Not all land-use planning forums are conducive to social learning. Many are framed as "public involvement" events during which agencies garner opinions or "input" from stakeholders on their initiatives. Rather than embedding decisions in a learning process, many public involvement strategies are one-way in their communication flow and may result in stakeholders reaffirming their understandings of the issues and reinforcing stereotypes of each other (Gramling & Freudenburg, 1994). This paper frames place meanings and values as more than preferences or statements of opinions. Place meanings are represented through narratives that link people to their communities and their natural environments (Cronon, 1992). Story-telling is a natural way for people to organize their lived experiences and values into meaningful wholes (Glover, 2003; Polkinghorne, 1988). Stories representing place meanings may hold promise to facilitate planning dialogue. Kruger and Shannon (2000) champion approaches to inquiry that allow people to tell stories of their lived experiences to others. The sharing of stories gives

community members an active role in constructing their viewpoints and in learning from one another (Fine, 2002; Richardson, 1990).

Techniques are needed to facilitate the sharing of stories about place. The promise of stakeholder forums in which place meanings are shared is a decision context based on socially constructed values and increased recognition of the complexity of such values. This research facilitates the transition in land-use planning from expert-based to citizen-driven (see also Fischer, 2000; Irwin, 1995; Yankelovich, 1991) by exploring a decision-making strategy for social learning and democratizing decisions.

Learning Circles

Sharing stories about place has modest aims. At its core is the simple act of representation, yet it also holds potential for legitimation and public creation of value. Sharing stories is premised upon place meanings as being embodied in lived experience of place. Doing so allows others to understand emotional attachments between people and their environments. Through understanding the place meanings of others and knowing that others understand your own, social learning is fostered about the value of place for a community of people. Sharing stories about place may lead to a creation of value for a locale that otherwise would not be known amongst a community (Brandenburg & Carroll, 1995). Sharing stories about place is not about reaching consensus nor resolving differences, it is about recognizing – and potentially legitimizing – the meanings and values held by stakeholders for a place. Through the sharing of stories of place, values for landscapes are represented and understood in everyday language (Hull & Robertson, 2000), thereby facilitating knowledge transfer, exchange, and mobilization.

The relevance of sharing stories of lived experience to social learning is explored through observations from two learning circles. They were conducted in Urbana, Illinois, a town within a metropolitan area of more than 100,000 people. The nine participants in each of the learning circles were from a variety of neighbourhoods in the community, and members (either past or present) of a park district advisory board, or were employees of the park district. As preparation for the learning circles, participants were asked to take pictures of important places in their daily lives and to share two or three of these important places with their fellow learning circle participants. Their photographs were depicted on a screen during their presentation. Discussions were tape-recorded and transcribed to allow for a review of the dialogue, which was intended to inform interpretation of the extent and quality of social learning. As a final task, participants were asked to reflect and make an assessment of the discussion. They wrote down their thoughts and reactions in a "blue book" provided to each learning circle participant.

The discussion is organized around the capacity of learning circles to foster social learning and allow for a public creation of value. The findings illustrate the potential of a public sharing of place meanings to foster social learning, provide contexts to build a sense of community, and ability to act as visions for land-use planning.

Looking at places

The learning circles, coupled with use of participants' photographs, focused attention on the landscapes, not the people. Participants viewed each other's pictures and considered place meanings, rather than thought critically about participants. Although the concept of place has a long history of connections to self and personal identity (Patterson & Williams, 2005), when we talk about our lived experiences of place, the object of discussion is the experience of the place rather than the person doing the talking. Stated differently, we are each experts on our lived experiences in the places of our lives. When we share these lived experiences with others, the "spotlight" shifts away from us and towards the environment – particularly if there is a photograph or some artefact to depict the place.

As an indicator of this focus of attention on places, participants often introduced themselves in reference to their place meanings. For example, Melissa introduced herself by depicting the loss of a local grocery store near her neighbourhood with a picture of the abandoned grocery store; her first remarks went directly to a commentary about her neighbourhood, "I'm feeling a lot better about southeast Urbana because I live right around there and it was a big loss to lose Jerry's IGA…..One of the reasons I bought [a house] where I did is because I could walk to the store as I aged". Another participant, Rose, introduced herself with some details on her personal environmental history:

> This is a portion of my front yard. I actually have a very big lot and that's just sort of part of the lot. I grew up in Chicago and I was raised living in an apartment. And I had no yard. I had about a 4X4 foot patch of dirt in front of my apartment…there was no grass. There was maybe a little bit of parkway in front of all the apartments, and there were no [single-family] houses anywhere in sight. I played in the alley when I was growing up.

By directing attention to places, participants deflected attention from themselves. Although their remarks support notions of "place identity" and "topophilia" in which people construct personal relationships with environments (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983; Tuan, 1990), the audience receives these narratives about place as being relational with the environment and, in doing so, attention is directed toward the environments at-hand. The remarks of participants described places they had come to know, thereby leading to discussions about place, seemingly not about themselves or their ideological beliefs. Because of the perception that this discussion was about places and not about themselves as individuals, the conversations about place meanings and landscape values unfolded effectively. For example, in her final reflection, Frances wrote "I really don't like public speaking, but talking about something I know about and love helps me to become a better speaker." Valerie wrote "Sharing memories of places is as good as any ice breaker." From both the transcripts of the learning circles and the final reflections of the "blue books," the findings suggest participants were represented and framed by others in relationship to their landscapes and meanings developed from them.

Building contexts for representation of place meaning

Describing special places was often told as a *personal* history of a participant's association with it. Participants were asked to tell others about their important places, and their meanings were developed through a telling of place history that focused on the participant's relationship with the place. Rose's portrayal of the Urbana Farmer's Market prompted a group discussion of the market's dog policy:

> Rose: I go to the Farmer's Market about 10:00 or a little after, but I take my poodle with me. And so, I find that there's lots of dogs then.
>
> Jill: So the dogs are all socializing, and people are socializing, little kids come up and the parents aren't sure if it's a friendly dog, and so they'll ask.
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> Melissa: It's like an alternative dog party.
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> Darla: It's really funny because they tried to fight the dogs at first, and it was illogical that you don't have dogs there with all those people, and it just didn't work. People just kept coming with their dogs….because they're on their walks. You know people are taking their dogs out in the morning.
>
> Jill: Well, I [usually] don't bring mine because the first time we went they realized there was food, and all they wanted to do was snuffle along the ground because there's food on the ground…..This one time I brought my yellow lab because I knew I was going to be there all day and she's kind of entertaining the people, and I had bought some of the popcorn, and she loves popcorn, so she was literally doing acts for everybody to get popcorn. It was pretty funny. So it was my way of drawing people in.

This interchange about the dog policy at the market provided a specific example of participants telling of their lived experience, and in doing so, developing a social context to understand place meanings. In the above case, a few of the participants are telling their own histories of bringing dogs to the market, and these histories not only embody their place meanings for the market, but depict needs and activities of their daily lives.

The conversation continued with a discussion about the function that the market served to build a sense of community, and included participants talking about its connections to desirability of nearby real estate, propensity of garage sales in nearby neighbourhoods and their enhancement on a sense of community, expansion of store hours in downtown Urbana, activities at the market to bring children together, and the selection of vendors at the market in response to changing values of the community and increased diversity in shoppers. There were several community-based values that emerged in discussion of the place meanings of the market. These

values were easy to express and understand due to their portrayal as part of participants' lived experiences with the market and their collective sense of loss during the winter months.

Participants' comments in their "blue books" also indicated that learning social contexts helps to understanding place meanings. Bernard wrote "It was neat to hear about other people's perceptions and histories. This has helped me to see some of the places differently." Brad wrote "The next time I go to Busey Woods, I will think of Frances and her sisters collecting walnuts with her grandmother. I didn't even know there were walnut trees growing there." By telling the social contexts of place meanings, they were easily understood by participants to the point where several participants changed their place meanings, or at least, will "see some of the places differently."

Teaching place history

The learning circles allowed a teaching of place history in order to appreciate reasons for current conditions and to enhance the ability of others to interpret the landscape. Several participants' discussion of place meanings addressed questions about "Why has a place become the way that it is?" In essence, they were telling others about their way to read the landscape. For example, Emily discussed the evolution of a local waterway:

> Emily: Does everyone know where the Boneyard [Creek] starts?....It starts in Northwest Champaign out by whatever the school is out on Bradley. . . . way up north and there's always been flood issues. . . .And so at one time it handled the water when it was all prairie, it handled it, it could handle the water, but as Urbana and Champaign grew, and put more concrete down, and it couldn't handle [the water] any longer. You go back in records they've been dealing with the Boneyard forever. Because it just never could handle all the water that comes off the land. . . .This [the picture] is the Boneyard flood control [reservoir]. A lot of people don't know about this.

By telling our place histories to others, we share our rationales for ways in which a place came into being. Story-telling can contribute to creation of a legend about a place that others come to reproduce. The public sharing of place histories, particularly in the above case of the Boneyard, was framed as teaching about place and meant to enlighten others about reading, and possibly appreciating, the local landscape.

Some of the participants indicated that place histories were meaningful to appreciate the locale in the reflections written in their "blue books." Rose writes "It is great to know that people share some common beliefs and it's good to think about what is different. Knowing how our histories affect our attitudes [about places] is very interesting."

Understanding difference

With the focus on places, differences between place meanings became non-threatening, friendly, and easily understood and received. Dialogue about commonalities and differences among participants in the learning circles appeared smooth and progressed without the anxiety one might expect at traditional forums of public involvement – such as public hearings or planning workshops. For example, Toni discussed her appreciation for the agricultural landscape in Illinois, and contrasts it with an earlier depiction of it being "flat and ugly."

> Toni: [Illinois is] not flat. I mean you said, oh yeah, it's flat, but no it's not. It's gentle. And you can see what's coming each year. It's not, what I hated about living out East is you could never see what was coming at you. . . . .when I came back [to Illinois] I really appreciated the beauty of the fields. . . . .I love April when they plow up the dirt and sow. It's just this richness and this vibrant color after all the dead stuff you see all winter long. And then they plant and everything is orderly. All in little rows.

For some people, the learning circles enhanced their own sense of self through comparison with place meanings of others. For example, Emily realized that she took a number of pictures of old buildings and appreciated the old-time architecture. By contrasting her places with the places of others allowed a sense of self-discovery. In introducing herself, Emily, one of the last participants to present her photographs, states:

> I kind of realized that I'm a preservationist, an historic preservationist. Because actually a lot of the pictures I was taking were of old space or things that had been around a very long time, and what I find is I really value downtowns like this…..I think that a sense of a town center is very important, you know, every town needs an identity.

In her reflections from the "blue book" Emily further states that "I learned that I am more of preservationist than I ever realized I am. I also learned that thinking about the future as well as the past is very important to me." In his "blue book," Bud reflects on the discussion by noting "I learned we all have the same values…[even though] a lot of the pictures were different but it seemed to bring us together as a group." The learning circles allowed each participant to situate themselves in the context of place meanings and values of others. By comparing their place meanings to others, they assessed similarities and differences with others, and to various extents the conversation allowed participants to discover both themselves and their community.

Public discussion about racial differences is still an open point. During a private conversation a participant who is African American mentioned a local swimming pool as being segregated when she was a child, and then it opened to all races as she grew older. Some people view the pool as a symbol of change, and there was a sense that the African American community should use the pool and reaffirm the racial integration of public places. However this topic was not mentioned during the learning circles. It could be that each participant discussed only a few of their place meanings, and that this particular place meaning was not a priority to

tell. It also could be that the learning circles created a social norm to represent places in positive ways, and that a negative place meaning – even one of a bygone era – would violate this norm.

Conclusions

The effectiveness of the learning circles is their capacity to shift dialogue from a stakeholder-planner relationship, to a stakeholder-stakeholder relationship, where the planning organization is but one of several stakeholders. Public speaking was noticeably easy for participants, in part, because they were talking about their places not about themselves. Because of this, differences were viewed not between people but between places, and the tension that could align with inter-personal differences was neutralized. Values for landscapes were expressed as part of one's lived experience of place, including the teaching of a landscape's history, and were not abstracted in some ideology, conflict, or adversarial relationship. The learning circles showed promise for public creation of value and legitimation of place meanings by underscoring the extent to which all stakeholders cared about their place and community.

To be sure, sharing stories about places meanings may not be appropriate for all landscape planning contexts and would be one of component of larger frameworks for planning. However their virtue is to provide a positive starting point for public dialogue in which groups of people appreciate each others' place meanings and publically share their emotional attachments to a locale.

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