

11.201, Gateway: Planning Action  
Prof. Xavier de Souza Briggs  
**Lecture 18**

**The role of Public Meetings:**

There are 2 schools of thought about the importance of public meetings:

**1) Public meetings are important**

Public meetings began to be conducted as a way to make planning more participatory. Given the dissatisfaction with technocratic planning – which had no scope for participation – the idea was that public hearings could at least enable consultative participation. In the Boston City Planning culture, public meetings are believed to be very important.

**2) Public meetings are not useful**

They are mere rituals, and the input of the public hardly ever affects the outcome of a policy or project proposal.

***Key Question:***

Does public input affect decision-making? In a public meeting, the public has the opportunity to be present, but are they heard?

While discussing these issues, it is easy to project that these issues are only about power differences, or marginalized groups. This is not true. The questions is, whether planners are culturally competent, whether they can communicate effectively, and be sensitive to cultural differences among groups of stakeholders at a meeting. For example, a planner may be dealing with a stakeholder who is extremely influential in society, and is well-educated, but comes from a different ethnic background than the planner. In this situation, is the planner sensitive to cultural differences?

Planning meetings in communities of a certain ethnicity (e.g. African American or Latino) may consist of not only marginalized stakeholders but powerful stakeholders. In this situation, is a planner of a different ethnic background able to deal with cultural differences between him/her and the stakeholders?

Communities are often identified by how their members speak.  
Speech Communities: Communities defined by shared speech patterns.  
E.g. African American Speech Community

**Group Discussion Questions:**

What are your reactions to the cases from today's readings?  
What are your reactions to the remedies proposed to make planners more effective communicators?

In the North Dakota Case, local authorities were not equipped plan according to conventional standards. The opposition to the developers' plans forced the town officials to regularize their decision-making. Until that point, they had been used to

doing what they pleased. Farmers used moralistic ethics as a basis for their arguments, where as others used a legal ethics. The major decisions about allowing the developer to develop land had already been taken. The goal of the public meeting was only to **accommodate** the decision that had already been made. This society was highly individualistic, because people had been used to making their own decisions. Some stakeholders had mutual interests (e.g. local business leaders and developers) while others had opposing interests (farmers and developers).

Caroline points to the topic of international development to support her view that planners must be culturally sensitive. She says that there is a consciousness about cultural differences when planners undertake international projects. However, his sensitivity is absent when planner deal with projects within the US.

Communication is greatly influenced by culture. People take their cultural norms for granted, and make judgments about how people of a different culture communicate based on their own perception of what is appropriate and what isn't.

In the North Dakota case, expert knowledge was dominant, and farmers opinions were not taken seriously. This technocratic approach to planning has been known to dismiss stories from the ground. Consequentially, farmers (and other marginalized groups) begin to mistrust "expert" farmers.

#### **Communication Problems and Remedies:**

- 1) Human beings have mental filters, and tend to ignore some things that have been said at a meeting, or misinterpret some things. One remedy for this problem would be to write down everything that is said at a meeting. A problem with this solution is that the emotional intensity with which something is conveyed at a meeting cannot be effectively projected in writing.
- 2) Another remedy is to have the facilitator recap what a stakeholder is saying and make sure that the stakeholder's words are being interpreted correctly by the rest of the participants.
- 3) It would also be useful to get background information on the stakeholders prior to the meeting. This prior research could include interviews, informal conversations with insiders, etc. Often, budget constraints do not allow this. An example of background information collection is the idea of Power mapping, where power differences among stakeholders are made explicit by talking to each individual stakeholder, to get an idea of what advantages and disadvantages people bring to the table.
- 4) To build trust among stakeholders, asking open-ended questions might be a good idea. A potential problem with this tactic is that often, marginalized stakeholders are not used to being asked such questions. They want more structure in the questions asked so that they can give specific answers.
- 5) The facilitator should have enough experience to remain strong and not be intimidated by potentially hostile stakeholders. Technically, facilitators have no reason to be intimidated because they are a neutral party. Having said that, other stakeholders should also have this ability to handle high-tension situations. However, it must be acknowledged that we all cannot play facilitators. We can adapt ourselves to a certain extent, but we cannot adopt a neutral approach on every issue.

- 6) Stakeholders should draw from past experiences, take a step back and think about why and how they have reacted to situations in past meetings. This can prevent future prejudices. Teach yourself to think in a different way.
- 7) Use a translator (not just for translation of English, but for translation of complicated technical jargon or formal vernacular into a language that all stakeholders can understand)

Xav's case studies emphasize the importance of non-verbal gestures as communication tools or hazards.

Some definitions:

Non Verbal Gestures: Facial Expressions, Gestures, Body Language

Standard Language: Formal, academic, reinforces power differences

Dialects: vocabulary that is characteristic of specific groups of people

Accents: Sound of Speech

Recommended reading: The power of Babel

### **History of Language:**

It was probably much more difficult for Shakespeare (1564 –1616) to understand old English than it is for us to understand Shakespeare's English. A number of factors are responsible for this:

E.g:

- 1) The printing press
- 2) Mass literacy
- 3) The use of dictionaries

The natural way of speaking has gone through several changes. But the changes have slowed down because language has become more regularized.

### ***Accents: sounds of speech***

People associate certain ethnic groups with specific accents. This leads to stereotypes about certain groups of people. We watched a video on an anti-housing discrimination commercial in which a White male tries to inquire about apartments by using different accents, and it is only when he speaks in the regular "white" accent that he gets a positive response about apartment availability.

Along with accents, names are also ethnically identifiable. However, accents are a much stronger indicator of ethnic identity. Schools in Cambridge, MA have speech classes to regularize accents.

### ***Video # 2:***

*"Do you Speak American?"*

This video is about African American English versus Mainstream English. Schools have attempted to equip young African American students with basic knowledge of mainstream English, because it is the norm in professional communication.

**Conclusions:**

Intelligence should not be correlated with someone's ability to speak mainstream "American". There is a debate on what stance society must take on the issue of different dialects. Should other dialects of English be tolerated even though they do not conform to the rules of conventional English?

Planners must keep in mind these cultural nuances and be culturally competent in public meetings in order to restructure the existing order of decision-making.