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COMMENT



Giusy Pappalardo responds to her commentators of the *Interface*, “Learning from practice: environmental and community mapping as participatory action research in planning” (Volume 18, 2017, Issue 1)

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To the Commentators of the *Planning Theory and Practice Interface* “Learning from practice: environmental and community mapping as participatory action research in planning” (2017, Volume 18, Issue 1), thank you for your inspiring contributions focusing on how communities and planners learn to face challenges in arduous contexts by working together.

The *Interface* draws on the interview that Daniela De Leo and John Forester conducted with me about an ongoing participatory action research process in the Simeto Valley. The process has been developed in the context of a long-lasting university–community partnership that started in 2008 between the Ecological Environmental Design Lab (LabPEAT) and a network of local nongovernmental organizations in eastern Sicily, Italy.

The *Interface* draws upon one stage in the process, a community mapping initiative. Based on my experiences it provides an account of our practices, reflecting on several key themes including participatory techniques, creativity and conflicts in planning processes, approaches for co-production of knowledge, skills acquired by planners in the field, and new challenges for planning curricula.

It has been a great honor for me to be part of a debate about community mapping as a process for co-producing knowledge and for planning/acting to creatively change the status quo, which in my native context – Sicily – is characterized by a lack of social and institutional capital and unbalanced relations of power with ties to Mafia dynamics.

I have enjoyed sharing my experience, my work and my reflections. I have gained renewed awareness when reading my words back in print one year after the interview. I have learned even more reading the comments made by the various contributors to the *Interface*. As a result, I have decided to nurture this ‘open dialogue’ by writing this response.

First of all I want to express my appreciation for the autobiographical approach undertaken by the researchers, and the value this approach offers as a reflective practice tool. It has been interesting to experience this firsthand and to see how it can enable in-depth investigation into a topic and open new avenues for questioning. The various theoretical and practical backgrounds of the contributors offer suggestive ideas that may assist in communicating how to “work practically and work well ... not only to make plans and then hope for the best” (p. 128).

Laura Saija, Daniela De Leo and John Forester set the Sicilian context in the introduction: “here people exchange favors to advance each other’s interest (often in sharp contrast to any public interest). Experts call this a ‘mafio-genous’ (Mafia-generating) sociocultural system, one providing the humus

for the criminal organization called the Mafia for which Sicily is so famous" (p. 128). I believe this is a central point for understanding what we have tried to accomplish through the community mapping initiative. We have tried to start a collective learning process through the act of 'mapping together' in contrast to 'doing things for privileged, selfish interests'. This process, which did not end with the map or the River Agreement, has been initiated with a long-run perspective. We know that we still have a long way to go in order to disrupt the unbalanced relations of power that produce the 'mafio-genous' sociocultural system. The community mapping is only a first seed that we hope to see flourishing in the years to come. Although there have been many imperfections, you have to start somewhere.

Reading Ives Rocha's contribution, I found myself reflecting on the opportunity of "distributing the role (of facilitators) amongst the participants" (p. 141). I totally agree with this statement and I think it is a crucial point. Due to the partiality of my account, I did not put the right emphasis on how we have tried to build a mechanism of handover for the participatory process. The participatory presidium actually acts as a group of facilitators that are learning how to "listen and give voice to everyone" (p. 141) in working groups. In terms of the overall organization and conduct of the participatory process, we still have to improve the mechanism that we have envisioned through the River Agreement. We are definitely experiencing the "discrepancy between the sense of time felt by those in the territory and those in the municipal administrations" (p. 142) and this may lead to frustration. I am stimulated by the idea of having a "treasure map" (p. 142) that may have clear milestones and clear progress indicators; it may act as a device for all the participants to see where we have come from, how many steps we have made, how many steps we can take in the short-run and the long-run perspective. A treasure map might become a creative device for our future public meetings.

Reading Bjørn Sletto's contribution, I have reflected on the opportunity of "leveraging creativity to focus participants' vision on the future, thus allowing participatory action researchers and residents to at least momentarily move beyond past frustrations and positioning to attend instead to the most difficult questions in planning" (p. 143): "Now what?" or "Then what?" It is actually the necessity of moving forward that has animated the creation of the community mapping initiative and the subsequent River Agreement. Although there have been several phases of stasis, the participants who have been involved in the River Agreement have constantly tried to answer the "Now what?" or "Then what?" questions. There will always be multiple and confused answers, and planners should help in cultivating creativity that leads towards more organized outcomes. This is still an ongoing challenge in the Simeto process. Another crucial point involves an emancipatory purpose: "not merely of disrupting social and material relations that drive conflict but also dominant planning rationalities that unfortunately may serve to reproduce unequal relations of power" (p. 143). This is an ambitious challenge that is related to the way planning tools are conceived. The simpler they are, the more inclusive they can be. Recalling debates about technocracy, the aim is to avoid imposing an unbalanced relation of power through technical knowledge. In this regard we have been deeply inspired by the work of indigenous communities in Latin America as well as Native Americans in the north. Personally I am fascinated by these worlds and I have learned how the specificities of each context demands reflection on the particular approaches adopted in different circumstances.

Reading Jason Corburn's contribution, I consider the opportunity to deepen the concept of a "technology of humility" (p. 144). This framework really explains what I think is crucial in disrupting unbalanced relations of power: overcoming technocracy to shape a more democratic planning. One focus is on the word "technology," which recalls devices, tools and organized structures. A wise use of technology should assume the perspective of a collective advancement of knowledge rather than an exclusive use of knowledge for perpetrating oppression. The focus on the word "humility" contrasts with the Greek concept of hubris that might lead to some errors.

In most public settings, professionals are encouraged to demonstrate their proficiency and fluency with problem solving, and they frequently downplay or just ignore what falls outside their field of vision, perhaps overstating whatever falls within that scope. For instance, statistics offer a choice between type 1 and type 2 errors. The first contributes to false positives, the second to false negatives, which might keep us from acting when we ought ... (p. 145).

I have then reflected on the importance of avoiding the type 3 error of “getting the right answer to the wrong question” (p. 145).

Reading Baraka Mwau’s contribution, I have reflected on the process of learning, not only in terms of planning education but also in terms of ‘mutual learning’ in the field. On one side, there is the need to prepare students – such as I was – to develop practical skills for managing an engagement process. On the other side, there is the richness of different backgrounds and perspectives that are blended during such an engagement process. In this sense, the practical experience that I had the fortune of developing in my master’s studies is a valuable opportunity that should be included in planning curricula more widely. Yet, this is still not common practice and I think it is important to advocate and push toward an

overarching objective to build a theory and community of practice [with] community planning centres or research programmes where students will be presented with an opportunity to test normative theoretical knowledge alongside technical skills in contexts necessitating public debate about inequalities, disenfranchisement, and overlapping power relations – formal and informal – amid urgent pressures for change, as portrayed in Simeto Valley ... (p. 149).

Reading Alberto Magnaghi’s contribution, I was drawn to his precious insights on the competence to be developed in planning curricula. The nexus between artistry and governance opens up interesting scenarios for overcoming the idea that inhabitants are consumers and building a common sense of active citizenship.

But what I have focused upon the most is the concept of ‘reciprocity.’ I think this is the core of what we do when we work with communities outside academia, and somehow I would extend that concept to include the wider scientific community. I think reciprocity is the key for really advancing knowledge, inside and outside the walls of our universities.

This is the main reason why I felt obliged to share these short notes about my thoughts on reading the *Interface*. I want to keep the cycle of reflection going on these topics. Perhaps I have not added that much to what has already been said; maybe I should have included all of the literature that may be referenced to support my words. Regardless, I hope there will be further opportunities to deepen this discussion in the same ‘mood of learning’ that has animated the ‘collective approach to planning’ of my fellow co-researchers in practice, from the LabPEAT and the Simeto Valley communities.

Thank you for what I have learned through your words in this *Interface*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Giusy Pappalardo is a postdoctoral Research Fellow in Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Catania. She won the first prize in a national competition, “La Città dei Cittadini,” for the Community Mapping Initiative in the Simeto Valley. With a PhD in Environmental Planning and Design from the University of Catania, she spent a year at Mississippi State University, USA, as a Fulbright Fellow. Her research focuses on improving riverine ecosystems in distressed communities lacking democratic processes. She has been working with the Simeto community since 2009, and she is currently collaborating on the Simeto River Agreement, a plan for social-ecological revitalization, working with the 10 municipalities that signed the agreement, as well as with regional boards and national agencies.