# Service-Learning at the American Community College

## Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives

Edited by

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## Mapping Routes to Our Roots: Student Civic Engagement in Transportation Planning

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The best assets of any community college are their students. Students learn, grow, thrive, and, often, remain in their community to help others do the same. They are vital to the development of their communities. Their voices, unfortunately too often silent to policy makers, can contribute to sustainable futures for the cities and towns in which they dwell. Their experiences and stories can enlighten others about how people live in a place and how those places can be made better for those who live there. How can these voices be heard? Can students at a community college help to generate public participation in government planning? Can they use their roots in the community to help their community find a voice? In this chapter, I discuss the theoretical and conceptual grounding for the "Partnership for Inclusive, Cost-Effective Public Participation" (PICEP2), a model of curriculum for Communication courses at Manchester Community College (MCC) in Manchester, Connecticut, that was designed to amplify citizen voices in government public engagement efforts. This project, which I created through funds from the Federal Transit Administration, is an example of using service-learning with community college students (and their networks) to bring previously silenced voices into efforts to solve/satisfy community/public (transportation) needs. It also indicates: (1) the direct connection between service-learning and participatory action research; (2) the direct role theory can play in project design; and (3) the real and unique contributions community college students, as community members, can make to mandated community-participation processes (as network bridges to additional participants).

## The Project: Partnership for Inclusive, Cost-Effective Public Participation (PICEP2)

The PICEP2 developed out of studying public voice in community governance. While in graduate school for my PhD in communication, I studied public involvement in government. I became fascinated by the work of Danish planning scholar Bent Flyvbjerg, particularly his ability to draw on theory to help describe and explain massive infrastructure projects and produce critical work of tremendous value. Having always been fascinated by civic and community life, I volunteered to serve as my hometown's alternate representative to my regional planning agency, the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission. In addition to learning about the broad spectrum of activities in which planning agencies engage, I gained a great deal of knowledge about the dearth of transportation options in Western Massachusetts. Though there was a rail line running parallel with the Connecticut River, the train did not run with enough frequency to spur the economic development that would come with linking (via Connecticut) to rail connected to New York City. Citizens would have to demand it, I learned, so I initiated a region-wide citizens' activist group, the Pioneer Valley Advocates for Commuter Rail. In doing so, I became aware of how little citizens believed their opinions mattered. Soon I became known in my community for my understanding of both transportation and communication. While serving on another town board, a fellow board member who worked for an international transportation planning firm informed me of a grant that the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) was offering to scholars who could help address a key problem in transportation planning: getting people with low incomes, racial and ethnic minorities, and youth engaged in legally required public involvement efforts. He shared a study with me that demonstrated the kinds of efforts planners used to engage these "hard-to-reach" groups. He offered his pro bono assistance on the grant application for the FTA's Public Transportation Participation Pilot Program (PTP-4), and another colleague who had done a great deal of community engagement work joined the team.

With my background as a transportation activist, community member, and college professor at MCC in Manchester, Connecticut, I wanted to create a model of curriculum that would address planners' needs for public engagement, community members' needs to have a say in the kinds of transportation modes, services, schedules, and funding systems that are designed to meet their needs, and college students' needs to participate in meaningful coursework. Thus, at its core, I developed PICEP2 to engage community college students' existing connections with their own community groups (whether through work, social life, religious affiliation, or other) as bridges for public participation in planning or government engagement.

In 2009, the PTP-4 funded the PICEP2 at $77,368.65. With these funds, I was able to hire project staff members, purchase a sturdy high-quality audio recorder, supply food for meetings, and obtain a course release each semester of the project. The project involved students in two of my communication courses at MCC, Public Speaking and Group Communication. In each course, students traditionally learn the discipline's central ideas of understanding audiences, crafting effective and appropriate messages, and sensitivity to context. Through PICEP2, these ideas were

applied to understanding community groups, crafting questions and responses that helped elicit discussion about transportation within these groups, and comprehending how cultural background and life situations help to shape people's responses in the discussion.

My spring 2010 Public Speaking classes assisted staff in conducting a kick-off meeting for the project with 47 government, community, and business leaders, students, faculty, and administration. Students promoted this event, helped with implementing it, and were active members of the discussions. MCC's president, Dr. Gena Glickman, opened the meeting, which included a multicourse meal prepared and served by MCC's Culinary Arts students (and funded by the President's Innovation Fund). Participants at each table talked about the scope of students' fall 2010 and spring 2011 PICEP2 work. Working across the tables, participants then decided that students would focus on understanding transportation needs across all modes (walking, biking, bus, car, rail, etc) in the Greater Hartford region. To do so, students would connect with community groups to conduct discussions about transportation at the times and places where the groups already meet, recording their discussions digitally and via field notes.

In the fall of 2010, the project got underway. On the first day of class, students enrolled into two sections of Public Speaking and a single Group Communication course learned that their sections would be doing service-learning to assist their communities and regional planners in public engagement on transportation planning. The Public Speaking students would be researching, writing, and conducting speeches on transportation and helping to facilitate the group discussions noted above. The Group Communication course's students had additional work. In addition to conducting two discussions, they would draw on insights from ethnography of communication and consultations with planners to develop a discussion guide, and they would also analyze their own class-based group communication dynamics. Guest speakers on transportation planning were invited to speak to both the Public Speaking and Group Communication courses.

The major work for students' preparation and leadership of the discussions involved the following steps. Students learned about transportation planning and public involvement. They learned about the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Participation (International Association of Public Participation 2007b), and they agreed to adhere to IAP2 Core Values and Code of Ethics for Public Participation Practitioners (International Association for Public Participation 2007a; International Association of Public Participation, n.d.) Students worked in research teams based on the geographical proximity of their residences. Each research team generated a list of groups to which they belonged, from family to religious organizations, sports to work. Students selected a community group and contacted a non-class member representative of that group to ask for permission to conduct a 30–60 minute discussion on transportation needs at a time and place where the group normally meets. Students conducted the discussions, recording observations in ethnographic field notes. They administered written questionnaires to community group participants, assisting if needed. For example, if some people had trouble reading, students would read the questions aloud. They also audio-recorded the discussions, which were transcribed by a paid professional service. Students presented findings related

to transportation needs at an end-of-semester symposium. The symposium included group posters, dinner, and select student speeches. Audience members included community group members, planners, academics, transit providers, and government and business leaders. This process was refined and repeated with three Public Speaking classes in the spring 2011 semester. Since Group Communication had a low enrollment that semester, the course was canceled.

## Theoretical Bases for PICEP2

Various literatures helped to shape the PICEP2. Since the FTA was looking for whether certain kinds of innovative methods of public participation would be effective, I drew upon theories of service-learning and participatory action research within communication studies, ethnographies of communication and group deliberation, and public participation and transportation sources. Through this review of the theoretical bases for the project, I will demonstrate how service-learning can be a form of action research, and how theoretically informed design can craft a project that meets (and exceeds) legal mandates for public involvement.

### Participatory Action Research and Service-Learning

PICEP2 emerged out of a need for improved public participation in policy planning and a need for engaged student learning. Students, involved as co-researchers and as members of the community groups with which they met, amplified community group voices and connected those who had been labeled as "hard-to-reach" with those who need to reach them. This type of pedagogy, which is "translational" (Frey 2009, 205) or "makes a difference" (Kahl Jr. 2010, 298), affects how professors present material, how knowledge of communication practices become present to students, and how improved communication becomes manifest within a community:

Communication is not only the outcome of learning an individual skill (through which one's competence in society can be measured) but is also central to the process of learning, and key to constructing engaged participation in a civil society. If individuals make meaning of themselves and society through communicative processes, then participation is itself defined in and through communication; without communication, participation in society would be impossible. (Cooks, Scharrer, and Castaneda Paredes 2004, 44)

Service-learning is one such example of such this type of pedagogy: students learn about communication while engaging in communication in service to their communities. They apply what they learned to real-world situations and needs.

Service-learning is often coupled with participatory action research. Schensul and Berg (2004) link service-learning and participatory action research in the following way:

Action research as service-learning is an activist oriented participatory approach to addressing social problems that utilizes ethnographic research methods

together with the critical theories of anthropology, sociology, and education to involve community members in identifying, conducting research on, and working to resolve social problems that affect them, their peers and their communities. (76)

Paired together, service-learning and participatory action research contribute to students' understanding of local political communication dynamics (in contrast with national political communication) (Townsend 2006) and engaged students' intellects, bodies, and senses of selves as civic agents.

### Ethnography of Communication

The PICEP2 is based in ethnography of communication (Hymes 1962) and cultural discourse analysis (Carbaugh 2007). Ethnography of communication is both a theory and a method of conducting research that "embraces cultural diversity and uses this diversity to understand what is particular and what is general in discourse and communication across cultures" (Scollo 2011, 5). It seeks first to understand how it is that people communicate. Often using native informants, ethnographers of communication engage in intense participant observation while recording observations and making initial interpretations in field notes. In order for this research to approach validity, participant observations must involve close and careful knowledge of the scene, setting, participants, acts, act sequence, emotional tone, means, norms, and genres in speaking events. This holistic view of the broad and specific contexts that shape communication requires the researcher to demarcate the boundaries of her or his observations.

Cultural discourse analysis (Carbaugh 2007) is a further development of the ethnography of communication where the major focus is on the ways of being, acting, relating, feeling, and dwelling in a speech community. This theoretical framework, elaborated elsewhere (Townsend 2013), presumes that because native members of a speech community already know, understand, and have the trust of their community members, they will choose those ways of communicating when in that community. In other words, because an outsider may not understand the rules for speech and social interaction in a community, they may have less success in communicating with that community. In the PICEP2, students, who were members of many of the groups with which they met, led group discussions using a discussion guide that they helped to create using ethnography of communication concepts like setting, scene, participants, ends/outcomes, among others.

### Group Communication

While ethnography of communication can address any communicative actions, group discussions are a particular kind of interaction that has its own literature in the discipline of communication. Group communication and deliberation scholarship (Gastil 2009) the practice of public involvement or engagement (International Association of Public Participation 2009) also inform this work. Groups across the world communicate in ways that seem natural to them and enact different forms

of making decisions. The PICEP2 asked group members to make decisions, to be *deliberative*, on a subject that government needs them to discuss. To be deliberative, a discussion "establishes a solid information base, prioritizes the key values at stake, identifies a broad range of solutions, looks carefully at the advantages, disadvantages, and tradeoffs among choices, and ultimately makes the best judgment" (Gastil 2009, 2). Students' crafting of the discussion guide included deliberative activities where group members needed to weigh what was most important to them, whether government dollars should go toward one mode of transportation over another, or whether a particular mode of transportation was deemed to be better for the environment.

Because deliberation has been so strongly aligned with democracy, and because some organizations realize the importance of having *everyone* participate in democratic discussions, community colleges are an ideal place for students to serve as facilitators of group decision making and deliberation. Yet even Carcasson, Black and Sink's (2010) exhaustive review of work in communication on deliberation in higher education ignores how community college students in communication classes can create or use deliberative spaces in their communities of origin. Thankfully, one network of organizations affiliated with the National Issues Forum Institute does include community colleges. The National Issues Forum Institute (and other organizations like it, e.g., the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation) draws upon communication research and supports other institutions, like colleges, in the conducting of public deliberation. Most notable is Arizona's Maricopa Community College Center for Civic Participation. In an interview, its director, Alberto Olivas, a national leader among deliberation researchers and practitioners, noted that community colleges are less prominent among colleges that engage in deliberative forums. Yet, he also cited distinct benefits of deliberation at community colleges:

On any effort where you need to try and attract members of the community to a public event on an issue, community colleges make more sense. A lot of times in the past, people would host these things in official government offices, like the County Board of Supervisors auditorium, or the Secretary of State's offices. Most members of the public don't know where those places are. But everybody knows where the community college is, even if you've never taken a class there. Most people know what their local community college is and how to get there. And it seems available to people in a way that state university campuses oftentimes do not. [. . .] community colleges tend to enjoy a high degree of confidence, a trust, by the community members. We're trusted. We're seen as a resource. And people know how to get to us. (Olivas 2010, n.p.)

The significant role that community colleges play in communities helped shape the PICEP2. In the PICEP2, I sought to connect the orientation provided by ethnography of communication and cultural discourse analysis with knowledge about group deliberation at community colleges as a way to meet a need for participatory engagement in planning process. Yet I did not limit discussion location to the community college; instead students were asked to hold discussions in those places where community groups regularly gather.

## Transportation Planning and Community College Engagement

Developed with funding from the US Department of Transportation Federal Transit Administration's (FTA) Public Transportation Participation Pilot Program (PTP-4), the PICEP2 aims to fulfill and surpass legal mandates for minimum public involvement, mandates that developed in 1946 (McComas 2001). Public involvement became part of transportation planning starting with the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991 through the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) in 1998, and expanded in the 2005 Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) (Smith 2006). The current legislation, the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) (P.L. 112–141), continues where SAFETEA-LU left off. Metropolitan Planning Organizations are required to have a plan detailing how they will involve the public. Before a project is developed, environmental review processes mandated by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) require public involvement. And transit agencies in relation to FTA programs must also conduct public involvement that is environmentally "just" or fair and equitable to all.

This notion of environmental justice, which is part of Environmental Justice Executive Order 12898 signed in 1994, refers to "the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies" (US Environmental Protection Agency 2012). The Environmental Protection Agency explains that meaningful involvement entails that "people have an opportunity to participate in decisions about activities that may affect their environment and/or health" (US Environmental Protection Agency 2012). It also calls for the provision of public participation for minority and low-income communities. The efforts of transportation planners and those focused on transit seem to be thoughtful and reflective about their need to engage these various publics. For example, the PTP-4 was designed to fund innovative research projects that would deepen and broaden public participation in transit planning. In particular, it emphasizes the development of specific ways to connect with "hard-to-reach" populations and remain sensitive to cost. The PICEP2 addressed these concerns by engaging community college students, who are members of the communities sought by planners, as leaders of and partners in public engagement. In so doing, it evidenced how community colleges can serve as cost-effective resources for future and different public engagement efforts.

### Conclusion

At the onset of PICEP2, I applied for and received Institutional Research Board approval from MCC to study this project. As a result, I would like to conclude this chapter with a brief summary of the project's findings. In total, PICEP2 engaged 95 students as trained facilitators and ethnographic recorders of group deliberation. In turn, these students engaged 29 different community groups, including Spanish-speaking church parishioners; a fantasy soccer league; nursing home staff; a senior center belly-dancing class; high-school students in a social studies class; members of the

a male minority group mentoring association; a ballroom dancing club; volunteer firefighters; a college women's basketball team; student study groups; social service agency staff; a junior police group for middle-school aged youth; clients at a homeless shelter; a dentist's office staff; and more. Nearly every group queried granted students' requests to conduct a discussion.

As indicated in the project's Final Report (Townsend 2012), participants' post-discussion questionnaires ($n$ = 108) yielded interesting descriptive data about the breadth of public involvement in students' transportation discussions: 42 percent of participants were in either high school or college; 47 percent were male; 53 percent were female; 56 percent lived in Manchester or Hartford; 59 percent self-identified as nonwhite; 16 percent spoke a language other than English at home; 25 percent took their own vehicle to school or work; 53 percent took a bus to school or work; 8 percent had previously contacted a government agency; and 8 percent had previously attended a public meeting. The mean age of participants was 28; the mode age was 17; and the median age was 18. The questionnaires also asked participants to describe their prior interest in participating in local transportation planning issues in their community at a level of 1.5 out of 5 (where 1 = not interested; 5 = very interested). Subsequent to the discussion, participants reported that their current interest level in participating in local transportation planning issues in their community increased to 2.6 out of 5.

Participants had much to say about transportation needs, reporting major concerns with bus availability, promptness, driver-rider interaction, and safety and comfort. Those with the lowest, or no, income were particularly concerned about bus ticket prices, arguing that free bus passes ought to be provided to seniors and the homeless. Students' ethnographic data revealed that participants' concerns spanned the following issues: respect for users of public transportation; the convenience, time, affordability, route and mode of availability of public transportation; the comfort, cleanliness, and safety of public transportation; passenger interactions on public transportation; their ability to have a voice and feel valued in discussions of transportation planning; bicycles, children and strollers; walking and sidewalks; and public involvement and efficacy in shaping transportation policy and practice.

As evidenced, participants wanted to be involved and to have a say in how their communities are structured. A primary concern holding many participants back from full expression of their democratic rights in this regard was their perception that they were insignificant to transit providers or to government more broadly. Thus, the first major finding of this project is that group discussion sessions can help to both involve and value the input of community members on matters of transportation. Student reflections also provided data for project analysis. In these writings, students expressed surprise at how participants responded to them and with their success in the assignment. In some of the writing, students noted their own transformation: "It was a great experience for me. I have never had to speak to a large group of people outside of class. It was good to feel that we were able to engage them even if it was only for a short period of time. I felt that they respected us and we even got some handshakes on our way out." Transformations focused on their developing communicative abilities. However, they were not convinced that it would work, as this student's reflection shows: "At first I thought this was a pointless exercise in public speaking, but I quickly realized you know what you are doing

and that it was very valuable for me. It is something that will help me in life not just in your class." Participatory action research can bring powerful changes to people's ways of interacting with the world.

Beyond how the experience could benefit them personally, students also noted the importance that public participation has for people who are traditionally marginalized in such processes. Some students were aware that their role in connecting two spheres—the public, and the planners and service providers—was a position of importance, as this student's writing demonstrates: "I am also grateful for the privilege of being their voice on improving the fairness, convenience and safety of public transportation because many of them are non-participants of meetings like this." A different student explained, "It was nice for kids who can't get their voices heard to actually have that happen, they seemed surprised that people actually do care about how they feel. They also seemed shocked that what they think really does matter." The potential for transformation moved from "self" to "other people" sometimes also resulted in a third shift, a move to "society." This student was able to see the bigger picture of the role of public participation in a democratic society: "Connecticut cannot fix its transportation until it fixes communication. It has to reach out to those most affected by our state's numerous transportation issues, as there is no point in living in a democracy if your voice cannot be heard." And lastly, this student's reflection summarizes the entire experience:

I think the most important part was we the students were almost like teachers in a way. We had to gather the information by ourselves to have a meeting based around the information we gathered and we needed to attend meetings out of class to get the information. This is a lot of responsibility that you don't receive in other classes. I think this was the key to the amazing learning environment that we had. We felt that what we did mattered and that what we were doing in and out of class not only mattered to our grades but it mattered to the community. What we did in class was going to make a positive effect on something more than us and that was honestly a really great feeling. I felt like this was more than school for once. I was doing something for a greater cause and going into it I was a little nervous thinking how the hell am I going to do this, I don't know anything about transportation but that wasn't the case at all and I was delighted with the end results that we made.

As indicated, students learned core topics and methods in communication through direct action in their communities. They also engaged "hard-to-reach" (or "under-heard") publics in ways that have proven difficult—but essential—to public planning efforts in the past. Having the trust of "hard-to-reach" (or "under-heard") groups eased students' participation; they were seen as liaisons that could be trusted to both receive the opinions and then share them with the transit providers and transportation planners. This trust was generated in several ways: (1) students were themselves part of the "under-heard" population already connected to the community groups with which they partnered and (2) students were prepared theoretically and practically for an intervention in their communities that had the potential for development of both themselves and their communities. Thus, the second major finding of this study is that, when armed with the appropriate theoretical knowledge

a male minority group mentoring association; a ballroom dancing club; volunteer firefighters; a college women's basketball team; student study groups; social service agency staff; a junior police group for middle-school aged youth; clients at a homeless shelter; a dentist's office staff; and more. Nearly every group queried granted students' requests to conduct a discussion.

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and that it was very valuable for me. It is something that will help me in life not just in your class." Participatory action research can bring powerful changes to people's ways of interacting with the world.

Beyond how the experience could benefit them personally, students also noted the importance that public participation has for people who are traditionally marginalized in such processes. Some students were aware that their role in connecting two spheres—the public, and the planners and service providers—was a position of importance, as this student's writing demonstrates: "I am also grateful for the privilege of being their voice on improving the fairness, convenience and safety of public transportation because many of them are non-participants of meetings like this." A different student explained, "It was nice for kids who can't get their voices heard to actually have that happen, they seemed surprised that people actually do care about how they feel. They also seemed shocked that what they think really does matter." The potential for transformation moved from "self" to "other people" sometimes also resulted in a third shift, a move to "society." This student was able to see the bigger picture of the role of public participation in a democratic society: "Connecticut cannot fix its transportation until it fixes communication. It has to reach out to those most affected by our state's numerous transportation issues, as there is no point in living in a democracy if your voice cannot be heard." And lastly, this student's reflection summarizes the entire experience:

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and practical training, community college students can serve as effective network bridges between community members and planners.

Area planners have since informed students that they plan to use the project's findings in future work to improve transportation services. They also indicated that they would use the strategy of partnering with community college students as a part of their public involvement efforts in the future. As a result of this feedback and their more general experience with PICEP2, many of the students involved in the project have gone on to positions of leadership, internships, and further involvement in community organizations. For example, after calling out the local bus service provider in a semester's end symposium, one student received an internship with that organization. Another student, who had been uninterested in school, sought greater involvement in school and the community after his participation in PICEP2; he became student government president and had internships with a US Senator and the Governor's Office. He is pursuing further education and a public service career (in transportation or logistics, and the armed forces). Significantly, all PICEP students can indicate on their resumes that they were assistant researchers in a federally funded study. Numerous other outcomes resulted from this work. College-community partnerships were strengthened. Any college is concerned about outreach. Community colleges in particular have partnerships with multiple organizations as part of their foundations. The premise that people will talk with whom they trust was upheld. Where consultants and planners, no matter how well meaning, have difficulty in gaining people's trust to speak with them, this "trust gap" was bridged through the use of students' social networks. Public participation became more deliberative and inclusive. Students saw they were able to bring more people into policy conversations now than previous to their efforts. Interest and involvement amplified while costs were reduced. Typically, consultants who do public engagement work cost tens of thousands of dollars. The PICEP2 dollar costs were under $1000; several hours of student research and faculty time in setting this project up were the personnel costs. Student leadership abilities and civic involvement increased.

Students reflected on their own learning and civic engagement in final speeches for the courses. They were amazed at their own growth, often puzzled that they found such a "random" topic like transportation policy interesting. They felt responsible and engaged in the civic infrastructure of their communities. I was curious about the effects this had on their success in school, if any. In addition to seeking student evaluations in the middle of the course I sought information about how my projects have improved student retention. According to research that the Institutional Research Office at MCC conducted at my request, new and full-time students who took Public Speaking with me in specific semesters where I used community service learning in 2010 were more likely to earn a degree or certificate in the time since their Public Speaking class, 12 percent versus 5 percent.

To conclude, community college student participation in leading deliberative, democratic discussions allows them to exercise civic muscles that they may not have known they had. It can also have a significant impact on the communities from which they come and to which they return. Students' pride in their growth, strength, and accomplishments was heartening for me to witness. Civic participation, once experienced, can become habit-forming. Community college student engagement with their communities, through service-learning is one habit that will increase the power of their communities.

## Note

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