PUBLIC PARTICIPATION:

Finding Knowledge and Clarity in Chaos

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Public Participation: Finding Knowledge and Clarity in Chaos

ABSTRACT

This essay uses the metaphor of chaos as a way to comprehend and deal with the complexity, ambiguity and diversity of public participation in practice and research. The proposition is threefold. First, what we hold to be 'knowledge' is a momentary truth: temporally, spatially and socially bounded. Second, 'chaos' is the crucial factor leading to new ways of thinking. And third, comfort in the process of knowledge generation is key to generating the 'clarity' needed for new visions. The narrative approach encourages readers to take on a collaborative and interactive role with the text as the author explores writing and metaphor as a method of discovery.

Key Words: Public Participation, Narrative Inquiry, Metaphor, Chaos, Knowledge

Public Participation and Metaphor

Public participation is about diversity. Listening to many voices and finding the symphony in the cacophony. What metaphors do you use when you think about public participation? What mental imagery does the choice of words evoke? How does this influence your practice or research? Why? Did reading "finding the symphony in the cacophony" influence your own thinking about participation? In your mental image, are you the conductor, the audience, a musician, an instrument, the lighting system or perhaps the building?

Metaphors are evocative and powerful tools to help us understand one idea by pairing it, or situating it, with another. They are useful for teaching, sharing difficult concepts and improving communications across disciplines or areas of expertise (Casnig, 2006). Is public participation like a florist shop, a symphony, an ecological system, or a building? Metaphors are also embedded in our everyday lives and play a powerful role in how we understand the world and our place in it (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The frameworks of metaphor influence the perspectives and decision-making we use to function and the roles we play within social interactions (Shipley, 2003). Are we engaging in participation with citizens, publics, minorities, stakeholders, decision-makers, or clients? How does the choice of language influence your participatory practices?

Inquiry Approach

Narrative is a qualitative method of inquiry connecting the personal with the cultural. The approach encourages readers to take on a collaborative and interactive role with the text, rather than as passive recipients of knowledge (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Writing can also be a method of discovery. Use of writing in different styles, exploring new metaphors, or viewing an idea from a new angle, can help us to see things in new ways. (Richardson, 1997).

Laurel Richardson proposes five evaluative criteria for creative analytic practices, such as this text. These include: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact, and expression of a reality (2000, p. 937). My proposal to you is that the value of this text is whether or not it raises new ideas, thoughts or questions in your own mind. Does it provoke you to unearth the metaphors you use or develop new ones to help in your own work?

Free-Writing Thought Process

Now, I take the risk of sharing my own thinking process, and invite you to join me. The text below is the free-writing thought process used to explore chaos as a metaphor for public participation.

The text is printed in its entirety and then again in segments with narrative to explain or expound upon the ideas recorded.

Out of chaos comes clarity.

1. Our visions are bounded by that which we accept as reality.
Chaos shakes things up.
>> *That which was up, is no longer*
>> *It could be down, but then again,*
>> *Maybe not.*
>> *… it doesn't matter.*

2. As humans we seek order, specializations, categories of understanding.
>> *Chaos is uncomfortable.*
Chaos Theory: nature is not linear, challenging the "scientific/intellectual."
>> *… does it matter?*

3. Revolution comes from within.
Chaos is our friend; it redefines/realigns/revolutionizes, our concept of reality.
Vision is unbounded.
Clarity comes from re-conceptualization of the whole, the context. The frame of reference.
The point of beginning. It can be a speck or the universe.
>> *… it doesn't matter.*

4. Clarity comes with comfort in chaos. Acceptance.
The question is: are you willing to take the risk?
>> *… it does matter.*

5. Vision cannot be made, given, it is sought.
Clarity is with the process.

Knowledge is a freeze-frame view of chaos.

Narrative

This essay uses the metaphor of chaos as way to comprehend and deal with the complexity, ambiguity and diversity of public participation in practice and research. The proposition is threefold. First, what we hold to be 'knowledge' is a momentary truth: temporally, spatially and socially bounded. Second, 'chaos' is the crucial factor leading to new ways of thinking. And third, comfort in the process of knowledge generation is key to generating the 'clarity' needed for new visions.

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In a Kuhnian sense, revolutions provide an opportunity to re-evaluate what is the state of knowledge which sets the parameters of our reality. These same parameters define the arena within which we allow ourselves to ask questions. In a state of chaos we are free to look beyond, below or around the obvious. The process of participation is the freeing act. Allowing, and accepting, the initial chaos opens up new questions and views. For now, it's not the product that matters but rather the process.

> *2. As humans we seek order, specializations, categories of understanding.*
>   *Chaos is uncomfortable.*
> *Chaos Theory: nature is not linear, challenging the "scientific/intellectual."*
>   *… does it matter?*

The unboundedness which accompanies change is often considered chaotic. We seek to settle back down into an ordered state, as the floating particles of soil settle out of suspension into definable horizontal layers. "We have soothed ourselves into imagining sudden change as something that happens outside the normal order of things. … We do not conceive of sudden radical irrational change as built into the very fabric of existence. Chaos theory teaches us that straight linearity … simply does not exist" (Crichton, 1990, p. 172). Using traditional scientific methods can lead to only a partial perspective of the overall situation. The comfort in familiar decision-making processes is challenged by chaos. Our underlying values and philosophies are exposed and open to re-evaluation. Marshal McLuhan noted the "increasing use of specialization as a way of self-preservation in a rapidly changing society. And yet, the very specialization of our interests may be the demise of our vision (1964, p. 124). What matters is whether or not we choose to experience the temporary discomfort in order to reach a new understanding, a new vision.

> *3. Revolution comes from within.*
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Chaos allows for new perspectives to be explored. The revolution begins from within, be it an individual or a group. Something changes. Things are seen differently. Our anthropocentric senses can easily be tricked into believing illusions to be true or miss things which do not fit into our socialized concepts of reality. Optical illusions are used by magicians and architects alike. Our senses can be distorted with the use of scale, proportion, speed and simple distraction. The magician relies on the old adage that the hand is quicker than the eye. An architect uses grand steps to mark the entrance to Jeffersonian government buildings to emphasize importance. Walt Disney used animation, still life pictures moving so quickly past our eyes that we perceived motion, to entertain. Realities, life worlds, beyond our limited senses and perceptions have been created for audiences of all ages. The list is enormous, so I'll only mention a couple of my personal favorites here: first, the works of Dr. Seuss including *Horton Hears a Who* (1954) and second, Gene Roddenberry's celestial *Star Trek* (1976) adventures. Through these stories and others, such as *Jurassic Park* (Crichton, 1990), *Harry Potter* (Rowling, 1997), and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Lewis, 1980/1866), we learn how to see things a little differently and maybe not take our own selves so seriously.

Lifting the veils imposed by scientific/rational views of the world allows us to use our abilities to respect and enjoy the mysteries of our existence. Participatory practices create a venue for people to

see things in new ways and become their own agents of change. It doesn't matter where we begin, just so long as we begin.

> *4. Clarity comes with comfort in chaos. Acceptance.*
> *The question is: are you willing to take the risk?*
> *... it does matter.*

As freedom is the recognition of necessity, acceptance is the recognition of things we can not control. Taking risks means venturing into things we may not be able to predict or control. Comfort in ourselves allows us the ability to accept chaos. Then we are open to the possibilities which can redefine our concept of reality. Participation is risky business. It means trusting the process and the participants.

> *5. Vision cannot be made, given, it is sought.*
> *Clarity is with the process.*

> ***Knowledge is a freeze-frame view of chaos.***

New visions of knowing and reality can not just be given; they have to be sought. Clarity is brought to the issues through the processes of knowing. Each product we refer to as knowledge is then just a freeze-frame view of chaos. Points, at which we temporarily rest, hold what we believe to be true, and gather our resources to begin the search again.

Finding Knowledge and Clarity in Chaos

Knowledge is a freeze-frame view of chaos, and out of chaos comes clarity, are metaphors to deal with the rich complexities of participation work on a day-to-day basis. The metaphors help to ferret out the important elements needed to continue working, allow for keeping an open mind for new knowledge, and accept that there will be gaps in the information available at any one time. This approach is a broader philosophical framework which can be useful with many approaches to participation, deliberation and dialog.

> "The payoff of chaos is collective vision, an institution of individuals all singing from the same sheet of music. In turn, that means all must have a meaningful voice in the development of mission, vision, values and strategic directions. Without buy-in, there will be cacophony in execution and implementation.
>   All of that sounds wonderful, but it involves so much work for people who are already too busy. Chaotic institutions are places where people must work harder and smarter. Chaotic institutions are not for the faint of heart, the lazy, or those who say, 'tell me what to do.' They are not for those who want to work to the contract. They are for the adventurous, the bold, the committed, the visionary, those who care about their future and the future of the institution, and those who see themselves as leaders from the line." (Perkins et al., 1996, 109).

About the Author

Pat Crawford, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture in the School of Planning, Design and Construction and Senior Director of the Bailey Scholars Program at Michigan State University. She received her BS in Horticulture from the University of Missouri – Columbia,

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