ABSTRACT

In multicultural cities such as Vancouver, high proportions of inner city residents and immigrants (including refugees, domestic care workers, and citizens for whom English is a foreign language) are, for various reasons, socially, economically, and politically excluded from the mainstream. In attempting to narrow the divide that separates those on the “outside” from those on the “inside” of society, the planning profession has become increasingly concerned with the idea of planning with, as opposed to for, marginalized individuals. This approach is most often referred to as “community-based” or “empowerment” planning.

This thesis explores the role conversational English as a Second Language (ESL) can play in the empowerment planning process by analyzing the “ESL Summer Pilot Project” as a case study. Collaboratively planned and implemented with residents of the Downtown Eastside (DTES) who patronize the UBC Learning Exchange, the story/case study reveals how a total of DTES residents helped nearly 70 immigrants practice what they need to effectively integrate into society; that is a cultural understanding of the who, what, where, when, and most importantly, how questions relating to life in Canada, and the means to ask those questions—conversational English. The story also reveals how, by taking a leadership role, these DTES residents were able to increase their sense of self-confidence, self-esteem, and capacity to make a difference in their own lives and communities.

After situating the ESL Summer Pilot Project story in the empowerment planning literature, I based my analysis on my own observations and on those of the nine “ESL facilitators” who participated in the focus groups I led after the pilot had concluded in the summer of 2004. What I found was that the empowerment planning process involves, more than anything, the development of mutually trusting, mindful, and caring “planner-participant” relationships and eventually, “participant-participant” relationships, that rely on the continued use of cross-cultural dialogue (or, in this case, conversational ESL) in order to link people’s knowledge and love to action.
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WHY EMPOWERMENT MATTERS

1.1 FROM MY POINT OF VIEW
Not unlike most children growing up, as a young girl I often complained of this or that being unfair. That is, until the day my aunt turned to me and said, “You know Marisol, one of these days you’re just going to have to accept the fact that life isn’t fair.” Confused and hurt, I was unable to accept my aunt’s advice then, and I am unwilling to now. In particular, I am unwilling to accept that living in poverty is the reality so many people face on a daily basis while others can, and do, simply look on. As Nelson Mandela recently stated, “Poverty is not natural, it is man-made, and can be overcome by the actions of human beings.” I agree. The question is, “how?” “How can you and I, we, make a difference?”

After living and traveling abroad, my search for the answer to this question led me to the University of British Columbia’s (UBC’s) School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP). Originally interested in the international application of a community-based empowerment approach to planning, my focus became localized when an opportunity arose to work in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside (DTES) where poverty, homelessness, mental illness, unemployment, drug trafficking and abuse, and the sex trade are known to be geographically concentrated in a pocket of the city’s otherwise rich (in both literal and figurative terms) urban landscape. As I soon discovered though, the DTES is also where some of Vancouver’s most radical, innovative, friendly, diverse, talented, and sadly, misunderstood, individuals live. Curious as to how these individuals and their talents could be mobilized in ways that could improve the quality of their lives and those of others, my interests in the DTES were peaked when, during a “Community Economic Development” course, I was given the opportunity to develop ideas for a social venture in the DTES; Specifically one that would attempt to connect the assets of the DTES with the needs of wider

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1 Nelson Mandela made this statement in support of the “Make Poverty History” campaign which, led by Bob Gelhard and U2 singer Bono, sought to urge G-8 leaders meeting in Scotland on July 6th, 2005, to commit to relieving African poverty. See website: www.makepovertyhistory.org/video/
society via the University of British Columbia’s (UBC’s) Learning Exchange, an educational outreach initiative in the DTES.

In the summer of 2004, that social venture came to life as the ESL (English as a Second Language) Summer Pilot Project; a project that brought residents of the DTES (as ESL conversation facilitators) together with immigrants (as ESL participants) to learn from and about each other.

In the end, the experience of collaboratively planning and implementing this project with local residents has, above all, taught me how planners such as myself can create conditions that enable marginalized individuals to empower themselves. For this reason, I have decided to use my story of planning the ESL Summer Pilot Project as the subject of my thesis.

1.2 ORGANIZATION OF MY THESIS

There are two basic parts to this thesis. The first part tells the story of the ESL Summer Pilot Project from my subjective perspective, and the second considers the ways in which the story exemplifies how learning and teaching conversational ESL can be an empowering experience for inner city residents and immigrants alike. The following outlines how each part is structured.

Part 1 of the thesis is comprised of three chapters. In this first chapter, I briefly introduce myself as someone who values social justice, and explain how these values brought me to UBC’s SCARP, and later, to its Learning Exchange Storefront Office where I became involved in planning, and later implementing, the ESL Summer Pilot Project. Next, I provide the reader with some contextual background to the DTES and the UBC Learning Exchange respectively. In chapters two and three, I narrate the ESL Summer Pilot Project story from its inception in January 2004 to its completion in September 2004. The story ends with a dialogue that brings the reflections of nine DTES residents (ESL conversation facilitators) into the story’s narrative.

Just in case you are asking yourself “Why is Marisol beginning her thesis with a story?” the reasons are as follows. In her book, Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities in the 21st Century, my professor, Leonie Sandercock, writes: “We can think about planning as performed story” (2003: 203). I like this metaphor because it reflects the
fundamentally important role that action plays in planning on the one hand, and that planners play in this action on the other. Thus, this thesis attempts to re-present my actions (or performance) at the Learning Exchange, in written form as a story. In so doing, I am hoping to convey to you, the reader, how events occurred in real time, and in particular, how the planning and implementation of the pilot project preceded my intentions of it ever becoming a case study to be researched. Furthermore, in assuming the role of storyteller in the first half of my thesis, my aim is give you the chance to formulate your own opinions, feelings, ideas, questions, and conclusions about how the story relates to planning in your world. According to Bent Flyvbjerg,

This approach leaves ample scope for readers to make different interpretations and to draw diverse conclusions. Thus, in addition to the voice of case actors and case narrators, there is space for the voice of the reader in deciding the meaning of a given case and in answering that categorical question of any case study: ‘What is this a case study of?’ (2001: 85. Emphasis added).

In Part 2 of the thesis, I consider how the ESL Summer Pilot Project story relates to the planning profession by abandoning the role of storyteller and assuming the role of researcher. In this latter role, I share how the story (my case study) informs my research questions, methodology, literature review, analysis, and next step recommendations.

1.3 THE SETTING/ CONTEXT

In any story, understanding the setting or context is key to understanding the plot, characters, and narrative- who and what the story is about. That is why, before I begin telling the ESL Summer Pilot Project story, I will first provide you with some of the historical background that a) shaped the DTES into what it is today; and b) led to the establishment of UBC’s Learning Exchange Storefront in Vancouver’s DTES.

The Struggles

“History hangs heavy over the Downtown Eastside.” This statement from Shlomo Hasson and David Ley’s 1994 publication Neighbourhood Organizations and the Welfare State, is a good point of departure for this, or any, discussion about the DTES because, like no other urban space in perhaps all of North America, the DTES is more than a territorially contested place/space, it represents a hugely contested ideological and political struggle. Briefly, here is why.
Chapter 1                                                                                   Why Empowerment Matters

For thousands of years, the south shores of Burrard Inlet were important hunting and fishing grounds for Coast Salish Aboriginals (such as the Musqueam, Kwantlen, Tsawwassen, Cowichan, Saanich, and Stó:Lo). This is why, since time immemorial, the Stó:Lo people have referred to this area as “s’olhtemexw,” which means “our land” or “our world” (Community Directions, 2002). When the expansion of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) reached the Pacific Ocean in 1885 though, it facilitated the progressively westward migration of Europeans (along with all their values and ideologies) to its shoreline. And, as these Europeans (and many of the Chinese who laboured in the treacherous construction of the CPR) began settling on the south shores of Burrard Inlet, “s’olhtemexw” was physically over-taken. In its stead, the area was renamed “Vancouver” in tribute to Captain George Vancouver who “discovered” the Inlet in 1792.

Of the relatively few Aboriginals who survived the decimating small pox epidemics accompanying the arrival of Europeans (which killed approximately 90% of pre-contact Aboriginal populations), most ended up forcibly living on reservations or in residential schools. Sadly, for the Stó:Lo (and all other Aboriginal peoples in the “New World”), “s’olhtemex” - as a territorial claim, an ideological concept, and way of life- was vanquished.2

By the turn of the century, more and more settlers were arriving in the new “City of Vancouver,” the heart of which was located at the intersection of Main and Hastings Street. In 1906, the city’s courthouse relocated to Georgia Street, prompting a gradual migration of the city’s central business district towards the west, and leaving in its wake a physically deteriorating “Downtown Eastside” (DTES). Consequently, by the 1950’s, the intersection of Main and Hastings (the original heart of the city) came to be known instead as the “heart of skid row.” Surprising? Not really. Considering that the city was founded on the displacement of peoples- from the “abruptly de-territorialized” Aboriginals to the growing number of “re-territorialized” immigrants (Harris, 2000:253), the radical demise of the city’s original urban core is perhaps not such an inconceivable outcome. What is inconceivable though, is the fact that some

2 Today the majority of Aboriginal Canadians are living in what are considered by the Assembly of First Nations as “Third World” conditions. For example, see Pieta Woolley’s article “City Natives Split on Tories” in the Georgia Straight newspaper. February 2, 2006, which can be found online at: http://www.straight.com/content.cfm?id=15758
50 years later, the situation in the DTES has not improved. In fact, today the DTES is considered ‘Canada's poorest postal code.’ So why does this “history hang so heavy over the DTES?”

Arguably, the problems the DTES currently face are residual of a politics of discrimination and segregation that governed the city's early development. That, combined with the post-WWII influx of single working class men to the area (most of whom worked in B.C.’s burgeoning resource industries), led to the area becoming officially recognised as a “skid row” by 1965 (where bars, brothels, pawn shops, single room occupancy hotels, x-rated movie theatres etc. started adorning the landscape).

Voicing the Struggles

Over the course of the 20th century, the rich diversity of residents inhabiting Vancouver's DTES came to serve as a force that both divided, and mobilized, residents. As a divisive force, tensions between those residents who wanted to live in the DTES and those who did not ran particularly high. As, the following dialogue between two current residents shows, these tensions are still very much present.

A: “People are down here because they screwed up big time elsewhere.”

B: “What are you talking about? I didn’t end up here, I chose to live here...I could've lived somewhere else!”

Despite these tensions, many residents of the DTES have come together to turn their personal struggles into shared political ones. This mobilization began in 1973 with the formation of the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA), a strong and politically active community-based organization.

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1 Focus group discussion. April 22, 2005.
Since the formation of DERA, more and more community-based organizations have emerged on the scene in Vancouver’s DTES. Combined with all the efforts that growing numbers of non-profit organizations and governmental agencies have made over the years though, it is difficult to understand why, despite all these efforts, the DTES remains the poorest area in Canada. And, from a planning perspective, considering why these numerous public, private, and non-profit organizations have been ineffective in their attempts to noticeably improve the situation in the DTES begs the question, “What alternative approaches to community development should we be starting to explore?”

1.4 THE UNIVERSITY’S PLACE IN THE DTES

Often criticized for promoting competing self-interests, the efforts of the church, government, and the many non-profit organizations located in the DTES have fallen under the scrutiny of many dissatisfied residents, some of whom have gone as far as to say that these organizations and their employees are “poverty pimps.” Founded on the belief that local residents understand the problems affecting them and their communities better than most “outsiders” who work there do, this critique was extended to UBC in 1999 when the university’s president, Martha Piper, announced UBC’s millennium goal was “to reach out to the larger community and play a role in supporting social change [by expanding] its presence in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside” (www.learningexchange.ubc.ca).

As a result of the negative reactions this announcement created amongst many residents of the DTES, a student-led consultation process was commissioned by the UBC President’s Office to determine what contributions the university could positively make in the community from the perspective of DTES residents, merchants, and community organizations.

The findings of this consultation were published in a report entitled Challenge and Promise by Margo Fryer and Brian Lee. In this report, a series of recommendations were made to the university, one of which was to open a community liaison office in

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4 As the 2001 census data shows, the average household income of 79.8% of the DTES population is $15,647 per year (as compared to $57,916 in the rest of Vancouver).
the DTES. In 2000, this office manifested as the UBC Learning Exchange, a community outreach storefront, which aimed to “foster connections between people at UBC and people in the Downtown Eastside and other inner city communities who share common interests” (www.learningexchange.ubc.ca).

Over the course of the next few years, the Learning Exchange came to be a popular drop-in centre where free computer access and Internet training programs, as well as various other educational activities were taking place. Wishing to further enrich the exchange aspect of these programs though, Dr. Margo Fryer, the Director of the UBC Learning Exchange, invited two graduate students from UBC’s SCARP to inventory the skills that local residents who patronized the Learning Exchange had on the one hand, and the needs that local organizations identified as continuing to go unmet in the DTES, on the other. As one of those students, this is where my story begins.


Chapter 2

SETTING THE STAGE

2.1 THE ASSIGNMENT

In January of 2004, Dr. Margo Fryer, Director of the UBC Learning Exchange, presented my Community Economic Development (CED) class with the opportunity to work with one of many Learning Exchange partner organizations in developing potential CED initiatives. Given the choice of either writing a theoretically-based term paper or a practically-based report, I opted for the latter and, intrigued by the university’s attempt to become an agent of social change in the DTES, chose to be placed at the Learning Exchange.

Together with Krista Peterson, another SCARP student, I met with Dr. Margo Fryer to discuss mutual learning objectives and a suitable output that would satisfy her expectations, as well as those of our Instructors, Professor Peter Boothroyd, Nathan Edelson, and Erika de Castro. It was decided that I would consult DTES residents that patronize the Learning Exchange in order to inventory their skills, interests, and ideas, while Krista would consult staff from a variety of DTES organizations in order to compile a community-based needs assessment. The purpose was to propose CED initiatives that could potentially capitalize on the university’s resources as well as those of Learning Exchange patrons in order to produce positive social change in the DTES.

2.2 FROM CLASSROOM TO COMMUNITY

The thought of applying the planning theory I had only begun learning in-class to real life practice in the DTES- one of Canada’s most complex, diverse, and ultimately very sensitive inner city communities, was initially quite intimidating. Questions like, “Am I ready for this?,” “How will a community of predominantly middle aged men react to me, a young woman from UBC?,” and “How will I gain people’s trust in such a short period of time?” raced through my mind.
So as not to generate any discomfort or suspicion amongst Learning Exchange patrons, before beginning my “consultation” I made a conscious effort to be as transparent as possible about my agenda, my lack of professional experience, and my commitment to collaborate with them on this assignment. Accordingly, rather than choosing to facilitate an elaborately designed open space forum, focus group series, survey, or in-depth interview process, I decided to consult patrons informally by simply going to the Learning Exchange once a week and regularly hanging out with people there.

Looking back, I realize that this was a critical decision to have made because it prevented me from having to face the huge resentments I now know many patrons of the Learning Exchange harbour towards people they perceive as being “experts” who are trying to “fix” them as if they were their “clients.” In any case, full of anticipation, I really had no idea of what to expect when I first arrived at the Learning Exchange.

2.3 FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Stepping off the number four bus at Main and Powell, I recall feeling disoriented when, at first glance, I could not see where the Learning Exchange was. In part owing to the fact that the Learning Exchange is so humbly nestled (without any signage) between some of Vancouver’s most dilapidated buildings, I was struck by the inconspicuous position the university was occupying in the area; particularly in relation to the imposing presence of the police headquarters, the provincial courthouse, and the welfare offices located directly across the street (see Fig.2).

Perhaps even more striking though, was the sight of the homeless people I spotted sleeping in front of the many boarded up buildings on the west side of the street, and the policemen, lawyers and camera crew that were walking past them in order to enter the courthouse located on the east side of the street. When I later reflected on why this image left such an impression on me, I came to the conclusion that it was because this part of Main Street (which happens to be where the Learning Exchange is located) is a very paradoxical urban space; one where east not only meets west,

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5 The Learning Exchange refers to local residents who patronize its storefront office and participate in its programs as “patrons” rather than as “clients.” Therefore, from this point onwards, I will also use the reference Learning Exchange “patrons.”
but where the state’s apparatuses for social order, control, and justice confront the reality of their failures in society.

Fig.2: The 100-300 blocks of Main Street (heading north from Hastings to Alexander Street). To the left, boarded up buildings. To the right, the Vancouver Police Department, the Provincial Courthouse, and the Welfare Office.

When I first entered the Learning Exchange, I remember finding the sound of lively chatter to be a welcomed respite from the disturbing world I encountered outside. Making my way through the building, what I noticed above all else was just how busy it was- all eight computer stations were in use, someone was talking on the phone, people were reading newspapers at a large table in the middle of the room, staff were working in their offices, and a small group of people were gathered in the kitchen waiting for the next pot of coffee to brew. My first impression was, “wow, what a busy drop-in centre!” However, as I became increasingly aware of the many people watching me, I realised that the Learning Exchange was not just a drop-in centre; it was a community space that I clearly did not belong to. Feeling as though I was the
watched watching the watchers, I tried to normalize my presence by pouring myself a coffee and sitting down to read a newspaper.

When I finally worked up the nerve to introduce myself to the guy sitting next to me, the interaction went something like this:

**Marisol:** How’s it going?

**George:** *Barely looks up from his newspaper to nod.*

**Marisol:** My name’s Marisol.

**George:** *Remains silent.*

**Marisol:** Anything interesting in the news today?

**George:** Is there ever? *Returns to reading.*

**Marisol:** *Turns to another man and with an uncertain laugh says,* Heh, how’s it going?

**Bob:** Oh, fine.

**Marisol:** My name’s Marisol. You?

**Bob:** Oh, I’m Bob.

**Marisol:** Hey Bob. I have a couple of questions for ya. Do you have a sec?

**Bob:** *Snickers and says with sarcasm,* One or two, I guess.

**Marisol:** Cool. Well I’m a student from UBC and I’m here to talk to people about the kinds of things they’d like to get involved in at the Learning Exchange.

**Bob:** Oh yeah. So, what do you study?

**Marisol:** Actually, I’m studying international development planning.

**Bob:** *Quickly interjects.* Oh really? You know I read somewhere that in India you can take computer courses for a tenth the price of courses offered here. Canadian Universities are such a rip-off, don’t you think?

**Marisol:** Yeah, I guess. So, is taking computer courses something you’re interested in?

**Bob:** Not really. Right now I’m interested in developing a plan to reduce toxic waste. If I do end up studying computers, I’ll go to India though. You never know. I always wanted to see that part of the world. *And the conversation continues...*
I included this dialogue to demonstrate the various ways in which people responded to my initial attempts at conversing with them on the one hand, and to simulate the way in which I ended up learning about people's skills, interests, and ideas on the other - in conversation with them. From the beginning, it was made very clear that people were not going to simply answer survey-style questions like “What kinds of skills do you have?,” or “What are your goals for the future?” so that I could simply jot them down and leave. Instead, information was revealed to me incrementally while drinking coffee and becoming acquainted with people.

What was immediately apparent to me was that in order for me to effectively participate in these cross-cultural conversations, I had to become very aware of the language I used and the way I used it; not just in terms of vocabulary, but also in terms of my body language. In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks writes “We communicate best by choosing the way of speaking that is informed by the particularity and uniqueness of whom we are speaking to and with” (1994:11). I discovered this by doing it. And in the process, I learned to read between the lines of what different people were saying, so that I could really hear what they were telling me (not just with words, but with their eyes, their facial expressions, their postures, their tone of voice, their hand gestures, etc).

### 2.4 VALUING DIALOGUE

Each week, I spent approximately four hours talking to people about whatever happened to come up in conversation be it gardening, the real estate market in Alberta, the history of religion, the redesign of UBC’s campus, the gentrification of the DTES, or energy problems. Free of the confines of only talking about my assignment, I had no difficulty getting people to converse with me. This unstructured approach did, however, make my assignment more time consuming and a lot more challenging than I had originally anticipated.

At the end of each weekly visit, I busied myself with taking notes, coding themes into categories such as computer skills, retail experiences, interests in small business, art, travel etc., and reflected on what I had learned. Although it was fairly simple to come up with ideas for how the Learning Exchange could build on the skills and interests of one or two of its patrons, I found it very difficult to come up with ideas that could potentially draw on the skills and interests of many different individuals at the same
time. In fact, it seemed that one of the only things they all shared in common was an interest and ability to tell stories to people who cared to listen.

Although no one admitted this in so many words, I realised that all the patrons I spoke with felt a strong need to give back in some way and reciprocate for all that they were otherwise forced to receive from the state, non-governmental organizations, friends, and/or family in order to survive day-to-day. And, while my assignment was specifically meant to inventory the skills of the Learning Exchange’s patrons, I felt haunted by what seemed to be a pressing need amongst them to feel needed by the organization (and, in turn, society). Thus, it was this perceived need that I hoped my CED proposal would respond to and build upon.

Since patience is not one of my strongest virtues, as the weeks slipped by and no ideas for a viable CED initiative had been generated, I started doubting my informal approach to “consulting” patrons and wondered if maybe our unstructured conversations were a waste of time. Looking back, I realise that this time was in fact the most prolific part of the planning process because it was then that I actually started to build a mutual sense of trust and respect with people. In any case, not knowing then what I know now, I think I would have probably given up on this project had it not been for the fact that I was receiving course credit for it.

2.5 THE IDEA: CONVERSATIONAL ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL)

In early February, a patron I had not yet met walked into the Learning Exchange and sat down next to me. He had recently lost his roommate and best friend to a heroine overdose and was overcome with grief. Unsure as to how to offer him support, I simply listened to him talk until the conversation turned to life in general. We soon discovered that we both shared a passion for cultural studies and travel, so we started exchanging travel stories about the places we had been, the people we had met, the adventures we had had, and the injustices we had encountered along the way. To my surprise, when I mentioned that prior to starting my master’s degree at UBC, I had been teaching ESL in Taiwan, this fellow conceded that he too had taught ESL while traveling throughout Latin America, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe for three years.
Aware of the growing need and demand for language services amongst immigrants in Vancouver, I began asking myself whether or not offering conversational ESL learning opportunities to immigrants would be something that patrons of the Learning Exchange would have the capacity, and interest, in providing. I also began asking myself whether or not the Learning Exchange would be a suitable venue for promoting this kind of cross-cultural learning exchange. I soon discovered that the answer to both my questions was “yes.”

2.6 INTRODUCING THE IDEA TO PATRONS

Recognizing that most of the Learning Exchange patrons spoke English fluently (whether it was their first language or not), and that conducting informal ESL conversation sessions was not an activity that necessitated intense formal training (in my experience anyway), I became increasingly excited about the idea of using ESL as a means of fostering “connections between people at UBC and people in the DTES and other inner city communities who share common interests (www.learningexchange.ubc.ca).” I felt that given the opportunity to help others while developing their own communication, facilitation, and interpersonal social skills, many of the Learning Exchange’s patrons could potentially develop an increased sense of self-confidence, self-esteem, and personal fulfillment. I also felt that bringing ethno-culturally diverse people together to participate in cross-cultural learning could potentially break down some of the negative stereotypes directed at the DTES and its residents on the one hand, and the various ethnic minority groups living in Greater Vancouver on the other. In other words, I felt that the idea had the potential of empowering marginalized individuals, and of enriching our society as a whole.

During my subsequent visits to the Learning Exchange, I spent most of my time surveying how patrons responded to the idea of conducting conversational ESL sessions with immigrants. While some people were really enthusiastic saying, “What are we waiting for, let’s do it!,” others hesitated and questioned whether they, or any of their peers, really had the capacity to lead such ESL sessions. Important questions such as, “How are you going to exclude people who are not capable of tutoring immigrants?” and “Is the Learning Exchange the right place to host these sessions given its location in the DTES?” were subsequently raised. Unsure of their answers, yet nevertheless excited about the buzz the idea had generated amongst patrons, I
proceeded to collaboratively brainstorm how such a program might logistically work with interested patrons.

2.7 THE OPPORTUNITY

Although Krista and I were not due to hand in or present the findings of our work to our CED class until late April, I discovered that the Learning Exchange Trek Program was offering several Chapman Summer Project Awards, and that the deadline for application was late-February. Curious to see if this idea had any real potential, I quickly began operationalizing what an ESL pilot project might look like with patrons. Together, we formulated a plan to offer affordable one-to-one ESL conversation sessions to adult immigrants over the course of the summer. The goal of the conceived pilot project was twofold:

1) To empower DTES residents by demonstrating that their skills and knowledge can be of value to society; and

2) To empower immigrants by helping them practice their conversational English while learning about life in Vancouver.
Chapter 3

IMPLEMENTING THE PILOT PROJECT

In late March, UBC President Martha Piper presented me (and seven other students) with a Chapman Summer Project Award. After sharing the good news with the Learning Exchange’s patrons, we started planning how to logistically implement what we decided to call the “ESL Summer Pilot Project.” One of our primary concerns was how we would go about recruiting immigrants to the project. Thus, I immediately started contacting a variety of immigrant service organizations in the hopes that they would inform me as to where I should market the project.

3.1 CONSULTING IMMIGRANT SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

In early April, I made appointments with staff from several reputable community organizations specializing in the delivery of immigrant services. These meetings were critical to the eventual success of the pilot because it was through talking to staff at these organizations that I began to learn about the complexities involved in the provision of immigrant services; namely, the politics surrounding who is eligible to receive what services, from whom, for how long, and at what and whose costs.

Becoming aware of these politics, I realized that in multicultural cities such as Vancouver, any given ESL class can comprise people who are not only coming from diverse ethno-cultural, socio-economic, political, and professional/educational backgrounds, but who are coming to Canada with very different motivations (e.g., some come to improve their quality of life while others come in order to flee persecution). Although bringing people together in this way could be extremely powerful, not being prepared for the potential issues that could arise in such conversational groups could also have devastating consequences (e.g., the generation of misunderstandings and discrimination). Realizing this, I decided that prior to moving ahead with the project, I needed to first consult patrons as to who our target population should be. We unanimously decided that the ESL Summer Pilot Project would most appropriately be of service to adult immigrants and refugees who
were either unemployed or underemployed, and who needed to practice their English in order to successfully find employment and socially integrate into society.

Since we found that most private language schools in Vancouver were charging upwards of 20 dollars per hour for ESL conversation classes, I assumed that offering ESL conversation sessions for five dollars an hour (the proceeds of which would serve as recognition for Learning Exchange patrons who would be volunteering as “ESL facilitators”), would be in high demand amongst immigrants and refugees. However, in meetings with staff from the Immigrant Services Society (ISS), the Multilingual Orientation Service Association for Immigrants to Canada (MOSAIC), and the United Chinese Community Enrichment Social Service (SUCCESS), I was taken aback when I discovered that, in their opinion, it would be difficult to attract low-income immigrants and refugees to our proposed pilot project for the following reasons:

a) The proposed five-dollars per hour fee would be considered too expensive by most low-income immigrants and refugees;

b) It would be hard to justify spending bus fare to get to and from the Learning Exchange for a one-hour conversation session;

c) The lack of professional qualifications amongst our volunteer ESL conversation facilitators would be scrutinized;

d) The Learning Exchange’s location in the DTES would intimidate newcomers; and

e) Most immigrant service organizations in Vancouver were already offering their own English conversation classes on a for-profit basis. Therefore, sending clients to the Learning Exchange would be perceived as a conflict of interest.

3.2 ADAPTING TO THE FEEDBACK

Feeling discouraged by the feedback I received from the immigrant service organizations I had consulted, my confidence in the pilot was temporarily shaken. When I shared this feedback with Dr. Margo Fryer and with Learning Exchange’s patrons though, we decided to go ahead with the pilot as planned, but rather than charging the five dollar fee for the ESL conversation sessions, we would offer them for free.
Since there were no funds in our very limited budget to reward DTES residents for volunteering as ESL conversation facilitators in any other way, I initially attempted to elicit donations from various merchants on campus and downtown. This effort was to no avail. Unsure as to why I was having such a hard time accepting the fact that we would have to offer the ESL conversation sessions for free, I realised that deep down I assumed that patrons would not commit without a monetary incentive. I also assumed that I would end up facilitating the majority of the conversation sessions, which would have clearly defeated the purpose of the project. This was an assumption that proved to be very wrong.

3.3  MARKETING THE PILOT PROJECT

Returning to ISS, MOSAIC and SUCCESS with flyers and brochures (see Fig. 3) advertising our “free” adult English conversation sessions, I hoped that for the sake of those immigrants and refugees who could not afford fee-paying conversation classes, caseworkers at these organisations would not only inform, but also encourage, their clients to come to the Learning Exchange. Weeks shy of our start date, I received a phone call from one of the coordinators at ISS’s English Language Services for Adults (ELSA) Program and was told that, after discussing it at their recent board meeting, the ELSA teachers agreed to inform their students about our pilot and the opportunity it would offer immigrants to practice their conversational English with local residents. Thankful and relieved, I stopped worrying about how to recruit immigrants and started worrying about how I was going to prepare patrons to play the role of “ESL facilitator” in time.

3.4  PREPARING THE ESL CONVERSATION MATERIALS

To orient the patrons on how, as ESL conversation facilitators, they could help immigrants improve their English conversation skills while learning about life in Vancouver, I went looking for ESL materials rich in Canadian content on the one hand, and focussed on conversational activities (not grammar, reading, and writing exercises) on the other. Since ESL is such a profitable industry in Vancouver (there
are approximately 177 language schools in Downtown Vancouver alone), I assumed that there would be an abundance of materials fitting these criteria. I was shocked to learn that this was not the case.\(^6\)

Since part of the ESL Summer Pilot Project’s goal was to assist immigrants in developing an understanding of Canadian society and culture, I decided that in lieu of purchasing locally irrelevant materials, I would compile materials related to daily life activities in Vancouver, B.C., and the rest of Canada instead. Finding that the level of English used in most sightseeing pamphlets and newspaper/magazine articles was generally too high for most English learners (since they were designed for native English speakers), I was forced to abandon this approach in favour of putting together our own ESL conversation handbook. Recognizing that this would be a lot of work, and would take a lot more time than I had budgeted for, I asked my good friends Anji Baker (a friend who had taught ESL in Taiwan with me) and Arti Khanderia (a fellow student at SCARP), to help me work on the handbook for a small portion of my honorarium. They both agreed and, together, the three of us set out to create what became the “ESL Conversation Handbook (Fig. 4).”

![Fig. 4: Arti and Marisol compiling the ESL Conversation Handbook.](image)

Besides finding suitable articles, games and conversational activities to include in our handbook, we needed to get copyright permission from publishing houses. This was very time-consuming. As a result, by the time we received copyright permission,\(^6\) I discovered that the reason behind this lack of Canadian-focussed ESL teaching materials was due to the fact that almost all of the private language schools in Vancouver cater to foreign students. Since foreign students are not interested in learning informal day-to-day English used in Canada, there are no materials available for teaching it.
finished the formatting, editing, and received the approval of Dr. Margo Fryer, it was the end of June.

3.5 ORIENTING THE ESL CONVERSATION FACILITATORS

Once the ESL Conversation Handbook was complete and all the flyers had been distributed, Anji, Arti and I, began preparing the orientation session for patrons interested in volunteering as “ESL conversation facilitators.” Initially, a group of 13 patrons attended the workshop to learn about the pilot and the responsibilities and rewards that went along with participating in it. In this workshop even some of the more sceptical patrons ended up getting quite excited when, during a role-play activity, people took turns practicing being an “ESL conversation facilitator” while the rest of the group took on the role of being “ESL participants.” This role-play led to a lot of laughs and an increased sense of “okay, maybe I can do this” amongst patrons.

The enthusiasm with which all 13 workshop attendees signed on to the pilot made Arti and I (by mid-July my friend Anji had had returned to England) feel at once encouraged and anxious. The fact that we had told patrons that they would gain valuable skills by helping immigrants improve their English worried us because, at this point, the success of the pilot seemed entirely contingent on the participation of immigrants and refugees- and we had no control over whether or not people would come. Fearing the answer to questions such as, “What if this doesn’t work,” and “Have we wrongly built up people’s hopes,” Arti and I struggled to stay calm in the weeks leading up to the start of the conversation sessions.

3.6 THE ESL CONVERSATION SESSIONS GET UNDERWAY

As the ESL conversation sessions got started in mid-July, people at the Learning Exchange suddenly started expressing more interest in the pilot because it had finally become real to them. Whether as staff or patrons, ESL facilitators or immigrants, everyone at the Learning Exchange started to feed off of each other’s energy, and anyone who wanted to participate in the pilot started doing so in their own way. From making suggestions, to collecting supplementary conversation materials from the library, and collaboratively participating in decision-making processes, to putting up more flyers, more and more people at the Learning Exchange were getting involved with the pilot. And, inevitably, as increasing numbers of people got involved at this stage, shares in the ownership of the pilot seemed to organically grow, divide, and
increase in value over the course of the next two months. The pilot had become everyone’s project, and we were all feeling very proud of ourselves for what we were accomplishing together.

Before I get ahead of myself with the story though, let me first describe the first few weeks of the project, which was, admittedly, a pretty tenuous time. Anything could have happened, and as more and more people started claiming a stake in the pilot’s success, we all started vocalizing our hopes and fears a little more—“I hope this, but what if that?” For example, looking back on the early stages of the pilot’s implementation, one patron-turned-ESL facilitator explained:

> The beginning was almost frightening because here was Marisol and everyone else, everything was prepared and ready to go and the posters were out, and my first thoughts were like, “wow all that hard work and this thing could just absolutely bomb.” I mean I’ve seen things bomb before and you just don’t know.7

These doubts and fears had propagated early on when, in the first two weeks of the conversation sessions, several ESL participants cancelled at the last minute, leaving their ESL facilitators ready and waiting for class that did not happen. Put in the awful position of having to reassure discouraged facilitators when their ESL participants did not show up, Arti and I decided we needed to reconsider the one-to-one structure we had originally designed.8

### 3.7 CREATING ESL CONVERSATION GROUPS

While the one-to-one conversation sessions quickly proved to be extremely popular amongst ESL participants who remarked, “This is the best way to learn English, one to one” and “With one and one you have lot of chance to talk…it’s very good,” by the third week of the pilot, Arti and I nevertheless decided to schedule two, three, and eventually four, ESL participants to each conversation group. Our rationale was based on two important observations.

First, as mentioned, the fact that there was an approximate 15% no-show rate amongst ESL participants meant that ESL facilitators were being put in the unacceptably precarious position of having to hope that their scheduled ESL

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7 Quoted during a focus group discussion with facilitators on April 22, 2005.

8 Although the ESL Conversation Handbook had by this time been completed, Arti chose to volunteer her time to continue helping us with the pilot project. For this, we owe her a huge “thank you.”
participant *might* show up. Often heard making comments such as “*Gee, I wonder if my student’s gonna bother showing up today,*” Arti and I realised that this precariousness made some facilitators feel unappreciated and undervalued. This was clearly undermining the sense of empowerment the pilot aimed to instil in Learning Exchange patrons. Second, since the demand from immigrants and refugees wanting to participate in the pilot started to sky-rocket after just a few weeks of the pilot’s implementation (mostly by word of mouth), Arti and I felt that scheduling ESL conversation “groups” as opposed to “one-to-one tutorial sessions” would enable us to accommodate more of the demand.

### 3.8 A TRULY TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

What happened next is difficult to write about because it was so deeply entrenched in the “you just had to be there” type of experience. Based on my own feelings and observations, I think the experience can best be described as a shared feeling of letting go and just trusting one another that things would work out. As the coordinators of the pilot, Arti and I had done everything we could to get the project running smoothly and it had come time for us to simply let go and allow the ESL conversation groups to become whatever they were going to be. For the ESL facilitators, it had come time for them to let go of their anxieties and self-doubts so that they could effectively lead their ESL conversation groups. For the ESL participants, it had come time to let go of their fears of making mistakes while speaking English, and in turn, start reaching out to make new friends (specifically friends from outside their ethno-cultural groups). For everyone involved in the pilot, this initial process of letting go, taking a risk, feeling a little vulnerable, and of learning to trust others, proved to be an incredibly rewarding challenge.

Seeing participants’ shyness and inhibitions fall away in those first few weeks as they began engaging in animated discussions with one another was exceptionally moving for Arti and I. There were many times when the two of us would look at each other and just smile…we just could not believe the kinds of transformations we were seeing people experience through our office window. On a daily basis, we would literally watch as initial tensions and anxieties (from both the ESL facilitators and participants) subsided, and, in their place, lively dialogue began over. It was almost as though the mutual tensions and anxieties people shared helped make everyone feel more at ease with each other, allowing genuine curiosity to override their fears of the
differences between them. In fact, as people started to become more and more familiar with one another, they seemed to go from not only talking and listening to each other, to also sharing their life stories. In this way, they were experiencing humanity (an understanding of the basic human condition) together in its simplest, and yet all too rare form: dialogue.

“How did all this work?” Basically, when an immigrant or refugee would walk in to the Learning Exchange during its public drop-in hours (weekdays from 1:00 to 5:00 pm), Arti and I would explain who and what the project involved, and how they could register. Then, after collecting information pertaining to where they were originally born, how long they had been in Canada, what their educational and/or professional background was, what their employment history in Canada was, and their contact information, we proceeded to schedule them into conversation groups as new “ESL participants.” If all the conversation groups were full, Arti and I would simply add a new class time to the schedule, and would recruit one of the ESL conversation facilitators to take over the group. Generally, this was not a difficult task because so many of the ESL facilitators were eager to lead as many conversation groups as they could.

The willingness of ESL facilitators to continually take on more and more conversation groups was largely due to the transformative learning that they were experiencing as a result of their increased involvement in the pilot (not just in terms of the number of conversation groups they were facilitating, but in terms of what they said they were taking away from each session). This was something that neither Arti nor I could have ever anticipated. As articulated by one of the ESL conversation facilitators,

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9 Many of the ESL participants were highly trained professionals in their respective countries of origin. Due to the lack of recognition of their professional credentials and the language/cultural barriers they faced though, they were having a very hard time securing employment in Canada. Thus, for them, being “taught” English by people who were faced with their own barriers to employment, proved to be a humbling experience; one that, as we will see, was felt mutually.
We went from learning from the book to learning about each other. I learned what I take for granted in Canada…like the fact that I don't have to worry about witnessing a school being blown up or being conscripted into the armed forces. It was cool 'cause everyone just looked past cultural tensions and honestly just wanted to learn from each other. It went from an ESL lesson to a lesson in real life.\textsuperscript{10}

It is important to note here that the “learning exchanges” that were taking place amongst and between participants in the ESL conversation groups were not occurring in \textit{spite of}, but rather in \textit{response to}, the fact that they shared very different ethnic (Fig.6), cultural, linguistic, political, and socio-economic backgrounds. Likewise, they all came to the ESL Summer Pilot Project with very different worldviews and epistemologies, different class, age, education, and employment-based backgrounds, and different ideas of what being “Canadian” means. One of the only things that they all shared in common (including the ESL facilitators) was their desire to develop a viable sense of belonging, identity, and livelihood in Vancouver.

\begin{center}
\textbf{Ethno-cultural Background of "ESL Participants"}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}
\begin{axis}[
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    bar width=8, 
    xtick=data, 
    x tick label style={align=center}, 
    enlarge x limits=0.5, 
    legend style={at={(0.5,-0.2)}, anchor=north, legend columns=-1}, 
]
\addplot coordinates {
(Chinese,49)
(Central American,13)
(South American,6)
(East Asian,12)
(French Canadian,1)
(South African,1)
(Eastern European,6)
(Middle Eastern,6)
(South East Asian,6)
};
\legend{Chinese, Central American, South American, East Asian, French Canadian, South African, Eastern European, Middle Eastern, South East Asian}
\end{axis}
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

\textit{Fig. 6: The ethno-cultural background of the ESL participants.}

3.9 ON TEACHING THE “LIVED” PART OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

As a vehicle for bringing diverse people together in cross-cultural dialogue (including nonverbal dialogue through gestures, expressions, emotions, pictures, etc.), ESL proved to be a very effective tool. That said though, the “ESL” that was being taught at the Learning Exchange was not the same as the ESL that most “qualified” teachers and books teach English learners (that is, the structural nuts and bolts of the language; the grammatical rules, punctuation, sentence structures, etc). Instead, the English that ESL facilitators were helping their participants practice was very informal, idiomatic, and colloquial in nature. It was the part of the English language that learners can only acquire in practice. In other words, it was the cultural part of the language that enables people to get to know one another, what I like to call the “lived” part of the language. In this sense, English was the means by which people could communicate what really mattered: life issues, experiences, beliefs, hopes, and frustrations. Every now and then, the ESL facilitators interrupted these conversations in order to help their ESL participants correctly pronounce a word or a sentence, but otherwise they simply encouraged participants to talk and live in English.

As the ESL conversation groups grew increasingly practical and interesting for ESL participants and facilitators alike, word of mouth quickly spread amongst various immigrant communities. Luckily, as the demand from immigrants increased, so too did the supply of ESL facilitators, which not only grew in numbers (from the original 13 to a total of 19 by the end of the summer), but also grew in terms of their interest to take on more and more ESL conversation groups (for example, two ESL facilitators were in competition with one another to see who would end up facilitating the most groups... one ended up leading a total of 40 one-hour sessions, while the other led 39). As a result, Arti and I found ourselves continually adding more and more conversation group sessions to the weekly schedule so that by mid-August, we had gone from offering only six one-to-one ESL conversation tutorials per week, to offering 37 conversation groups per week (see Fig. 7).

By mid-August, four weeks into the project’s implementation, the pilot had taken on a life of its own. In order to regain some control, Arti and I started scaling back the number of ESL conversation groups offered during the last few weeks. We hoped that in so doing, we would not only have the time to start evaluating the project by talking...
to ESL facilitators and participants, but that we would also signal to everyone that the pilot was gradually winding down.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Conversation Groups Offered Each Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the end, from mid-July to mid-September, 19 ESL facilitators led over 200 one-hour ESL conversation groups for a total of 68 ESL participants. The pilot had clearly been an overwhelming success and everyone (even those who did not participate in the pilot directly) felt very pleased by what had been collectively accomplished.

3.10 BRINGING THE PILOT TO AN END
Promising to contact ESL participants if or when the Learning Exchange would begin offering an ESL conversation program on an on-going basis, in mid-September we reluctantly began saying good-bye to the immigrants who had participated in the pilot. For some of the ESL facilitators this was particularly difficult because, besides having to say good-bye to their “regulars,” they also had to let go of a role that they had discovered they really enjoyed for a variety of reasons; some of which included the sense of accomplishment, self-confidence, and personal fulfillment it brought to their lives (see “Our Reflections” section below).

At a special get-together in late September 2004, Dr. Margo Fryer, Director of the Learning Exchange, acknowledged the hard work everyone put into making the pilot a success by presenting each of the 19 ESL facilitators with a certificate and
personalized letter of reference. While at this get-together, we all sat in a circle and took turns reflecting on the pilot and how it had impacted our lives. This was a very heartfelt gathering, and although I was not taking notes, I remember hearing one of the patrons saying, “It wasn’t about teaching words, it was about teaching community.” That statement really hit home for me because it was then that I realised that the project I had collaboratively created with patrons of the Learning Exchange, and coordinated with Arti over the summer, was not a pilot for community building, it was community building.

3.11 OUR REFLECTIONS: LOOKING BACK ON THE ESL SUMMER PILOT PROJECT

Actions are not simply followed by reactions. Instead, they are followed by periods of reflection (varying in lengths of time from seconds to years). It is in reflecting on our actions that our hearts and minds are given the chance to conceptually learn from our actions.

Given the importance of reflection in praxis, I feel that it is crucial for me to include a reflection section to this story, which so far, has been more focussed on describing what happened (from my perspective), than it has been on how the pilot had made “us” (as a collective group of actors) think or feel. Since, the ESL facilitators played such an intrinsic role in the ESL Summer Pilot Project story, from its inception through to its completion, I have decided to share this reflection with them. Thus, what follows is a description of some of the thoughts I had throughout the implementation of the pilot (presented as a dialogue below), quotes I anecdotally collected from ESL participants, and pieces of the dialogue I had with ESL facilitators during our focus group discussions (one held on April 22, 2005 and the other held on July 8, 2005).

MARISOL: So Marisol, has it always been your intention to combine the skills you developed as an ESL teacher in Taiwan to the community development skills you are developing at SCARP?

Marisol: No. Two years ago had someone told me that I would be using ESL to initiate a community-based project in the DTES, I would have never believed them. This is because, at the time, I was convinced that ESL was an oppressive and culturally homogenizing industry; certainly not one that had the potential of producing empowering outcomes. I predicated this naïve view on my experiences teaching ESL
in Taiwan where I found myself morally struggling with my role. On the one hand, I knew I was making English more accessible to Taiwanese youth who felt that they needed to learn language in order to lead a successful life. On the other hand though, I felt as though I was feeding into an Anglo-Saxon hegemony.

MARISOL: How has your view towards ESL and its potential role in community-based development changed since you began your studies at SCARP?

Marisol: I guess you could say it has changed quite dramatically. I mean, I still view English as a colonizing language, one that continues to threaten the existence of many minority languages and cultures in the world. That said though, since proficiency in English is something that so many people want and need in order to improve the condition of their lives, I have come to the conclusion that it is even more imperialistic to deny people access to learning English than it is otherwise. The fact that we are living in an Anglo-Saxon dominated “Information Age” reaffirms this view. The reality is, as Adrienne Rich is quoted as saying in bell hooks’ book *Teaching to Transgress*, “This [English] is the oppressor’s language, but I need it to talk to you” (in hooks 1994: 169).

MARISOL: How did you come to this conclusion?

Marisol: It was by attending SCARP that I became more fully aware of my privileged worldview and began asking myself questions like “who am I to impose my values of preserving cultural diversity on people who want nothing more than to develop their proficiency in English (and computers for that matter) so that they too can connect to the world of information, “the mainstream” of the 21st century?

MARISOL: Why do immigrants living in English-speaking countries such as Canada need or want to take ESL conversation classes? Why can’t they learn practical English skills by simply engaging in conversation with people in daily life?

Marisol: As I understand it, it is fairly easy to learn English vocabulary and grammar by independently studying books or by attending large ESL classes. However, applying English in daily conversation is much more difficult because it requires someone fluent in the language to practice with (to ask questions from, be corrected by, and explain why things are the way they are). Since many immigrants feel intimidated and ashamed to speak English in public, many have said that they feel
more comfortable to practice in small, classroom-like environments, where they feel it is safe to make mistakes, be corrected, and ask questions.

Unfortunately, the reality is that our civil society is not always very “civil” when it comes to interacting with people who are learning English as a second (or third, fourth…) language. Thus, afraid of interacting with rude and impatient Canadian-born citizens, many immigrants choose to pay people for having conversation “classes” with them if they can afford it, or choose to simply avoid speaking in English if they cannot. In their own words, some of the pilot’s ESL participants explained why participating in the ESL Summer Pilot Project was beneficial to them.

“I am very shy to speak English in my other classes, but here I do so I think it’s very good.”

“My teacher has a very big heart. She always finds the community flyers for us. She loves us. She wants us to improve our English.”

“After this class, I find out myself more confidence to express my idea, learn more vocabulary, idioms, slang that you can never learn from a book. I also made some new friends from all place around the world, knowing new cultures. From they dialogue, I reflex myself.”

“You (speaking to an ESL conversation facilitator) are teaching real English, not teacher English. That’s what we need. Thanks man.”

“Your class is changing the life for the teacher and the student. My life is very lucky now. I understand a little English. I’m the new person now because I know the western culture better!”

MARISOL: Why would residents of Vancouver’s DTES be interested in helping immigrants? Don’t they have their own problems they need to worry about?

Marisol: When I started spending time with patrons at the Learning Exchange, I learned that what people in Vancouver’s DTES really need is the opportunity to give back to their community in a meaningful way. Rather than being on the receiving end of their interactions with people, they explained that what they really wanted was the opposite- to feel valued by being able to share their time, knowledge, and skills with others. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire explains why this may be.

True generosity lies in striving so that these hands- whether of individuals or entire peoples- need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world (2005: 45).
MARISOL: Did the ESL facilitators really feel good about “giving back” in this way or do you think they might have felt exploited at times?

Marisol: Rather than answering that, or any other questions on behalf of the ESL facilitators, I will let them answer such questions in their own words by sharing with you pieces of the dialogue that ensued from our focus group discussions. These dialogues were held at the Learning Exchange on April 22nd and July 8th, 2005 (seven and ten months after the ESL Summer Pilot Project had ended). The first focus group included six ESL facilitators, and the second involved three ESL facilitators who had participated in the first focus group, and three others who had not. It has been anonymously reprinted with the written consent of all participants.

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MARISOL: Can you tell me why you decided to volunteer in the ESL Summer Pilot Project as an ESL facilitator?

A: The reason I wanted to volunteer is ‘cause I wanted to become less self-conscious about how I speak [with reference to a stutter] and all that. And I wanted to volunteer my time to help other people besides, besides me.

B: I also came and got involved because I do like helping people that are poor, and, marginalized is such an overused word, but people that are in need and can’t afford it. Um, It’s something that gives you purpose in the DTES and I think that it’s something that could be useful for anyone living here.

C: I got involved in the ESL program initially for selfish reasons I guess because I wanted to have something current on my resume, ‘cause I still had it on my mind to get work. So initially that’s why I did it. The second thing is of course helping people and I thought, “Wow, I’m doing something really good for people…People that can’t afford it. And it’s something that maybe I can challenge myself and test myself with.

11 Although the ESL Summer Pilot Project had ended in mid-September 2004, an ongoing ESL conversation program was re-implemented at the Learning Exchange in January 2005 and many of the original ESL facilitators joined the on-going program. Therefore, the experiences that ESL facilitators spoke of in the focus groups were true of those they had experienced during the pilot project, but perhaps were not limited solely to the pilot project. Also, since I had taken so few pictures during the actual pilot project, approximately half of the pictures included in the next few pages were taken during the on-going ESL Conversation Program (written consent was obtained to use the photos).
D: What I liked about this was that I did in fact get to know all these, not co-workers but co-facilitators, and that I liked because that’s a very good thing. It’s so much like it makes you more of a family.

MARISOL: What was it like for you to transition from being a patron at the Learning Exchange to an ESL facilitator?

C: It’s a different role… I’m not the same person. When I’m sitting on the chair, I’m more of an observer and a listener and I learn that way. But this way [as an ESL facilitator], I’m learning in a different way. It brings out a part of me that is probably more out going, a lot more assertive, a lot more humorous. And that’s a part of me that I never thought I had.

MARISOL: Can you tell me how volunteering in this role made you feel?

E: I found it very challenging and rewarding. I mean, knowing that people are going to use these tools that you are giving them for the rest of their lives for finding work and for dealing with people in day-to-day life… Some people had been here for many years and were just frustrated with not being able to have conversations with people or to change their lives.

C: Well with me, I mean, I keep saying it’s a confidence thing. It gave me a lot of confidence and showed me some other areas that I can go into. Maybe I can actually stand up in front of other groups and actually give presentations and make an impact in some way. Maybe I can do that, and I never thought I could before.

Marisol: That’s great. I’m wondering if any of you would be willing to describe what your interactions with the ESL participants were like?
Chapter 3  Implementing the ESL Summer Pilot Project

A: Well, I had a student, her name was Annie and she was so nice. She taught me a few things and I taught her some things. And she’d always make me laugh and feel good about myself. And she was a great teacher… I mean a great student to me.

MARISOL: What about you, C?

C: Yeah I had Eric and Wendy. They were a couple and the onus was on him to take care of his family here in a new country. So he kept looking at me like, “Help me, teach me English, I gotta go out there and get work and compete with Canadians.” They were going to try to find jobs here with just rudimentary English.

D: Well, my students were in desperation of ever finding a job, and they may or may not have been good for the job market, but for their whole being it was important for them to converse with others. So I really did my best to try and help them.

MARISOL: Did your ESL participants respect you even though you did not have formal ESL teacher training?

C: Oh yeah. My students respected me a great deal. I mean they’d see me in my jeans and maybe my shirt wasn’t washed yesterday, and I didn’t have the most perfect haircut, and I had nicotine stains in my teeth. But still, I demanded respect from them!

E: I mean, I really don’t think you could express the gratitude of the students for being able to get what they get for free here. There’s somewhat of a disbelief I think just because they’re so used to getting asked for money for anything like this that would help them.
MARISOL: So, in your opinion, what was it that attracted so many immigrants to the pilot project?

F: Most of them confided in one way or another that they were on a rapidly fraying lifeline of personal savings and they had looked everywhere for help but couldn’t find it. This was the first opportunity that they had uncovered where they felt they could improve their situation.

B: The thing is, it’s about conversation skills and local topics, things that could be useful in their daily lives. So it’s not necessarily just for English. It’s for helping them with cross-cultural issues.

C: I mean, for them they’re listening to an English native speaking person from this country and they’re learning how to connect with people, because maybe a lot of them are apprehensive or afraid to do that and so they stay in their own little groups. So I always suggested that they get out and mingle and get to know that we’re not all scary. Canadians aren’t all scary. I mean… it’s about building their confidence! Even if they’re learning just a little bit here, what they’re learning is the confidence. And that’s the most important because that’s what it is when you speak, in your body language, it’s the confidence that comes through.

MARISOL: How do you feel that you, as ESL facilitators, contributed to society then?

B: For me the main aspect is the humanitarian aspect. I can imagine someone coming out of an oppressed country with not a very secure future in a country that’s got everything to give, but where everyone is too busy doing their own thing. I think it’s so important for them to get accepted and feel friendship from some of the citizens. That would just totally have such an impact on the way that they feel about being here. It gives them a sense of belonging, a sense of home, a sense of friendship. I think that probably is the most important aspect of what we contribute.

C: Yes, I think we do a great thing. This is a much-needed service ‘cause a lot of people go to schools charging heavy prices for wealthy students. There’s always something for the wealthy but it’s good that down here there’s something for people who can’t afford it.
MARISOL: And how do you feel volunteering in this way has contributed to your own lives?

F: I think that when a lot of people really appreciate the effort that you put into their development of the English language you start to see yourself in a different light, a more positive light. It makes you appreciate yourself a little bit more.

C: I never considered myself to be a leader. I always waited for somebody else to follow. This way I took a leadership role and I thought, “I’m pretty good at this.” Not just for teaching but for other parts of my life.

B: You know I can quote a paper by Bruce Alexander, called ‘The Roots of Addiction.’ It’s got to do with people that have a void in their lives, usually a cultural void. And it’s often filled with something not very useful to the actual needs of the person, which often leads to addiction. So, I find this useful for the general populace here… to fill this perceived void with something more useful.

C: I’ve gained a tremendous amount. It’s not just about teaching English and I’m doing this just to, you know, get a reference. It’s changed. It’s actually empowered me and showed me a lot of things. And I love doing it too! I mean it’s the reactions from the students, like they’re in awe. Like, I feel like they’re in awe of my teaching. So, I’ve gotten gold and wealth and more than money can buy just by coming here!

3.12 ACTION, REFLECTION…END OF STORY?

In response to the momentum the ESL Summer Pilot Project generated, and based on all the positive feedback we received from DTES residents and immigrants (who continued to call on a daily basis inquiring about when the ESL conversation groups would resume), a proposal seeking support for an ongoing ESL program was presented to HSBC Bank Canada.

In January 2005, the “Learning Exchange ESL Conversation Program Supported by HSBC Bank Canada” got underway. Many of the original ESL facilitators and participants continued to take part in the ongoing program which, in its first year (January to December, 2005), registered 27 DTES residents (as “ESL facilitators”)
Chapter 3  Implementing the ESL Summer Pilot Project

and over 300 immigrants (as “ESL participants”).\textsuperscript{12} So, although this marks the end of the ESL Summer Pilot Project story, it does not mark the end of the cross-cultural “learning exchange” initiative that the pilot project created.

\textsuperscript{12} Check the Learning Exchange website for up to date information regarding the program: www.learningexchange.ubc.ca
Chapter 4

INTRODUCTION TO THE CASE STUDY

4.1 THE ESL SUMMER PILOT PROJECT
Upon starting my master’s degree at SCARP, my goals were to learn how, or through which processes, unity could be generated out of difference to form communities of people who can, and do, effect their own change. Part 1 of this thesis tells the ESL Summer Pilot Project story of how residents of the DTES (as “ESL facilitators”) helped immigrants (as “ESL participants”) attain what they need to integrate into society; That is, an understanding of life in Vancouver (the what, where, when, why, and most importantly, how questions), and the means to ask those questions - conversational English. The story also tells how, by helping immigrants practice their English conversation skills, DTES residents developed a renewed sense of self-confidence, self-esteem, community, and power to make a difference (in both their own lives, and those of others). In Part 2 of this thesis, my aim is to explore the ways in which the ESL Summer Pilot Project story exemplifies the role cross-cultural dialogue, in the form of ESL, can play in 21st century empowerment planning.

As I embark on writing Part 2 of my thesis, the question I am asking myself is: What is this story a case study of exactly? Bent Flyvbjerg argues that researchers practising phronesis should ask themselves and their readers “What is this a case study of?” because so doing allows the narrative of the case study to provide the answer (2001: 86). From a planning perspective, the story integrates many different participatory approaches including transactive, communicative, reflective, deliberative, empowerment and multicultural planning (and probably many more). As all these approaches are derived from an alternative-planning paradigm that is primarily concerned with the micro-politics of planning practice, I will try to speak to each of them in the following chapters. Considering that the original goal of the pilot project was to empower participants (both DTES residents and immigrants)

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13 Bent Flyvbjerg argues that researchers practising phronesis should ask themselves and their readers “What is this a case study of?” because so doing allows the narrative of the case study to provide the answer (2001: 86).

14 Here I mean “alternative” to the traditional modernist-planning paradigm, which considers planners to be a-political experts who are concerned with the rational-comprehensive design of cities.
though, I feel that it is most appropriate for me to focus my research accordingly- on the role empowerment plays in planning and how the ESL Summer Pilot Project exemplifies this. As I prepare to develop my conceptual framework then, the remainder of this chapter is dedicated to the formulation of my research problem, research questions, and methodology.

4.2 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In the City of Vancouver, as in most multicultural cities, high proportions of inner city/DTES residents and immigrants are, for various reasons socially, economically, and politically excluded (or disempowered) from “opportunity structures that facilitate upward [and outward] mobility” (Ley and Smith, 1997: 2). Stemming from unequal distributions of power and resources (inherent in our neo-liberal world system), this exclusion has created a perpetuating cycle of disempowerment; one that has impaired large segments of our society from acquiring the standards of living and being that, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone deserves.

For planners in the 21st century then, determining how to attempt planning for and with the socio-economically and politically disempowered has been contentiously problematic. Some have argued that the responsibility lies within the state, while others have claimed it lies within all of us, members of civil society. Still others have argued that such responsibilities lie somewhere in the middle: within the state, the private sector, and civil society.

The Challenges

The oppressor is solidary with the oppressed only when he stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated the sale of their labor- when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love (Freire, 2005: 39).

In Part 1, an ESL facilitator was quoted as saying, “‘marginalized’ is such an overused word.” This may be true, but as he and so many of his DTES counterparts know all

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15 As quoted in Friedmann (1990:12), section 25.1 of the Declaration states: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”
too well, being “marginalized” or “disempowered”\textsuperscript{16} is an understated reality. As in most global cities, this is the case in Vancouver where the bulk of mainstream society relies on the government to take care of marginalized citizens (immigrants and refugees included), and the government in turn relies on its institutional systems to service them. Since neither civil society nor the state has taken on the responsibility of actually caring for marginalized citizens though (through the moral provision of interpersonal support—talking and listening, encouraging, respecting, appreciating, and loving people), services intended to promote greater self-sufficiency (through the systematic provision of basic needs—money, food, shelter, clothing, essential skills, etc.) have often failed, yielding greater dependency as a result (McKnight, 1995).

Let us imagine for just a moment that it was you who suddenly lost everything in your life (all your assets, your job, your home, your family and your friends). The $530 the government’s welfare system hands you each month barely covers the cost of your food and rent, let alone your personal health and hygiene.\textsuperscript{17}

With each day that passes you feel you are becoming increasingly alienated from the rest of society. Your sense of self-confidence, self-esteem, and identity (who you are) erode away. You feel like you have nowhere and no one to turn to, except, as one DTES resident recently explained, the “institutions such as the welfare systems, the E.I. systems, and the job placement systems, [which are] all very humiliating and demoralizing. They just beat down the poor, they just beat down people…they’re impersonal.”\textsuperscript{18} Like this resident, you hate the system, but you depend on it to survive; it has become your “life world” (Habermas, 1984).

Now, let us imagine that on top of all this, you are unable to speak English…

The “impersonal” ways in which the poor and those perceived to be “different” (those who do not look, dress, act, speak, smell, or move, the same as “we,” from the dominant socio-cultural class, do) are systematically treated in multicultural cities such as Vancouver (by the state and civil society alike), is a force that pushes people who

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{16} I purposely defined the word “disempowerment” rather loosely to encapsulate related terms such as “marginalization,” “exclusion” and “oppression.”
\item\textsuperscript{17} Welfare recipients are allotted $350 per month for rent (which is the cheapest there is in Vancouver). The remaining $180 they are given each month ($6 per day) has to cover all other costs including food, clothing, health, etc. And in a city such as Vancouver, that simply is not feasible, particularly considering that it is nearly impossible to find a nutritious meal for less than ten dollars.
\item\textsuperscript{18} Comment made by an ESL conversation facilitator. Focus Group Discussion. July 8th, 2005
\end{itemize}
are already on the margins further away from the folds of society. It is also a force that creates widespread misunderstandings amongst and between citizens who, by having few opportunities and/or responsibilities to engage with “others” on an interpersonal level, have learned to fear them instead. As Leonie Sandercock puts it, “The less we know about and are exposed to strangers, the more afraid we are” (2003:116). Subsequently afraid of the “strangeness” of strangers, we become blinded from seeing the “likeness” of people.

The Opportunities

Intercultural contact and interaction is a necessary condition for being able to address the inevitable conflicts that will arise in multicultural societies (Sandercock, 2003: 88).

In the 1960’s, social upheavals such as the explosive feminist, gay and lesbian, black power, anti-war, and free speech movements, led to a paradigm shift in the social sciences; one that became focused on equality, human rights, inclusive democracy, good governance, and social power. In planning, this translated into a gradual shift away from the rational-comprehensive model of planning and its corresponding view of planners as technocratic “experts”. In its place, a more radically transformative model of planning has been put forth, one that views planners as the “enabler[s] of community self-empowerment” (Sandercock, 1998:65). At the crux of this paradigm shift has been the determination of for/with whom to plan, at what scale, how, and why (the politics of planning practice).

Once solely concerned with developing master plans for the state (large scale modernist planning), over the past twenty-five years or so, planners have become increasingly concerned with the process of planning for communities (small scale advocacy planning), or even with individuals/communities (micro scale innovative planning). In support of the more micro-scale planning practices, Sandercock writes,

The sites of coming to terms with ethnic (and surely other) differences are the ‘micro-publics’ where dialogue and prosaic negotiations are compulsory, in sites such as the workplace, schools, colleges, youth centres, sports clubs, community centres, neighbourhood houses, and the micro-publics of ‘banal transgression’ (2003:94).

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19 Sandercock cites Ash Amin (2002: 12) for her use of the term “banal transgression.”
I agree. My aim in writing this thesis, however, lies in not only considering how people might \emph{come to terms} with such differences, but how they might actually \emph{be empowered} by learning from them.

**4.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What is empowerment and how does it relate to planning?
2. In what ways does the ESL Summer Pilot Project demonstrate the role cross-cultural dialogue, in the form of teaching and learning conversational ESL, can play in empowering inner city residents and immigrants?
3. From a planning perspective, what can we learn from this example?

**4.4 METHODOLOGY**

**Practice Before Discourse**

Most researchers describe their methodology by explaining how they \emph{did} their research: “I designed… I conducted…. I observed, etc.” In this thesis, I try to explain how I am \emph{doing} my research in the moment, in real time. As mentioned earlier, the distinction is significant because, unlike most researchers, my intention to use the ESL Summer Pilot Project as my case study only surfaced \emph{after} I was in the “field” perse. Therefore, the data I have used to reflectively narrate \emph{my} version of the ESL Summer Pilot Project story is anecdotal data that I inadvertently compiled as a central figure in the pilot project (subjectively from the inside), not as a “researcher” purposefully taking field notes on the project (objectively from the outside). I am supplementing this anecdotal data with the reflections of participants involved in the pilot by conducting focus group discussions with them more than six months after the project wrapped up.

It is hard to say whether or not this “case before the study” or “practice before discourse” (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 134) approach to action research is a particularly good methodology to use or not. All I know is that when my thesis advisor, Leonie Sandercock, asked me how I would have done things differently had I known the pilot was going to be the subject of my thesis, my answer was this: I would have taken a lot more notes, set up more interviews, compiled more quotes, taken more photographs, and spent a lot more time in each of the ESL conversation groups as a participant-observer (which would have significantly undermined the sense of
leadership the ESL conversation facilitators had experienced as a result of being in charge of their conversation groups). All things considered, I expect that I would have put a lot more energy into documenting the project (in the anticipation of writing my thesis), and consequently, a lot less time participating in the action or the “doing” of the project. Moreover, I imagine that I would have probably also tried to control the outcomes in the hopes of finding clear answers to whatever my predetermined research questions were. According to Hans Eysenck, “sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases- not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something” (Quoted in Flyvbjerg, 2001:73) This is what I feel I have done, and it is what I am hoping to continue doing by sharing my story-turned-case-study with you in the same way that I experienced it; that is, by describing the action (or performed story) first, and the research second.

What follows is a discussion of the methods I have used to formulate the ESL Summer Pilot Project story in Part 1; namely the compilation of personal and collective reflections from people participating in the pilot, and storytelling. I then outline how I intend to go about doing my literature review and case study analysis in Part 2.

Can Reflection be considered a Research Method?
While it can be argued that all researchers reflect on their research practices in order to report and analyze their findings, most would not consider reflection to be an actual research method. But with no tangible “data” in hand to begin with, drawing on my memory (and later, the memories of ESL conversation facilitators) and reflecting on the who, what, where, when, why and how of the pilot project, was the only method I could use to begin writing, and later, analysing the pilot as a case study. In other words, my memory (and the collective memories of ESL facilitators) became my data, and reflection is the method I am using to retrieve, report on, and analyze, it.

Uncomfortable with the idea of solely including my memory and voice to descriptively narrate the “who, what, where, when, why and how” behind the ESL Summer Pilot Project story, I decided to submit an application to UBC’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board to lead focus group discussions with ESL facilitators. In mid-April 2005,

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20 The pilot wrapped up in September of 2004 and I started reflectively writing about it in April 2005.
my application was approved, and in compliance with the “Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans” requirements, I led a one-hour focus group discussion with six ESL conversation facilitators on April 22, 2005, and another with six ESL conversation facilitators on July 8th, 2005 (three of whom participated in the first focus group session, and three who had not). The purpose of these two focus groups was to collectively reflect on the ESL Summer Pilot Project and how it impacted participants’ lives, both as individuals, and as a community. The questions I planned to ask were:

1. Why did you choose to volunteer in the ESL Summer Pilot Project?
2. What did you like most about your role as an ESL conversation facilitator? Least?
3. Was this a unique experience for you? How? Why?
4. What did you find to be the most rewarding/challenging aspect of this project?
5. How did volunteering in this project impact your life?
6. Has this experience changed your worldview? How?

I audiotaped these discussions and, after transcribing them, I appended parts of the dialogue to the ESL Summer Pilot Project story (at the end of chapter 3). As you will have noticed in this dialogue, I ended up asking ESL conversation facilitators many other questions as they came up in conversation (that is, I did not firmly stick to the questions I had prepared in advance). The reason I included this dialogue in Part 1 (and not in my analysis section for example) is because I felt that the best way to communicate this shared reflection piece was to present it in the way that it actually happened- in dialogue at the end of the ESL Summer Pilot Project story. I also felt that this shared reflection would create a nice transition between the ESL Summer Pilot Project as a story (chapters 1 to 3) and case study (chapters 4 to 7).

To include the voice of immigrants involved in the pilot project as “ESL participants,” I drew on quotes that I had gathered while conducting one-on-one interviews with randomly selected ESL participants at the end of the pilot (Note: these interviews were conducted for the purpose of writing the ESL Summer Pilot Project's final report, which was presented to the Learning Exchange staff in the fall of 2004).

Now, in reflecting on whether or not reflection can be considered a research method, I have come to the conclusion that in situations where the researcher doing the reflection views him or herself as one of the subjects under study (which, as a central figure of the pilot project, I do), reflection is a logical research method to use. This “researcher as the subject” approach is known as phenomenology, and it asserts that
as human beings, “social scientists are part of the very entity we [researchers] seek to understand” (Schutz, 1970 quoted in Payls, 2003:9). From this phenomenological standpoint then, reflection is arguably not only a logical method to use, but a valid one as well. That is, so long as the researchers’ values are explicitly stated. This is necessary because values are inextricably embedded in the way we perceive the world.

**Do Phenomenological Methods Constitute “Science”?**

Since “reflections” and values” are not typically part of the scientific method’s vocabulary, some scientists have questioned whether or not the subjectivity embodied in qualitative approaches such as phenomenology (and in methods such as reflection, story-telling and single case study analysis), really constitute “science.” For me, this question was sufficiently put to rest when I read Bent Flyvbjerg’s *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How it Can Succeed Again* (2001). In re-introducing Aristotle’s philosophy of knowledge as comprising of three intellectual virtues- episteme (science), techne (art/crafts) and phronesis (practical values), Flyvbjerg reminded me that the age-old question of whether or not qualitative approaches (such as phenomenology) and methods constitutes “science” or not, is irrelevant. What is relevant is whether or not such approaches and methods accurately represent social realities or “truths.”

**Is there any “Truth” to My Research?**

According to Flyvbjerg, the one ingredient that Aristotle’s philosophy of knowledge lacks is a consideration of power and how power relations are played out in everyday life. Like Foucault, Flyvbjerg argued that since power pervades all human interactions, there can be no analyses and/or representation of human “truths” (as a reliable guide to practice), without there first being an acknowledgement of power.

In reading how Flyvbjerg links Aristotelian philosophy of truth to Foucault’s analyses of power in the social sciences, I came to understand my own involvement at the UBC Learning Exchange as the deliberation of *my* values with reference to my praxis as a student engaging in a variety of power relations- what Flyvbjerg refers to as “phronesis” (2001: 57). Since, “the study of human activity, according to Aristotle, demands that one practice phronesis, by occupying oneself with values as a point of departure for praxis” (Ibid: 70), I decided to explicitly share my values of social justice
and the path I chose to apply them (as a planner), with the people I met at the Learning Exchange (and with you) from the beginning. That way, I hoped that they (and you) would understand the lens through which I was approaching my praxis, without feeling like their (or your) values and interpretations of the pilot project/story-turned-case study, were being compromised.

In terms of whether or not the inclusion of my values into my research praxes is enough to constitute “truth,” begs the answer, No, not unless the issue of power is addressed. This is because, just as Flyvbjerg argues that “no conception of phronesis can be adequate today unless it confronts the analysis of power” (2001:88), Sandercock asserts that “We need to be attentive to how power shapes which [and whose] stories get told, get heard, carry weight” (Sandercock: 182). Since questions of power are so important to phronetic research, I plan to devote my entire literature review (chapter 5) to the question of power and empowerment in planning.

Why Use a Single Case Study?

According to D.T. Campbell’s 1963 article entitled Social Attitudes and Other Acquired Behavioural Dispositions,

Case studies have such a total absence of control as to be of almost no scientific value…Such studies often involve tedious collection of specific detail, careful observation, testing, and the like, and, in such instances, involve the error of misplaced precision… It seems well-nigh unethical at the present time to allow, as theses or dissertations… case studies of this nature (Emphasis in original, Quoted in Palys 2003:318).

Ironically, today most contemporary social scientists would agree that it is exactly this uncontrolled collection of specific detail, context dependency, careful observation, and imprecision, that makes case studies one of the more ethically valuable means of building our understanding of human realities. In fact, according to Bent Flyvbjerg, “the case study produces precisely the type of context-dependent knowledge which makes it possible to move from the lower to the higher levels in the learning process” (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 71).

For me, deciding on whether or not to use reflection, storytelling and a single case study analysis as my research methods did not feel like a choice. Instead, it felt like the most natural way to investigate what I learned from my experiences, and to report on what other participants said that they learned from theirs. However, in thinking
about my methodology, I feel that I need to somehow justify or rationalize these choices. So here it goes: I designed my research based on my normative experiences as a central figure in the pilot project, and in order to most accurately replicate these experiences, I reflectively told the story. In turn, I am planning to draw on my story, and the reflections of ESL facilitators and participants in the pilot project/case study to analyse the role conversational ESL can play in promoting cross-cultural learning and empowerment in 21st century planning.

This approach is one that is consistent with the social learning literature, which attempts to bridge the gaps between theory and practice through concepts such as John Dewey’s “learning by doing” for example. For me, the praxis (action and reflection) of constructing my “pilot project-turned story-turned case study,” is my methodology; it is how I am conceptually sharing what I have learned, and what I am continuing to learn in the process, with you.

**How will I Analyze my Case Study?**

In chapter 5, I will review academic literature relating to what empowerment, and empowerment planning is, and how it can be (and has been) applied in multicultural cities. While most researchers do their literature review prior to their fieldwork, I am doing mine afterwards. According to Patton (2002), this approach reduces bias and encourages innovative thought in the field. It also allows the researcher to be more focused when it comes to selecting literature relevant to the study at hand.

In performing my literature review then, I plan to construct an analytical framework out of the data I compiled and the relevant theories, pedagogies, models and stories I read. As mentioned, this framework will serve as the basis for analyzing the ways in which the ESL Summer Pilot Project demonstrates the role conversational ESL can play in the empowerment of inner city residents and immigrants (my research questions).

**4.5 SUMMARY**

In this chapter, I outlined my research problems and, from a planning perspective, the challenges and opportunities that they represent. After I defined my research

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21 The Deweyan philosophy of social learning is revisited in the next chapter (beginning on page 53).
questions, I explained my methodology as a work in progress- one that will become clearer once I complete my review of the literature in the next chapter.
Chapter 5

EMPOWERMENT PLANNING

In our rapidly urbanizing world, the population size, density, and ethno-cultural diversity of what are now commonly referred to as “global cities” (Sassen: 1995) are increasing dramatically. In response, people living in cities such as “Diverse City” (be it long time residents or newcomers) have learned to adapt their ways of knowing and being in the city to facilitate new interactions with the people and places they encounter. “Why?” Because they know that in so doing, they, as individuals and as a society, are growing in tandem with the changing urban environment they inhabit.

“But does Diverse City actually exist,” you ask? As a city, “No, not yet.” But as a vision for the many multicultural societies that, instead of embracing difference, are marginalizing it, trying to pretend it is not there, and fearing it when they realise it is, “Yes.”

In previous chapters, I explained that in an attempt to mediate the cross-cultural fears that have been, and are, brewing in many multicultural cities (and the misunderstanding, marginalization, and hostility they often feed into), the planning profession has been shifting away from the rational comprehensive model of “master planning” since the 1970’s. I also explained that in its place, alternative approaches to participatory planning have emerged with the aim of building inclusive communities where difference is valued as a resource (one we can learn from and potentially be empowered by) rather than feared as a threat.

Since my thesis is concerned with the role cross-cultural dialogue, in the form of teaching and learning conversational ESL, can play in facilitating empowering

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22 Here I am referring to the “othering” that occurs as members of the dominant or mainstream culture(s) set out to define what is and is not the “norm” in society; particularly in terms of who belongs and who does not based on ethnicity, culture/language, class, religion, sexuality, age, gender, etc.

23 The recent Oscar-winning movie “Crash” does an excellent job of portraying the suspicion, fear, and violence that often result from simple cross-cultural misunderstandings in cities such as Los Angeles (or Vancouver).
“learning exchanges” in multicultural communities, the purpose of this chapter is to explore these alternative approaches and how they may inform our current understanding of empowerment planning. Prior to beginning this review though, I will first explain why I think empowerment is important to talk about and work towards in planning “Diverse Cities” in the 21st century.

5.1 EMPOWERMENT, A MEANINGFUL OR MEANINGLESS DISCOURSE?

Although there is much conflicting theoretical debate as to how power works or even what power is,24 the term “empowerment” has nevertheless become a buzzword in our society. So popular in fact that some would argue it has become superfluous—a word that is used by the private sector, the government, non-governmental organizations, the academy, and the media in very inconsistent and often contradictory ways.25 It is largely a result of this confusion that the entire empowerment discourse has fallen under the scrutiny of scholars such as Frances Cleaver, who, in her article Institutions, Agency and the Limitations of Participatory Approaches to Development, argued that:

As ‘empowerment’ has become a buzzword in development […] its radical, challenging and transformatory edge has been lost. The concept of action has become individualised, empowerment depoliticised (2001: 37).

This and many similar critiques of the empowerment discourse have demanded that we question whether “empowerment” (both as a word and discourse) has become as cliché—whether or not its “transformatory edge” has been lost to mere rhetoric. While this line of inquiry is valid, I would argue that a more telling position stems from asking why empowerment has become a buzzword in the first place…What societal void(s) is the concept filling, and for whom?

While sitting in a coffee shop and pondering this question, I thought of E.F Schumacher’s Small is Beautiful: Economies as if People Mattered. Published at the tail end of the Fordist era (1920-1970), Schumacher claimed: “It is not wealth that stands in the way of liberation but the attachment to wealth; not the enjoyment of

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24 See for example in the planning literature the divergent views of Forester (1989), Flyvbjerg (1998) and Hillier (2002), who each draw on different social and political theorists (Habermas, Foucault and Lacan respectively) to explain the operations of power.

25 As an example of just how contradictory “empowerment” has become in our society, I recently spotted a billboard that read “Drive a Pontiac, be empowered.” The message being that empowerment can be bought and sold, like any commodity on the market.
pleasurable things but the craving for them” (E.F. Schumacher, 1973: 57). This statement in turn reminded me of something a resident of the DTES told me during one of our focus group discussions. He said: “[Addiction] has got to do with people that have a void in their lives, usually a cultural void, and it’s often filled with something not very useful to the actual needs of the person” (Focus Group, 2005). Although this comment was made with implicit reference to people with physical addictions, it made me think that perhaps it applies to people more generally; that perhaps our society’s “attachment to wealth” and “craving for pleasurable things” (our material addictions) is in fact linked to our lack of cultural connection to, and understanding of, one another and the world in which we live (who and why we are). This conclusion is not unlike the one Paulo Freire came to in Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

The oppressors do not perceive their monopoly on having more as a privilege which dehumanizes others and themselves. They cannot see that in the egoistic pursuit of having as a possessing class, they suffocate in their own possessions and no longer are; they merely have (2005: 59, emphasis in original).

So if our drive to compete in an individualistic game of “survival of the richest” (where having, in a material sense, is being), is being fuelled by a cultural (if not spiritual) void in our society, then the questions we need to be asking are: How do we break out of this dilemma? Is it possible to forge cultural connections with one another despite our differences and fears, and be empowered in the process?

These are questions that the empowerment discourse responds to by vesting hope in the human capacity to take action and create change (even in the face of seemingly hegemonic power). Indeed, by connoting a sense of “I/we can,” the empowerment discourse instils a sense of possibility that without the word, or discourse, would not conceptually exist. As Korten puts it, empowerment is a word that represents the kind of enabling language and action that is needed “to restore to local people and communities control of the productive assets on which their livelihoods depend” (1988: 7). It is also a word that communicates a sense of restored confidence in one’s own abilities, either as an individual or as a collective, to create change in one’s own life and community.
In these respects, “empowerment” is not only a word that conjures into existence alternatives to the status quo. It is a word that gives us something to believe in, to work towards, and to find new meaning in together. It helps us, collectively, to construct a politics of hope. And, it is for these reasons that I think “empowerment” has not only become a buzzword in society, but an essential goal to be striving towards in life, and in planning.

5.2 “GREAT BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN?” EXPLORING THE MEANING OF EMPOWERMENT

Now that the relevance of an empowerment discourse has been justified, a look at what it actually means is warranted. In search of a very general definition that I could later build upon, I found the most useful to be UNESCO’s version, which defines empowerment as:

How individuals/communities engage in learning processes in which they create, appropriate and share knowledge, tools and techniques in order to change and improve the quality of their own lives and societies (2005, emphasis added).

I was initially drawn to this definition because I am a strong supporter of the idea that empowerment is above all a learning, and conversely teaching, process that enables individuals/communities to transform their lives and societies. I also feel, however, that it is important to understand the ways in which the empowerment of individuals differs from that of communities in terms of the learning processes involved and their outcomes. In Planning in the Public Domain (1987), Friedmann makes this distinction by referring to the empowerment of individuals and communities as “self-empowerment” and “collective self-empowerment” respectively.

The “Self-Empowerment” of Individuals

Occurring in different ways for different people depending on where one is starting from, the self-empowerment of individuals involves learning to believe in the self, in the idea that “I can.” It is a process that takes place within the self, but results from one’s interpersonal transactions with others. It stems from what Friedmann calls “mutual learning” (1973), and from what one of the ESL facilitators coined “learning-by-teaching.” More specifically, self-empowerment occurs as one develops the knowledge, tools, and techniques necessary for one to improve one’s life on the one hand, and the love of self necessary to actually use such tools in productive ways on
the other (in ways that enables one to live up to one’s potential, strive towards fulfilling one’s goals, and prosper in ways that correspond to one’s values, for example). It is a process that involves learning from and giving back to others in meaningful ways.

The “Collective Self Empowerment” of Communities
Collective self-empowerment is similarly a therapeutic process in that it brings local people with common interests together in ways that strengthens their collective capacity to improve their socio-economic, political, and psychosocial conditions. It is a political organizing process that enables groups of people to mobilize their resources and take charge of defining their own community’s strengths, weaknesses, strategic vision, and plan for action. It is a process that above all else fosters conditions necessary for the self-empowerment and collective self-empowerment of individuals and communities to continue taking place on an ever-widening scale. It embodies the power of believing in “we can.”

Why Emphasize the “Self” in Empowerment?
For many people, empowerment is a confusing concept. This is understandable considering its meaning has changed so radically over the past few decades. Traditionally, “empowerment” was used with reference to the authoritative bestowing of power on the powerless. As such, its focus was almost entirely placed on the “other” as the object of empowerment.

More recently, empowerment has come to be a term that is generally used with reference to learning about our “selves” (in both a singular and plural sense), and specifically, about our ability to exercise our power to create our own change. In this way, the emphasis has shifted away from the idea that we can empower others, and towards the idea that empowerment comes from within the self. That said, this does not mean that there is no role for people to be playing in the creation of self-empowering conditions. Before I turn to looking at how the planning literature has begun to see this role as being the responsibility of professional “Planners,” I feel it is important to investigate why the empowerment trajectory has changed over the past

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26 Originating in the mid-17th century, the more conventional understanding of empowerment is still very much present in our contemporary usage of the word though. Perhaps this is why The American Heritage Dictionary’s definition of empowerment is: “To invest with power, especially legal power or official authority.” (See: http://dictionary.reference.com/)
three decades or so. Thus, what follows is a summary of the ways in which Michel Foucault’s work in particular has transformed our understanding of knowledge and power, and in turn, learning and empowerment.

Knowledge as Power, Learning as Empowerment: The Lessons of Michel Foucault

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Foucault challenged our paradigmatic understanding of power by arguing that power arises from the bottom up (as opposed to the top down), that power is exercised (rather than possessed), and that power can be productive (as well as repressive). Claiming that power is rendered through a multiplicity of social relations in society, Foucault therefore rejected the idea that one can have power, and correspondingly, that one can give power to others (the traditional meaning of empowerment). Instead, he argued that the exercise of power is linked to knowledge, and in turn, that the process of empowerment is linked to learning in two distinct ways: through “technologies of domination” and “technologies of self” (Olssen, 1999:24).

Understood as techniques that enable certain people to define social norms and forms and to thus dominate over others, Foucault considered most of the social sciences to be technologies of domination. As an applied “social science” the planning profession would have been no exception to this critique. That is, until planners started becoming concerned with the applications of “social learning” (learning how we can manage ourselves in relation to others in everyday life). This new approach to planning would have been, for Foucault, considered to be a “technology of self” in that it aimed to enable and encourage people to learn from one another (mutual learning) so that they can occupy their own place in the city and community (Foucault in Olssen, 1999:150).

While it sounds simple, acquiring a Foucauldian understanding of the “self” in relation to the “other” is no small feat. In fact, Antonio Gramsci went as far as to say that learning “to know oneself better through others and to know others better through oneself” (quoted in Forgacs, 2000: 59) is our ultimate challenge in life. That being the case, one can deduce that doing so in the presence of ever-increasing ethno-cultural differences is an even bigger challenge.
5.3 FROM SOCIAL ORDER TO SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION, THE EMERGENCE OF A PARTICIPATORY PLANNING PARADIGM

If power is anchored in the micro-practices of everyday life, then that is also where the oppositional politics needs to begin, with a deconstruction of the power relationships built into everyday practices, and a reconstructed, political planning (Sandercock, 2003:71).

Although the planning profession historically served as a Foucauldian “technology of domination,” a paradigm shift was spurred when marginalized members of the American public started taking democracy to the streets in the 1960s. Organized around issues such as women’s rights and black power, these insurgents demanded that social policies governing the United States (the supposed “land of the free”) reflect the fact that contrary to the all-pervasive melting pot theory, the “mainstream” was actually comprised of “multiple streams,” all of which deserved the same recognition, autonomy, civil rights, and ability to flourish, as everyone else did.

To accommodate these demands, planners started exploring how their practices could be made more participatory and inclusive. For this, two models of participatory action proved highly influential: John Dewey’s process-oriented approach to social learning, and Saul Alinsky’s and Paulo Freire’s more radical and politically driven approaches to social transformation. While both of these models were predicated on the idea that interpersonal learning is the key to creating positive social change, their visions for how this might be accomplished and for what purpose, were very different. For Dewey, the process of dialogically learning with others (“learning-by-doing”) represented both the means and end to creating a more democratically empowered learning society. For Alinsky and Freire, however, this process simply represented the means by which the disempowered poor could begin questioning, mobilizing, taking action against, and transforming the system that was oppressing them.

John Dewey’s “Learning by Doing”

In terms of Dewey’s work, the idea that the most valid type of knowledge stems from our practical experiences- from interactively learning from others and our material environment (as opposed to learning through rote memorization for example) remains highly influential. A strong proponent of liberal ideals (particularly in the form of democratic governance and education), Dewey therefore felt that the role of the state and its officials (including planners) should be geared towards cultivating experiential
learning processes throughout civil society. For example, in *Democracy and Education: an Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*, Dewey explained:

> The aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education…the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth. Now this idea cannot be applied to all the members of a society except where intercourse of man with man is mutual, and except where there is […] a democratic society (1966, 107).

As noted here, Dewey considered experiential learning to play an instrumental role in enabling change to take place from the bottom up; that is, with citizens who, through dialogue, would constantly learn to create their own change by doing it (learning by doing).

Whereas Dewey’s focus was on enabling change to occur from within the system, Alinsky’s and Freire’s emphasis was much more focused on the importance of radically transforming it. Considered by some to be the father of American radicalism, Alinsky argued that the only way to achieve social justice is through the mobilization of mixed sectors of civil society- from churchgoers, to youth groups, to members of labour unions, to small business owners for example. In *Reveille for Radicals* (1946), Alinsky claimed that “organizing organizations” that were comprised of ordinary people was the only way the “system” could be democratically confronted, challenged, and changed in ways that reflected the greater good.

**Saul Alinsky’s “Organizing Organizations”**

In the 1930s, Alinsky recruited indigenous leaders who shared common interests in order to help him bring together historically antagonistic ethnic groups including Serbs and Croatians, Czechs and Slovaks, Poles and Lithuanians. Together, this large and diverse group of people formed a new organization, the “Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council.” Encouraging members to protest, rally, and “stir the pot,” Alinsky encouraged people to demand their right to negotiate with public and private sector officials on such issues as equal access to education, employment, housing, and social services. In this way, he saw the power of the masses as the promise of revolution. Over the course of the next three decades, he used his “Back of the Yards” model to found community organizations throughout the United States.
Paulo Freire’s “Concientization”

Similarly, Paulo Freire concerned himself with the plight of the oppressed poor in Brazil and developed a pedagogy that sought to mobilize, educate, and promote citizens to radically take action against their class-based society. His *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) specifically attacked the traditional teacher-student power relations embedded in what he called the “banking” system of education. This was largely because, for Freire, the educational system served as a powerful “instrument of oppression” (or “technology of domination”) that immersed students in the oppressive paradigms of the present, and inhibited them from thinking critically. To get around this, Freire offered a radical alternative by advocating the formation of “cultural circles:”

In place of a teacher, there would be a co-ordinator; instead of the traditional lecture and handing down of information, an exchange of ideas between people in the form of ‘dialogue’; instead of passive pupils, there would be active group participants; instead of material which was far removed from the interests and understanding of the participants, there would be compact programmes broken down into manageable and meaningful learning units (Mackie summarizing Freire, 1980: 39).

Within this context, Freire determined that co-ordinators would facilitate discussions by using a “problem-based” approach to learning. This would allow participants to dialogue about how they thought a given problem was affecting their lives, and to collaboratively focus on how they could overcome it. It is important to note here that for Freire, “dialogue” implies much more than simply speaking and listening… it signified cooperation, mutual respect, and love. It is through this kind of genuine dialogue that Freire imagined people would communicatively recognize “one another as equally significant participants” to the extent that both are considered teachers and students at the same time (Misgeld in Forester, 1988: 97).

In essence, Freire’s pedagogy determined that through a dialogic, problem-based style of learning, cultural circle participants would enable each other to develop a self-awareness (*who* they are as individuals and as a collective), a situational awareness (*why* they are in relation to others and their material environment), and a critical

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27 This “banking” concept critiqued formal education system whereby teachers are seen as the “depositors” of knowledge, and the students are seen as the “receivers.” While Freire’s pedagogy was developed with the explicit intention of educating the rural and urban poor to read and write, his pedagogy implicitly applies to transforming all forms of social injustices.
awareness (what forces are inhibiting them from flourishing, and what actions they can take to transform them). Freire referred to this process and its outcomes as “conscientization”: a critical consciousness that has “the power to transform reality” (in Talyor, 1993:52).

Linking Participatory Traditions to Planning: Friedmann’s Theory of Transactive Planning

One of the things that struck me about the arguments made in Dewey’s *Experience and Education* (1938), Alinsky’s *Reveille for Radicals* (1942), and Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) was the fact that none specified who, from a practitioners’ perspective (teachers, social workers, law enforcers, policy-makers, etc), can and should be responsible for encouraging interactive learning processes to take place in our strongly individualistic and multicultural societies. That is to say, they did not specify who should take on the challenge of securing and sustaining the social conditions necessary for “individuals/communities [to] engage in learning processes in which they create, appropriate and share knowledge, tools and techniques in order to change and improve the quality of their own lives and societies” (emphasis added. UNESCO, 2005). This is clearly a very political responsibility that, in an ideal world, would be shared by us all (indeed that is the goal). In our present reality though, there needs to be professional practitioners who work towards making sure such transformative agendas are being articulated and prosecuted from within our communities (Healey, 1997). In 1973, John Friedmann convincingly argued that this responsibility belongs to planning practitioners in collaboration with the state and members of civil society.

Influenced by the social learning literature and by Freire’s newly published *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Friedmann’s *Retracking America: A Theory of Transactive Planning* (1973) redefined the planners’ political identity in relation to the state and civil society. It did so by reconceptualising the planning profession as one concerned with the process of dialogically linking knowledge to action on the one hand, and with the production of radically empowering and/or transformative outcomes on the other. The result was his theory of transactive planning, which not only gave birth to a new communicative approach to planning, but also began incorporating a radical empowerment discourse into the realm of planning theory by arguing that planning is
political and does have a role to play in enabling marginalized individuals to participate in the decision-making processes affecting them. Here is how...

Embedded in Friedmann’s theory of transactive planning was the idea that a crisis of values and a crisis of knowledge had produced a communication gap between experts (with scientific knowledge) and people (with experiential knowledge) in our post-industrial societies. Based on the idea that knowledge is translated into action through dialogue, Friedmann stressed the need for planning to therefore be rooted in the micro-publics of civil society where an “unbroken sequence of interpersonal relations” (1973: 171) between the empowered and disempowered (planners and their clients for example) can take place. This way he claimed that “the barriers to effective communication between those who have access primarily to processed knowledge and those whose knowledge rests chiefly on personal experience” (1973: 172) could be broken down. And, in their absence, Friedmann envisioned that dialogic processes of mutual learning could take place, potentially leading to the creation of “learning cells”– ones that, in his vision of the “Good Society” (1979), would continuously grow, divide, and merge to form a transactive learning society.28

The Communicative Approach to Planning

Following Friedmann’s lead and building on Dewey’s pragmatic model of experiential learning, the communicative approach to planning was further influenced by Donald Schön (1983) and Jürgen Habermas (1987) in the 1980s. Focused on the importance of developing and valuing communicative ways of knowing and doing (a communicative rationality and skill set), power and empowerment were not emphasized in this body of literature.29 Instead, Schön’s focus was rooted in the ways in which practitioners can make well-informed and meaningful decisions “on the spot” by informally participating in “a larger societal conversation” and then reflecting on it (quoted in Sandercock, 2003:66). Coining the term “reflecting in and on action,” Schön’s pragmatic approach to the exercise of communicative rationality has long since influenced the ways planners engage with their practice.

28 This radical idea became the subject of Friedmann’s subsequent book The Good Society (1979).

29 Just because power relations and dis/empowerment were not recognized as having a role to play in the earlier communicative action literature, does not mean that they were not actually influencing planning practice. On the contrary, they play a central role in communicative practices; a point that scholars including Friedmann (1987), Forester (1989), and Sandercock (2003) have repeatedly made.
Adding to Schön’s hypothesis that technical reason is not the only way to make well informed decisions, Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action (1987) concluded that the forms of reason we use in our every day lives to understand, cooperate, and respect each other, are equally as important as the forms of reason we use to build bridges for example. Based on the idea that through dialogue, self-reflection, and praxis, emancipatory ways of knowing will enable people to simply surpass the power relations embedded in society though, Harbemas’ theory of communicative action has been deemed by many as being too idealistic and impractical. As Porter and Sheppard put it:

We are not sure that Habermas is correct to believe in a single, transcultural form of communicative rationality through which we can all, in principle, find common ground with one another (1998: 565).

At the roots of this and other critiques is Habermas’ (and his predecessors’) refusal “to take seriously the basic relations of dominance and dependence that exist in every social system” (Friedmann, 1987:220). These are the politics of human interaction that must necessarily be taken into account if any social theory is to be effectively applied in practice. Thus, in picking up on the works of, among others, Friedmann (1973, 1979), Schön (1984), and Habermas (1987), John Forester began bridging the emerging gap between communicative theory and how it can be realistically applied in practice, by considering how communicative action can and does intersect with power (as opposed to “surpassing” it) on a daily basis.

Forester performed his analysis by taking an in-depth look at just what it is planners do in real life and then writing about it in Planning in the Face of Power (1989), and later, in The Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes (1999). What his extensive research revealed was that planning truly is an interactive practice and, accordingly, what planners do most of the time is talk and listen to people. He also found that in the “precariously democratic” and “strongly capitalistic” (1989: 3) context of the late 20th century talking and listening to people is a deeply political act. Thus, for him, creating a vision of the public good that is at once realistic and inclusive of the interests of marginalized individuals/groups, is dependent on the willingness of planners not only to embrace their communicative and technical rationalities, but to develop their political ones as well.

If planners understand how relations of power shape the planning process, they can improve the quality of their analyses and empower citizen and community action (Forester, 1989: 27).
Forester states that one of the ways planners can “empower citizen and community action” is by acknowledging that information (or knowledge) is a source of power, and that since socio-economic and political structures often “operate to distort communications” (1989: 141), citizens need to be persuaded to “check and challenge claims that planners, developers, and other citizens make on them” (ibid: 161). In other words, like Freire, Forester claims that civil society needs to be made more critically conscious (“conscientization”) of the ways in which power is exercised through the transfer of information/knowledge (whether formally or informally). To help facilitate the development of people’s critical thinking skills, Forester’s “mutual understanding framework” is therefore intended to provide planners and citizens with a tool that enables them to evaluate how comprehensible, sincere, legitimate, and factually accurate information is conveyed.

“But how is drawing ones attention to, and raising ones awareness of, the micro-politics of communications (how comprehensible, sincere, legitimate, and factually accurate information is conveyed) actually leading to the empowerment of citizens and communities?” Forester argues that by encouraging citizens to critically reflect in and on the communicative planning process (by using analytical tools such as his mutual understanding framework for example), planners are, in essence, coaching citizens to view information as a source of power, and in turn, to view the ways in which people communicate information/misinformation to one another as an expression of this power (or lack thereof).

The question of whether doing so actually contributes to their empowerment though, really depends on the extent to which people are able to connect this understanding of power to their own lives in ways that help them to communicate more effectively (thereby expanding their social networks and spheres of influence). This is something that Forester considers in more detail in “The Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes (1999).

Expressly drawing from the “Deweyan” and “Freirean” models of participatory practice introduced earlier, as well as from the many stories he gathered from observing, interviewing, and deliberating with various practitioners, Forester’s The Deliberative Practitioner (1999) offers a new approach to participatory practice- what he calls the
“transformative theory of social learning” (1999:130). That is to say, a planning approach that sees “transformative” and/or “empowering” outcomes as not only being one of the positive spin-off effects of communicative processes, but rather as the intended goals of such processes.

This theory is based on the idea that by communicatively working and learning with others (deliberating with them), people change (not only in terms of what they think, but in terms of who they are. For this reason Forester warns that planners need to “be wary of focussing so much on argumentative learning that [they] fail to appreciate participants’ learning of skills and confidence, appreciation of and respect for others” (1999: 151). These are the transformative aspects of a communicative planning process that, for Forester, are all too often overlooked by the communicative planning literature. Thus, to better understand these potentials, Forester’s “transformative theory of social learning” attempts to build an understanding of how communicative planning processes can be practically linked to radically empowering outcomes by analyzing a series of case studies, one of which is summarized later in this chapter.

So in case you are wondering what communicative planning theory has to do with empowerment planning, I hope the answer is beginning to become increasing clear: that an empowerment planning approach is one that relies on communicative planning processes (as introduced above and elaborated upon below) intended to create radically empowering outcomes amongst and between individuals and communities.

The Communicative Approach: A Commentary

By facilitating a shift in planning, from technocratic to democratic, expert-driven to inclusive, the communicative approach to planning reasserted the importance of the profession in the ever-changing geographies of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Indeed, the communicative approach effectively redefined the profession as one

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30 The concept of “transformative learning” is now a highly popularized one in the social sciences. See the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto's (OISEUT’s) “Transformative Learning Centre” website for related publications and conferences: http://tlc.oise.utoronto.ca/index.htm

31 At a time when the nation state’s role in securing the civil/human rights of its citizens is becoming secondary to its role in securing the interests of the global economy, the planning profession’s shift towards planning for and with civil society could not have come at a more crucial time.
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centered with the micro-processes involved in dialogically linking knowledge (both technical, communicative, and political) to action in the public domain from the bottom up. Despite everything the communicative approach accomplished though, come the turn of the 21st century, its shortcomings have been manifesting in several distinct ways.

As Forester (1999) has pointed out, the communicative approach’s emphasis on process (i.e., that dialogic processes are both the means and end to creating community) came at the price of overseeing the “transformative learning” and/or empowering outcomes that were, or potentially could be, taking place in communicative practices. As discussed in the next section, this potential is particularly strong in multicultural communities where endless opportunities for cross-cultural learning exist as a result of people’s diverse ways of knowing and being in the world. That said though, if planners are unprepared for facilitating (and possibly mediating) such cross-cultural interactions, this transformative potential could be lost to misunderstanding, fear, and/or adversity in multicultural contexts. For these reasons, it is imperative that planners recognize the importance of developing creative ways to dialogically communicate meaning across difference.

According to Michelle LeBaron, “We can increase our cultural fluency in a variety of ways. One of the most productive is putting ourselves in situations that stretch us, where we encounter culturally unfamiliar people and situations, observe our responses and develop resourcefulness and flexibility”(2002:42). In working with diverse stakeholders, this is what planners do. But what planners must also do is consider the ways in which they can pass these cross-cultural skills32 on to the people they are working with, because ultimately, “…as cities become more multiethnic and multicultural, the need to engage in dialogue with strangers must become an urban art and not just a planners’ art (Sandercock, 2003: 204).” In the next section, the question of how so doing can facilitate empowering outcomes amongst individuals and communities is investigated.

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32 These “cross-cultural communication skills” may include knowing how to use one’s body language to communicate meaning across a language barrier, knowing how to make talking about race okay and not something to feel weird or politically incorrect about, knowing how to read others’ cultural signals, knowing how to inform others about one’s own cultural signals, etc.
5.4 A CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH TO EMPOWERMENT PLANNING

People resist the process of individualization and social atomization, and tend to cluster in community organizations that, over time, generate a feeling of belonging, and ultimately, in many cases, a communal, cultural identity. For this to happen, a process of social mobilization is necessary. That is, people must engage in urban movements (not quite revolutionary), through which common interests are discovered and defended, life is shared somehow, and new meaning may be produced (Castells, 2004: 60).33

While the communicative approach to planning emphasizes the importance of dialogic processes and social learning, the empowerment approach goes several steps further by stressing the need for such processes to yield social mobilization and transformation. Generally speaking, a communicative process will, over time, feed such empowering outcomes (however big or small). This is why integrating such approaches the way Forester’s “transformative theory of social learning” does, holds so much potential for re-politicizing communities so that they can create their own change. Still, the politics involved in applying such processes in ethno-culturally diverse settings presents several challenges. These challenges (as articulated below) reflect the fact that cross-cultural interactions often involve interacting across many racial, class, and/or lingual “barriers.” This is why planners need to be prepared for communicatively addressing issues such as:

1. How can communicative planning processes mediate the politics rooted in race (the racial politics), which, as a “source of meaning and recognition throughout human history” (Castells, 2004: 53), can either facilitate or inhibit “reciprocal communicability between excluded/exclusionary identities” (Ibid: 9)?

2. How can communicative processes be receptive to, and inclusive of, the different cultural politics embedded in cross-cultural interactions, including the different cultural ways of knowing, speaking, gesturing, joking, and just simply expressing oneself?

3. How can planners be sensitive to the linguistic politics embedded in cross-cultural communications, such as who is included and/or excluded from the communicative planning process based on their language proficiency?34

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34 Language proficiency in this context refers to both a person’s ability to fluently speak the language being used in the planning process, and a person’s ability to identify with the culture of the language being used (the use of academic jargon versus street slang language versus sign language for the hearing impaired for example).
To effectively engage with, and mediate, the micro-politics associated with planning in multicultural communities, Sandercock argues that planners need to incorporate different cultural ways of knowing into their professional practice, and into their personal ways of being (2003). For her, this requires planners to adopt an “epistemology of multiplicity,” one that consists of:

...knowing through dialogue; from experience; through seeking out local knowledge of the specific and concrete; through learning to read symbolic, non-verbal evidence; through contemplation; and through action-planning” (Sandercock, 2003: 76).

In her master’s thesis, Jill Faye Atkey adds that planning in such settings also requires practitioners to develop and practice certain cross-cultural skills including reflexivity, communication and listening, facilitation and mediation, community education, and an understanding of cultural contexts (2004). It also requires planners to have certain personal characteristics such as creativity, intuition, humour, sensitivity, flexibility, patience, and respect (ibid, 2004). These skills and personal characteristics are, for Atkey, not specific to “(P)lanning” (that is, planning as a professional practice), but are in fact the prerequisites necessary for us as members of a multicultural civil society, to effectively learn to communicate with one another.

To attest to the importance of adopting Sandercock’s “epistemology of multiplicity,” and Atkey’s “cross cultural navigation tools,” while teaching English in Taiwan I learned the importance of supplementing verbal dialogue (speaking and listening) with facial expressions, gestures, sounds, drama, humour, visual aids, metaphorical imagery/symbolism, analogy, and body language in order to communicate meaning (indeed since I did not speak Chinese, doing so was not only a teaching technique, but a survival tool). It was upon discovering that these alternative forms of dialogue were transferable in multicultural cities such as Vancouver, that I started to think about the importance of educating people (both members of our “host” society and newcomers) on how such skills can be incorporated into our daily lives...into our ways of being with each other in the city.

As mentioned in Part 1, it was this conclusion, combined with my conversations about teaching ESL abroad with residents of the DTES, that initially led me to consider the possibility of using conversational ESL as a vehicle for bringing diverse people together (native and non-native English speakers) to learn, and practice cross-cultural communication skills and understanding with one another...thereby expanding

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people’s social networks and sense of belonging or “community” in the city. In order to analyze whether or not this “idea-turned-pilot project” is in fact a case of a “cross-cultural approach to empowerment planning,” an understanding of how empowerment can be recognized as an outcome of cross-cultural communicative planning processes needs to be determined.

The Challenge of Evaluating Empowerment as an Outcome of Planning: Friedmann’s Dis/ Empowerment model of Poverty

In search of a tool that would enable me to better understand how empowerment, as both a process and a strategic goal, can be recognized and evaluated in cross-cultural communicative planning processes then, I initially turned to the development literature. Overwhelmed by the range of tools used to measure empowerment (definitions, indicators, data sources, formulas, and methods—some context specific, and others purportedly universal, in application), I came to the conclusion that empowerment has, generally speaking, become too “operationalized” in much of the development literature; systematized for the sake of objectively scoring, ranking, and ordering empowerment, rather than focusing on what really matters—people and the power of their stories.

Determined to find a simpler and more qualitative way of approaching, identifying, and analyzing self-empowerment and collective self-empowerment in planning, I found Friedmann’s “(Dis)Empowerment Model of Poverty” (1992), to be particularly useful. Designed in the shape of a wheel (or symbolically, the world), Friedmann claims that by charting each household’s relative access to the model’s eight bases of social power (social networks, appropriate information, surplus time over subsistence requirements, instruments of work and livelihood, social organization, knowledge and


36 For Friedmann, the household, not the individual (although a household may be comprised of only one person), is the starting point of analysis. This is because households are political (in that its members engage in decision-making processes), households are territorially based (members live in a shared space), households are productive (members act on behalf of each other), and households are made of individuals who are morally tied to one another. Thus, in this model, each household’s access to the bases of social power is relatively determined; that is, relative to one’s own historical situations, to other households, or to mainstream society for example.
skills, defensible life space, and financial resources), their empowerment can be comparatively analysed (those positioned nearest the centre of the wheel are least empowered).

Rooted in the belief that through social power one can develop psychological power (self-confidence and esteem) as well as political power (critical thinking/decision-making capabilities), Friedmann's model relies “on politics rather than planning as the principal process through which needs are identified and the means for their satisfaction pursued” (1990: 96). That said, its implications for planning practitioners are nevertheless manifold. For example, Friedmann argues that it is by increasing their access to social organizations and social networks in particular, that households can “in collaboration with others, and independent of the state, exert a pervasive influence in gaining access to the remaining bases of social power” (1990:101); thereby achieving self-empowerment.

But, how can households’ access social organizations if they do not exist...or if they only exist for a select few (a particular minority group for example)? And, why would households want to access social organizations that do not reflect their values, needs, and interests (in terms of the people, activities, services, programs, and/or politics they involve)? Whether employed by the state or not, these are political questions that are (or should be) of concern to planners

In order to collaboratively work with diverse groups of marginalized individuals and/or households in forming, sustaining, and continually strengthening their social organizations and networks (recall Freire’s “cultural circles,” Alinsky’s “organizing organizations,” and Friedmann’s “learning cells” for instance), the communicative planning literature tells us that planners must first engage in dialogue with locals; talking and listening, expressing respect for, and interest in, local ideas and concerns. However, “In this process, it is not only communication that is needed between the outsider and the disempowered or oppressed sectors of a community, but also trust – which must be earned not learned” (Connell, 1997: 93). And, as Atkey points out, “…building trust in communities where there has historically been distrust requires a great deal of time” (2004: 98). Thus, one can deduce that taking an empowerment approach to planning requires that practitioners be prepared to commit a lot of time to communicatively planning with specific groups of marginalized individuals. Exactly
how long is not something one can predetermine because, ultimately, empowerment is a process that depends entirely on the stakeholders involved, the context.

Since there is no prescriptive way to “do” empowerment planning, it is imperative that planners and citizens become familiar with, learn from, and be inspired by, stories of how planners working with different individuals and communities have gone about developing local capacity to create change. The ways in which Ken Reardon and his students helped residents of East St. Louis to develop these capacities exemplify the kinds of outputs that can be generated by this kind of cross-cultural trust building, collaboration, and commitment. It is therefore a perfect example of the kinds of stories we need to hear more of.

Referenced at length in Forester’s *The Deliberative Practitioner* (1999), and described first-hand by Ken Reardon (2003) in his article “Ceola’s Vision, Our Blessing: The Story of an Evolving Community-University Partnership in East St. Louis,” this ongoing “outreach project” is one of the best examples there is of a cross-cultural empowerment planning approach; particularly because the story reveals both the challenges and opportunities associated with the cross-cultural communicative planning process.

**The Story of East St. Louis: Exemplifying the Power of a Cross-cultural Empowerment Approach to Planning**

In 1990, two years into the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign’s (UIUC) “East St. Louis project,” Ken Reardon became an Assistant Professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning. Along with this appointment came the East St. Louis project (later named the East St. Louis Action Research Project- ESLARP). As told by Reardon in Eckstein and Throgmorton’s *Story and Sustainability: Planning, Practice, and Possibility for American Cities* (2003: 113-140), what follows is a summary of how the ESLARP came into being, the challenges and opportunities that arose, and the numerous achievements that this university-community partnership afforded the university students, the residents of East St. Louis, and the Emerson Park community organizations involved.

Upon visiting East St. Louis for the first time, Reardon’s story begins with his description of the advanced state of urban decay he found in East St. Louis due to suburbanization, deindustrialization, and disinvestment- the classic plight of an inner city. He also described the sense of disappointment he felt upon learning from several community leaders that the UIUC-East St. Louis’ partnership did not have support from many community leaders and residents. This was largely due to the fact that,
from their perspective, researchers were classically so intent on identifying the community's problems that they could not see, or ignored, its many strengths.

As an employee of the Lessie Bates Davis Neighbourhood House, and co-founder of the Emerson Park Development Corporation (EPDC), Miss Davis was among the several deeply committed residents supporting the community’s grassroots revitalization initiative. She was also among those who were most resistant when it came to considering the possibility of forming an EPDC-UIUC partnership.

After much deliberation between Reardon, Miss Davis, and her colleagues, an EPDC-UIUC partnership did eventually form; but only on the condition that an empowerment approach would be taken whereby: locals would determine the issues to be addressed, locals would be actively involved in every step of the research, planning, and implementation processes, the UIUC would commit to working with the community for a minimum of five years, the UIUC would assist the EPDC in accessing funds for local development projects, and finally, the UIUC would help the EPDC establish a not-for-profit organization that would carry on the work after it left the community (Reardon in Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2003: 118). These stipulations were, as we will see, all part of Miss Davis' vision to not only train local residents to do their own research, but to enable them to take part in, and eventually lead, the continued revitalization of their community-collective self-empowerment.

Beginning in September of 1990, Reardon and his students began their research by taking a participatory action research approach (PAR) to collaboratively developing a neighbourhood plan with residents of Emerson Park. Agreeing to meet with the community on a monthly basis, Reardon explained that at first, both his students and the residents seemed to approach this joint venture with a great deal of uncertainty. Given that the collaboration was very cross-cultural in nature though, and considering the fact that many of the East St. Louis residents involved were struggling to make ends meet in a variety of ways that most the UIUC students would presumably have never experienced, these initial feelings of uncertainty are not surprising. What is surprising though, is the ways in which these tensions were overcome.

During one of their initial meetings, Reardon described how one of the local youths was brave enough to critique the ways in which the students had collected their data. In response to his critique, Reardon encouraged his students to incorporate the youth’s suggestions into their research design by redoing their analytical framework. The reluctant students complied and, in so doing, learned the importance of taking local feedback seriously, which is not only important for improving the quality of the work, but for ensuring that a respectful, trusting, and reciprocal relationship is established with community members. Indeed, Reardon explains, “several experienced leaders told me what a profound effect our willingness to accept a neighbourhood youth’s criticism of our work had upon their desire to work with us” (Reardon in Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2003:122).

The other big turning point in the “research and establishing trust” phase of the ESLARP project came when the students began conducting personal interviews with approximately 140 residents of Emerson Park. For the students, personally interacting with locals and being exposed to their conditions of living was not only an eye opening experience, but a deeply emotional one as well. According to Reardon, “They listened to young mothers describe their efforts to support their families while working at several low-paying jobs in areas poorly served by mass transit […] They learned of
the fear small children experienced travelling to school on streets dominated by drug
dealers, addicts, paid lookouts, and streetwalkers." (Reardon in Throgmorton, 2004:
125).

Reardon further described how, by reflecting upon the difficult realities that so many
residents of Emerson Park were experiencing, and in developing caring relationships
with their interviewees in the process, the students subsequently became deeply
committed to the project and the people involved. And, once this interpersonal
connection and rapport had been established between Reardon’s students and the
residents, it became easier for participants (be it students or residents) to feel that
they had a legitimate and valued role to play in the ESLARP.

In the years that followed the initial phases of the ESLARP, Reardon explained that
several impressive neighbourhood improvement projects were undertaken. Students
worked with local residents to clear garbage from vacant lots, improve the
community’s crime prevention system, and secure donations to do home repairs in
the community. According to Reardon, “in many case, our students were trained to
complete this work by African American contractors living in the neighbourhood” (in
Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2003: 130). This arrangement in particular worked so well
that the housing improvement project turned into an on-going program with over 3000
students taking part over the course of the next nine years.

From 1990 to 1995, the ESLARP continued to produce incredibly positive changes in
the Emerson Park community. However, despite all that Reardon and his UIUC
students had contributed over the years, in 1995 (five years into the ESLARP), Miss
Davis asked Reardon when the empowerment planning approach they had discussed
using at their first meeting would be implemented in Emerson Park. Reardon
described feeling completely taken aback by this question at first, but then later said
that it was at this moment that he had an “epiphany.” Indeed, whereas Reardon had
thought that he and his students had been doing empowering work all along, at this
moment he realised that Miss Davis was right, that, “...the Emerson Park residents we
worked with each week never had the opportunity to attend college and were
disadvantaged when working with our [UIUC’s] students because we were not
offering residents the kind of training needed to prepare them to engage in
cooperative problem solving on a truly equal footing with our students” (Reardon in
Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2003: 137). Indeed, as a community leader had explained
to Reardon, “Without real training in topics related to community planning and design,
we [the residents] are not even the tail on the dog in this partnership. We are not even
the flea chasing the dog. We are the fleas chasing the flea hoping to land on the tail
of the dog” (ibid: 137).

These criticisms subsequently led to discussions relating to the possibility of
collaboratively setting up a free educational program in East St. Louis; “one that
would offer the city’s expanding network of civic leaders an opportunity to acquire the
same knowledge and skills that our best students possessed (ibid: 137). In 1996 a
“neighbourhood college” was subsequently set up offering courses in community
development practices. In the five years that followed, some 400 residents reportedly
completed the courses while the ESLARP continued to work towards Geola’s vision of
mobilizing and enabling local residents to transform their own lives and communities.
Reardon’s Story: A Commentary

In many ways, Reardon’s story demonstrates how, through communicative processes and participatory action, cross-cultural relationships can be forged; ones that over time yield self-empowering and collectively self-empowering outcomes (that is, mobilization and transformation). The following is a breakdown of themes relating to, building upon, and informing our understanding of communicative, cross-cultural, and empowerment planning approaches.

1. The use of informal “schmoozing” to establish, and later, nurture, the building of rapport with community members

On his first trip to East St. Louis, Reardon engaged community members in casual dialogue to get to know them and to assess their response to the UIUC’s previous involvements in their community. According to Reardon, this initial process involved “schmoozing and hanging around and informal discussion with people in the very beginning to get a better sense of things” (quoted in Forester, 1999:121). It is this hanging out and “schmoozing” process that is quintessential when it comes to building rapport.

2. The identification of a community “champion”

By creating a partnership with the EPDC through Miss Ceola Davis, one of the community’s very active and respected leaders, Reardon was able to establish a certain amount of credibility for himself (and, de facto, for his students). Indeed, with Miss Davis’ backing of the ESLARP initiative, a tentative trust (or willingness to at least think of trusting the UIUC students) on behalf of the community had been seeded. This is one of the many advantages that can come from working with and gaining the support of a local “champion” at the onset of an empowerment planning initiative.

3. The importance of collaboratively creating an “urban movement”

Subsequent to the establishment of a university-community partnership, a new social organization was formed: the East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP). Loosely comprised of university students enrolled in Reardon’s “neighbourhood planning” courses, members of the Emerson Park Development Corporation (EPDC),
and/or East St. Louis’ residents, the ESLARP achieved more than what it initially set out to accomplish. It promoted mutual learning opportunities amongst and between the university students, community leaders, and residents involved in the project by expecting them to work together. In turn it enabled participants to develop and practice new skills, expand their social networks, and as Friedmann put it, “exert a pervasive influence in gaining access to the remaining bases of social power” (1990:101).\(^{37}\)

As a result, the urban movement that the ESLARP initiated led to both physical changes in the community (the vacant lots were cleared of garbage, the streets were safer, and the houses were fixed up), and ideological transformations amongst its residents- people felt a new sense of hope, interest, commitment, and power to collectively take action and create their own change.

4. **A commitment to valuing local knowledge and working with rather than for the community**

By agreeing to change their research design and analysis in response to a local youth’s criticisms, Reardon and his students demonstrated that they valued local knowledge. And, although doing so created more work for the students, it also created a more trusting rapport between the UIUC team of students and the Emerson Park residents; one that led to transformative learning. For the students, this was a powerful lesson to learn in planning (in that is showed how important it is to include the voice of local people in empowerment initiatives). For the residents, being taken seriously in this way confirmed that their knowledge did count, that they did have something to contribute, and that they were truly a part of this project.

5. **The transformative potential of cross-cultural dialogue**

By highlighting the transformative learning that took place amongst and between his students and the East St. Louis residents during the interview process, Reardon revealed the tremendous potential that cross-cultural “dialogue” (not just in terms of talking and listening, but in terms of expressing mutual respect, cooperation, and

\(^{37}\) As introduced earlier in this chapter, the “remaining bases of social power” include: defensible life space, surplus time, knowledge and skills, appropriate information, social organizations, social networks, instruments of livelihood and work, and financial resources (1992: 101).
love) holds in enabling “caring relationships” to form. Indeed, engaging in cross-cultural dialogue can often challenge people’s predisposed worldviews, encourage critical self-reflection, widen social networks, stimulate innovative thought and action, and give people the chance to discover the many likenesses they share with “others.” Indeed, as Reardon puts it:

What our students learned during these interviews prompted them to reexamine what they thought they knew about our country, the planning profession, and their own futures. The interviews helped them realize how closely the hopes, aspirations, and dreams of Emerson Park’s residents reflected those of their own families…(in Eckstein and Throgmorton, 2003: 125).

It is important to recognize that in East St. Louis, “caring relationships” did not form in spite of the presence of cross-cultural (including cross-ethnic and cross-class) differences, but rather in response to them. These differences essentially served as Reardon’s “course outline” and Miss Davis’ “blue print” of community development in that they provided participants (students and residents) the opportunity to realise that no matter how different people may be, everyone fundamentally shares the same basic goals in life (to live long, happy, and healthy lives, to find love and meaning in the world, to provide for our families, to feel we belong and are appreciated, to overcome our fears, and to live and die in peace, for example). In other words, they learned to find commonality amongst difference- what Sandercock calls “cosmopolis” (2003).

6. The time “it” (empowerment) takes

One of the questions that stories such as Reardon’s help to provide answers to relates to the issue of time in empowerment planning. Indeed, Reardon’s story demonstrates that, yes, empowerment approaches to planning do work, but they take a lot of time (a resource that many planners often do not have).

After collaboratively working in East St. Louis for five years (from 1990-1995), and after successfully contributing to the many positive changes that were taking place in East St. Louis (making it a cleaner, safer, and more aesthetic place to live), Miss Davis challenged Reardon’s ideas of empowerment, and whether or not it was taking place amongst residents of Emerson Park. What Reardon came to realize was that although the ESLARP had yielded transformative learning outcomes for many of the
individual students and residents involved (in that it enabled them to learn skills, gain confidence, and become more appreciative and understanding of one another), it had not, at that point, provided the local leaders and residents with the theoretical and practical know-how to one day take the reins of the ESLARP. In this way, the residents had remained dependent on Reardon and his students to provide leadership. Upon realising this was the case, Reardon et al. set up a neighbourhood college, which over the course of the next four years, offered hundreds of local residents the opportunity to develop their “capacity to provide leadership” in planning for change. And, while developing the capacity to provide leadership amongst residents of a given community should be the ultimate goal of any given empowerment planning project, it may take many years before local community members feel ready to collectively take on this role (as it did in East Saint Louis). For example, had Reardon and his collaborators decided to open a neighbourhood college at the onset of the ESLARP, it is fairly safe to assume that significantly fewer residents would have attended the courses. This is because it was only through working on the ESLARP for several years that the residents discovered the value of such skills.

Due to the time it takes to foster local interest in, and capacity for, providing leadership within communities (collective self-empowerment), many of the more successful empowerment planning initiatives have been conducted by practitioners who, like Reardon, are either supported by research institutions or development agencies. For planning practitioners working in most public, private, or even non-profit sectors though, it is unlikely that the same level of investment and support would be given to a single project in a single community. Thus the time empowerment planning takes to be successful is both its biggest limitation, and attribute (in that its transformative impacts do not end when the planner leaves, but rather, they are carried on indefinitely).

5.5 MOVING AHEAD
The first part of this chapter considered the value of an empowerment discourse in 21st century planning, including what empowerment means, and how and why it has come to influence the planning profession. The rest of the chapter focused on the ways in which communicative planning processes can yield empowering outcomes in marginalized communities (restoring people’s faith in “I” or “we” can). From this
literature review, and from Ken Reardon’s story of planning in East St. Louis in particular, ideas of how cross-cultural dialogue can be used as a means of engaging citizens in their own transformative learning and/or self-empowerment processes, emerged.

These ideas have provided context to my case study. They have not, however, provided me with a clear framework for analyzing if, when, and to what extent, self-empowerment and/or collective self-empowerment is taking place in a given situation or community. This is because, as the literature review helped me to understand, only individuals can determine whether or not they are experiencing self-empowerment. That is, only “I” can know, feel, and reflectively conclude if, when, and to what extent I have gotten closer to believing in “I can.” And the same goes for the collective “we.” Therefore, the analysis of empowerment projects must necessarily be rooted in the actions, stories, and feelings of the participants involved (including the planner).
In evaluating empowerment planning projects both the processes involved and their outcomes must be considered since the two are so inextricably interconnected (in that empowering outcomes occur at different times for different people throughout the planning process). As was the case with Ken Reardon’s story of planning in East St. Louis (as told in Eckstein and Throgmorton’s *Story and Sustainability*), a large part of the ESL Summer Pilot Project story was therefore dedicated to describing the ways in which a trusting rapport was initially established with patrons of the Learning Exchange and how, subsequently, a plan to offer free conversational ESL classes to immigrants was collaboratively devised. The remaining part of the story described the transformative learning outcomes that Arti and I observed (and personally experienced) in the lead up to and implementation of the pilot project, and includes personal reflections from DTES residents and immigrants participating as “ESL facilitators” and “ESL participants” respectively. In this chapter, I will return to this story to analyze the ways in which the planning process and its outcomes illustrate the fundamental role cross-cultural dialogue, in the form of conversational ESL, can play in empowerment planning.

6.1 DEVELOPING MY ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Because there is no prescriptive way to go about “doing” empowerment planning, the need to learn from, and build upon, each other’s stories of what worked and what did not in different situations cannot be overemphasized. From the stories I have read, and based on my own experiences, I have come to the conclusion that what distinguishes the empowerment planning approach from other participatory methods

38 As the literature revealed, the ways in which empowerment planning approaches unfold “on the ground” really depends on who is involved (the stakeholders), where they are coming from, what they bring with them (their strengths, weaknesses, hopes, and fears), what new relationships they form, what learning exchanges occur, and what ideas emerge as a result, etc. As the initiator of this process, “who” the planner is, including his or her personality traits, values, life experiences, spirituality, work / educational history, social networks, etc. serves as a particularly significant influence.
is the fact that, in order to be successful, planners need to spend time establishing interpersonal connections with marginalized individuals and communities; connections that not only enable them to link their knowledge but their love\(^{39}\) to action in the public domain.

In the last chapter I reviewed several theoretical approaches to participatory planning. With a shared focus on questions pertaining to how planners might go about doing participatory planning (in terms of dialogical methods and/or processes) and why (in terms of emphasizing the need for inclusivity in planning), what few of these approaches overtly acknowledged was the role dialogue plays in enabling planners to build interpersonal relationships with and between people. This argument represents the basis of Friedmann’s *The Good Society* (1979), which claims that forming interpersonal relationships is the key to radical planning practices. To me, this is one of the biggest challenges planners must face when working in multicultural contexts where the fear of “otherness” and the politics associated with lingual, racial, and cultural differences, can complicate such interactions. Without discounting these challenges, I have come to this research with the idea that, as a form of cross-cultural dialogue, conversational ESL can nevertheless serve as a tool (as opposed to as a barrier)\(^{40}\) for building empowering “planner-participant” and eventually “participant-participant” relationships in multicultural communities. This premise remains central to my analysis.

To begin designing my analytical framework, I read over Part 1 of this thesis and reoriented myself with the focus group transcripts, stories, and quotes I anecdotally gathered. In so doing, I noticed that most of the comments participants reflectively made about the pilot project were thematically very similar. Thus, using differently coloured highlighters, I started coding my data and grouping them into common themes. For example, comments like, “There were some things that I didn’t know, and I learned from them [the ESL participants], actually we learned from each other,” and “I’m learning a lot about different languages such as the Mexicans can’t say ‘v’ in their

\(^{39}\) Here I am not referring to romantic love, but rather, what the Greeks referred to as “agape”; that is, the kind of love that we invest in anyone (ourselves included) or anything we care about and believe in. It is the kind of love that makes us feel cared for, respected, supported, and strong.

\(^{40}\) As was discussed in the last chapter, engaging in cross-cultural dialogue with people who do not speak English (or whatever the dominant language happens to be) fluently, is often very challenging. This is why we often label such interactions as being plagued by a “language barrier.”
language,” were coded as “mutual learning.” In all, four major themes emerged from my data: interpersonal relationships, mutual learning, self-empowerment, and leadership.

Although these four themes were derived from the comments made by ESL facilitators and participants about the pilot (its outcomes), I discovered they also apply to the analysis of the planning process. This is because while the roles of the different actors changed quite dramatically as we transitioned from planning to implementing the pilot, the ways in which cross-cultural dialogue, and later, conversational ESL, was used to facilitate the building of interpersonal relationships (ones that in turn led to mutual learning, self-empowerment, and leadership) amongst and between participants followed a very similar, if not cyclical, trajectory. In Fig. 8, I have tried to visually map this iterative cycle of self-empowerment.

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Fig. 8: An Iterative Cycle of Self-Empowerment

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41 Here I am referring to the transition that occurred as the Learning Exchange patrons I was collaboratively working with in planning the ESL Summer Pilot Project, actually started facilitating their own cross-cultural “learning exchanges” with immigrants once the pilot was implemented.
Note: Without cross-cultural dialogue, interpersonal relationships cannot form or be sustained amongst diverse individuals. As a result, the transitions between points 1 to 4, and back to 1 again etc., also cannot occur. In this way, cross-cultural dialogue remains a necessary constant in this particular cycle.

Although relationship building, mutual learning, self-empowerment, and leadership are each represented in Fig. 8 as distinct "steps," such processes and outcomes rarely occur so “tidily” in real life. Instead, they occur interdependently, experienced simultaneously by some, and at different times by others. Thus, what follows are my observations and reflective analyses of first, the ways I experienced and observed these processes/outcomes taking place amongst patrons of the Learning Exchange, and second, the ways in which patrons described experiencing them with small groups of immigrants.42

6.2 THE CYCLE BEGINS... USING CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE TO BUILD INTERPERSONAL “PLANNER-PATRON” RELATIONSHIPS

To analyze how cross-cultural dialogue helped facilitate the development of new and trusting “planner-patron” relationships at the Learning Exchange, I feel the most appropriate starting point is with the Learning Exchange’s TRUST document. This document outlines a set of five guiding principles meant to inform Learning Exchange staff on how to develop working relationships with each other, university faculty, students, community partners, and patrons, that are based in TRUST (from the Learning Exchange “TRUST” document, 2004). They are:

| Truthfulness: Being as honest, open, and straightforward as you are able without being hurtful or reactive. |
| Reliability: Doing what you say you are going to do. This is the foundation for relationships where you know you can count on each other. |
| Understanding: Listening to the perspectives of others with an open mind and heart, with empathy. It involves being willing to move away from an ideological position that could be inhibiting communication, and acknowledging one’s mistakes and forgiving those of others. |

42 The reason my analysis of the ESL Summer Pilot Project is in part based on my own observations, and not only based on those of the patrons, is because I played a consistently central role in facilitating the planning process. And as part of my phenomenological methodology, this means that my observations are legitimate and valid data that should be analyzed.
Self-awareness: Noticing when your own individual needs might be interfering with what is beneficial for the relationship. It also means recognising the benefits and joys of working collaboratively.

Timeliness: Responding to others’ requests as quickly as possible to let the other person know you haven’t forgotten the need to follow-up. This is a sign of the importance you give to the relationship.

Complementing much of the planning philosophy I had been exposed to in my first year at SCARP, these principles confirmed the idea that in order to develop viable prospects for a CED initiative to be undertaken at the Learning Exchange, I would first have to build a trusting relationship with its patrons. To do so, I used this TRUST document as a self-referential tool in the following ways.

First, given that I was not only an “outsider” to the DTES community, but a young, female, academic “outsider,” before going to the Learning Exchange, I planned to be “as transparent as possible about my agenda, my lack of professional experience, and my commitment to collaborate with them [patrons] on this assignment” (quoting myself, 2006: page 9). I also made a conscious decision to make my weekly visits to the Learning Exchange a priority, so that the patrons could feel that they could count on me without being disappointed. I was later told that it was this truthfulness and reliability combined with my informal approach to “consulting” patrons, that helped make people feel less suspicious of me.

Second, after visiting the Learning Exchange a couple of times, I realised that in order to promote mutual understanding, I not only had to adjust the pace at which I normally exchanged information with people, but I also “had to become very aware of the language I used and the way I used it” (quoting myself, 2006: 12). This conclusion was drawn after realising that instead of providing straightforward answers to my questions, patrons generally evaded them (almost as if they had not heard me). This, I soon learned, was not because they misunderstood what I was asking, but rather because they were not used to engaging in “rushed” conversations (where the point of the conversation is to uncover information in as little time as possible). All in all, it was by engaging in this “consultation” process (which essentially involved “hanging out”) that I learned that in order to effectively “plan” with Learning Exchange patrons, I not only had to engage them in cross-cultural dialogue so that they could learn to trust me, but rather, so that I could learn to trust them. Coming to this realisation took a lot
of reflection and self-awareness on my part. To give you an example of how this mutual “learning-to-trust” process started to unfold, I will tell a piece of the ESL Summer Pilot Project story that I have so far omitted.43

One day while hanging out at the Learning Exchange, a man saw me taking some medication with a glass of water. In front of several others, he asked me what I was taking. Caught off guard, I explained that I had a chronic headache disorder that required me to take daily medication. Expecting the conversation to end there, I was further surprised when another fellow asked me what my condition was. A little uncomfortable, I ended up confiding that after being in a car accident late in my teens, I developed a disorder that had forced me to spend several years living in near-complete darkness (literally) until I was accurately diagnosed.

As is always the case when I talk about this difficult time in my life, I became visibly shaken and apologized to my small audience. I told them that it was sometimes hard to cope with the feeling that I do not have complete control over my life. This struck a cord in the group and, one by one, each person started to open up to me and share their own stories of how they too had experienced this “loss of control” at one time or another. At that critical moment I could feel that a wall had come down between us and, in its place, a sense of mutual understanding and trust had taken root.

It was in this way that I learned the value of Judith Herman’s claim that, “The encounter with others who have undergone similar trials dissolves feelings of isolation, shame, and stigma [and provides] the possibility not only of mutually rewarding relationships but also of collective empowerment” (quoted in Forester, 1999: 216).

By opening up to this small group of patrons, a mutually trusting rapport started to form between us. As a result, when the semester had come to an end, I felt too personally connected to the Learning Exchange community to simply walk away from it without at least trying to develop our ideas into collective action.44 It was with this commitment or sense of timeliness that I decided to collaboratively develop a

43 This part of the ESL Summer Pilot Project story was purposely left out of Part 1, because I felt that it was strange to include details about my own struggles in this thesis. In the year or so that has passed since I first started writing however, I have become more and more comfortable sharing this story with people. In fact, I have discovered that doing so is actually quite therapeutic for me, and can be for the people I confide in (because it reveals that I am/they are not alone; that everyone has their own struggles to overcome in life).

44 This point is crucial because, as I came to learn, the suspicious lens through which many DTES residents tend to view “others” often comes from a fear they have of being let down, abandoned, and subjected to broken promises. Unfortunately, these fears are usually based on experience, and therefore, are difficult to get past.
Chapman Summer Project Award proposal, and later, the ESL Summer Pilot Project, with patrons.

6.3 THE FACILITATION OF MUTUAL LEARNING, SELF-EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP

As is described in chapter 2, it was by engaging in cross-cultural dialogue and thereby establishing a trusting relationship with a small group of “champions” at the Learning Exchange that other patrons started to open up to me. Before I knew it, my weekly visits to the Learning Exchange went from being comprised of mostly cautious small talk, to lively story sharing get-togethers. And it was in this way that I began to feel like I had become a socially accepted member, or “patron,” of the Learning Exchange community, participating in meaningful learning exchanges and becoming more self-confident in my role as a “planner” in the process.

The patrons also benefited from our interactions in ways that were not unlike those Reardon described observing in the communities he had worked in.

You can begin to see people change in the process: they are more likely to voice their concerns. If they are not listened to, they pursue the point and feel like they have a right to do so, whereas before they might not have. For many people, that is an incredible leap in their consciousness and sense of confidence in what they deserve and who they are (Reardon quoted in Forester, 1999: 144).

This was certainly the case amongst increasing numbers of patrons who, after learning that we were actually going to turn our idea to offer conversational ESL classes into a real project, started becoming increasingly vocal and assertive about what they thought the pilot should look like. For example, one patron took it upon herself to make a flash card game out of magazine articles, while another compiled a list of commonly used idioms that he thought could be used in the ESL classroom. Yet another patron designed a “log book,” which he thought could be used to track the progress of individual ESL participants throughout the summer. These actions were more than thoughtful gestures. They were huge steps for many of the patrons to be taking, particularly considering the fact that so many of them had been quite hesitant to get involved, initially saying things like, “Look, I have an anxiety disorder so I can’t be interacting with people face to face.”

45 Indeed, as one ESL facilitator explained:

45 Ironically, the fellow who made this comment did eventually end up volunteering in the pilot project as an “ESL facilitator.” For him, doing so was not easy, but instead took a lot of courage. This is why, just trying
Before getting involved in the project my comfort zone had shrunk to about the size of my apartment. My outlook was pretty bleak. But here I am. I've come crawling out of my shell and back into the mainstream. That's gotta be a good thing. And my self-confidence has continued to grow exponentially.

How did these self-empowering transformations begin to happen amongst Learning Exchange patrons, you ask? LeBaron argues, “As we work on a project together, we come to see ways we are similar. As we accomplish a task, we share a sense of accomplishment” (2002: 87). I am convinced that these transformations were the result of the sincere encouragement patrons gave to, and received from, one another as we all worked towards making our pilot project a success. This peer-based support gave self-doubters the encouragement they needed to risk getting involved with the pilot without knowing with any certainty that it (or they) would succeed. And, it was with this collective sense of ownership, responsibility, and support that 13 patrons initially attended the ESL facilitator orientation workshop thinking: “Well, maybe I can do this after all.”

Once the ESL Summer Pilot Project got underway, it was the patrons’ turn to demonstrate and develop their leadership capacities by using cross-cultural dialogue-in the form of conversational ESL, as a means to build relationships with immigrants (subsequently enabling mutual learning, self-empowerment, and leadership to take place amongst and between them). The following describes the impacts their participation in the pilot made on their lives from their point of view.

6.4 THE CYCLE CONTINUES…USING CONVERSATIONAL ESL TO BUILD INTERPERSONAL “FACILITATOR-PARTICIPANT” RELATIONSHIPS

In order to analyze how the implementation of the pilot project started impacting the lives of Learning Exchange patrons in more depth (the outcomes according to individual “ESL facilitators”), I will first provide you with a little more information as to who the patrons who attended the focus groups were.46

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46 Because the pilot project was planned and implemented with patrons at the Learning Exchange and not with immigrants, my analysis of the pilot project's outcomes will be designed accordingly… focussed on the reflections of “ESL facilitators” and not so much on those of “ESL participants.”
Profiling the ESL Facilitators

David Ley has argued “the conjunction of poverty, old age, and physical or mental handicap has made residents like those in the Downtown Eastside among the least empowered in North America” (1994: 201). I agree with this point but would clarify that, today, this analysis of “DTES residents” is one that extends (or should be extended) to people who not only live within the geographic confines of the DTES, but who regularly spend time in the DTES, identifying with the people and places they encounter, and using the social services that are located there. This looser definition of the term “DTES resident” is an important one to adopt more widely because, as the DTES continues to gentrify, a growing diaspora of “DTES residents” is becoming more and more commonplace.\(^47\)

Out of the nine “DTES residents” who participated in the focus group discussions I led, seven actually resided in the DTES proper, one resided in a single occupancy room (SRO) hotel in downtown Vancouver, and one resided in Surrey, a suburb of Vancouver. Ranging in age from 31 to 65, two of the ESL facilitators involved in the focus groups were female and the other seven were male. The fact that there were significantly more men involved in the focus groups (and pilot) is not surprising given the distinct gender imbalances that exist in the DTES.

From an educational standpoint, all nine of the ESL facilitators had attended high school (two had completed grade 11, and seven had graduated from grade 12), three had taken some university courses, and one had earned a Bachelor of Science degree. While there was a wide range in educational backgrounds amongst this group, all nine of the ESL facilitators had remained “unemployed” for the last four years or more (in the sense that they had not been earning a regular full-time salary). That said, many did say that they had been working informally as “binners” (people who collect deposits from recyclable bottles and containers), babysitters, subcontracted construction workers, and/or volunteers in a range of different organizations including the Carnegie Centre (a local community centre), the Salvation Army, and the International Children’s Festival for example.

\(^{47}\) Many people are migrating away from the DTES at night, and are returning during the day to hang out, work (often “under the table”), and use the services that continue to be concentrated there.
In terms of their perceptions of the DTES, all nine of the ESL facilitators said that they had both love and hate feelings for the DTES community they felt they belonged to. Explaining that with many residents being deemed “persons with disabilities” or “persons with multiple barriers to employment” (themselves included), most people in the DTES have a lot of time on their hands; something that they felt was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, they explained that being “unemployed” (as defined by the government as working 20 hours or less per week) afforded them the time to reach out to others in ways that are rarely possible in the “materially wealthy, but time poor” segments of our mainstream society. Indeed, it is this quality that, for them, was what contributed to making the DTES such a special community, one where people not only know each other and say “hi,” but where people come together in protest when they feel their community is being threatened (e.g., with the redevelopment of the Woodward’s building- a historically significant local landmark). On the other hand, the ESL facilitators explained that for many people in the DTES (themselves included), having too much time on their hands can lead to boredom and self-destructive behaviours. It is in this sense that these ESL facilitators felt that time/boredom is an endemic problem in the DTES.

Perhaps related to this latter point, this group of ESL facilitators said that the main reason they enjoyed regularly spending time at the Learning Exchange was because they enjoyed accessing the Internet and meeting people in a relatively quiet, and learning-focused environment. In their own words they said that the Learning Exchange was like “an oasis” in an otherwise “hectic” neighbourhood.

Through conversational ESL, DTES residents participating in the ESL Summer Pilot Project as “ESL facilitators” were able to form new relationships with diverse groups of immigrants while also redefining and strengthening the relationships they had had with one another. Indeed, once the pilot got underway, it had become clear that conversational ESL was not only being used to bring two typically marginalized groups of individuals together, but it was also being used to create a social space where everyone felt like they could contribute something, learn, and belong.

While on the surface, DTES residents and immigrants were coming to the Learning Exchange for the specific purpose of teaching and learning conversational ESL skills,
what they were actually doing most of the time was sharing their stories with one another (talking about their families and friends, cultural traditions, impressions of Canadian life, future hopes, and day-to-day challenges for example). In this way, these diverse individuals were using conversational ESL as a vector to forming interpersonal relationships while helping each other expand their social networks, sense of community, and worldviews. This point is reflected by the following comments made by ESL facilitators:

To take the time to listen and be patient makes people who don’t have English as a first language feel more comfortable and less pushed around and judged and criticized.

I think it’s so important for them to get accepted and feel friendship from some of the citizens. That would just totally have such an impact on their psychology and, you know, like the way that they feel about being here you know? It gives them a sense of belonging, a sense of home, a sense of friendship. I think that probably is the most important aspect of what we can contribute.

The interpersonal relationships that individual ESL facilitators formed with their ESL participants reflected both their personalities and their individual approaches to “teaching.” For example, some of the ESL facilitators developed light-hearted and playful friendships with ESL participants, while others built more “okay, let’s get down to business” rapports with them. Regardless, the fact that the ESL facilitators were not professional teachers standing at the front of the classroom resulted in the creation of a more relaxed and sociable learning atmosphere (one that is rarely accessible in most formal ESL classes). As one ESL facilitator explained:

People [ESL participants] became relaxed and somewhat more at ease. I have no idea how they behaved in other groups, but around here they felt relaxed and were able to make themselves understood.

This observation coincides with much of the alternative education literature. In “Discourse Analysis in the Language Classroom,” Riggenbach makes the point that,

For many learners, involvement in their own language-learning processes helps empower them in the sense that […] students develop the ability to come up with their own discoveries and need not always rely on answers prescribed from textbooks or on “expert” opinions provided by instructors (in Arbor, 1999: 15).

Similarly, in an article entitled “Students as Discourse Analysts in the Conversation Class” Wennerstorm claims that,
Ideally, a conversation class should be practical and applicable to real-life situations. It should offer students a chance to build speaking, listening, vocabulary, fluency, and other social skills for the purpose of interacting in informal settings in the host country. This makes for a student-centred class, with the instructor taking the role of a facilitator and informant (in Burton and Clennell, 2003: 46).

Besides informally developing interpersonal “ESL facilitator-ESL participant” relationships over the course of the summer, ESL facilitators also formed new relationships with other patrons/ESL facilitators at the Learning Exchange. Indeed, hanging out to compare notes over coffee at the end of their ESL conversation sessions, the ESL facilitators quickly formed a distinct and tight knit community where mentor/mentee relationships thrived and tacit knowledge flowed. It was with reference to this mentorship that one facilitator made the comment,

What I liked about this was that I did in fact get to know all these, not co-workers but co-facilitators, and that I liked because that’s a very good thing. It’s so much like it makes you more of a family.

And besides sharing their experiences of what worked and what did not in the ESL classroom, ESL facilitators also shared what they learned with regards to the difficulties many of their ESL participants were experiencing in Canada. For instance, one afternoon an ESL facilitator told a group of patrons how one of the women in his conversation group had recently become a widow after immigrating to Canada with her husband and three children. As a result, he explained that besides grieving the loss of her husband, she was desperately trying to learn English so that she could find a job and support her children. This story had visible impacts on the other patrons who repeatedly made comments like, “Wow, and we thought we had it hard!” It was times like these that it became apparent that a shift was starting to take place in the minds of many ESL facilitators (and other patrons). They were starting to recognize the hardships that other people face in comparison to their own. In turn, they started realising that, in some ways, they were privileged… that, although they were living on the margins of society, they had the advantage of speaking fluent English, growing up in a peaceful country, and having access to a social safety net that is not accessible in many other countries in the world for example. This is illustrated in the comment one of the ESL facilitators made at the end of one of his ESL conversation sessions:

We went from learning from the book to learning about each other. I learned what I take for granted in Canada…like the fact that I don’t have to worry about witnessing a school being blown up or being conscripted into the armed forces. It was cool cause everyone just
looked past cultural tensions and honestly just wanted to learn from each other. It went from an ESL lesson to a lesson in real life.

6.5 THE FACILITATION OF MUTUAL LEARNING, SELF-EMPOWERMENT, AND LEADERSHIP

In chapter 2, I explained that “the ‘learning exchanges’ that were taking place amongst and between participants in the ESL conversation groups were not occurring in spite of, but rather in response to, the fact that they shared very different ethnic, cultural, linguistic, political, and socio-economic backgrounds” (quoting myself, 2006: 24). Since our pilot was an “ESL” project, these differences were not only expected, they were relied upon in the sense that, without them, opportunities for mutual learning may not have existed in the same way. Moreover, had there not been these differences, people would not have been as enticed to come together to learn from one another (that is, if immigrants did not feel the need to practice their conversational English, they would not have made such an effort to come to the Learning Exchange to converse with patrons).

Ultimately, what each individual took away from these cross-cultural interactions was uniquely their own. In general, the more “ah-ha” moments the ESL participants experienced, the more self-confident the ESL facilitators became in their leadership role. As one ESL facilitator put it,

"From the first time I heard ‘thank you teacher’ I was hooked. I just couldn’t get enough. Honestly, just thinking about it makes me smile!"

For the ESL participants, practicing their conversational English skills with native speakers enabled them to not only improve their capacity to communicate with others in English, but it enabled them to meet new people, share their experiences with others, and feel like they belonged. In much the same way, the ESL facilitators said that leading the ESL conversation “classes” enabled them to improve their social skills while meeting new people and feeling like they too belonged/had a role to play in society. Moreover, the ESL facilitators said that they also learned a great deal about the kinds of challenges that immigrants face when trying to integrate into Canadian society. In their own words, two ESL facilitators said:

"What I learned was how thankful they are for this opportunity. I don’t think you could express the gratitude of the students for being able to get what they get basically for free. There’s somewhat of a disbelief I think from most students that they can get this for free. Just because
they’re so used to getting asked for money for anything like this that would help them.

Some people had been here for many years and were just frustrated with not being able to have conversations with people or to change their lives. Seeing them come here I think was really interesting too because of the fact that people had gone for say 17 years without being able to enjoy certain aspects of their life here. That’s pretty difficult to imagine. I don’t think I could handle that for a couple of years, let alone 17.

Moreover, some of the ESL facilitators who attended the focus group discussions said that through their interactions with the ESL participants, they learned that despite all their differences they could actually relate to the social exclusion, separation from loved ones, poverty, unemployment, and/or loneliness that they were experiencing. In this way, they could support and empathise with each other. In the words of one ESL facilitator:

I’ve seen both sides of it, right? I’m an immigrant myself. I came here when I was 19 and at first I was really impressed [that] everybody says “Hey how are ya?” and seem so friendly. And then I realised it only went skin deep. Certain parts of Vancouver are like that… you know, where people with money sometimes really look down on other people. So, you know, it’s important for people to have a sense of belonging in a community.

The ESL facilitators’ ability to mutually learn from, relate to, and/or empathize with, the marginalization that many of the ESL participants were experiencing was often what made their interactions so transformative. Since the ESL facilitators were able to provide useful tips relating to the kinds of resources that are available to individuals facing such challenges (such as where people can access cheap meals, computer training, counselling services, day care facilities, job search agencies, community kitchens, and other tips that most mainstreamers could not provide), the ESL participants were incredibly appreciative of them, making comments like: “My teacher has a very big heart. She always finds the community flyers for us. She loves us.”

Besides mutually teaching and learning with ESL participants, the ESL facilitators also indicated that volunteering in the ESL Summer Pilot Project “empowered” them. In the previous chapter I argued “self-empowerment occurs as one develops the knowledge, tools, and techniques necessary for one to improve one’s life on the one hand, and the love of self necessary to actually use such tools in productive ways on the other” (quoting myself, 2006: 50). According to the ESL facilitators (many of whom had not
“worked” for many years), volunteering in the pilot proved that they could be counted upon, could maintain a schedule, and could help others in a meaningful and self-fulfilling way.

I developed practical skills like communication skills, being sensitive to other people. Things that I had, but this brought it out even more. So I’m learning stuff out of this to give back in some way. This is public speaking, this is communication, this is learning by teaching!

It gave me some structure. It made me set a bit of a timetable to stick to. It was quite a responsibility to ensure that I showed up. These people were coming from all over the city for one hour and if I couldn’t show up for that, then that was pretty sad from my view. It was quite a responsibility when you think about it.

For me it was being able to look at a group and get them to start interacting with each other and have some sort of idea of how that was going to happen, how that was going to progress. And like, be able to size up a group and then decide this is the best way to get these people to interact with each other.

These practical communication, time management, and group facilitation skills are clearly transferable ones. That said, however, on their own these skills would have been limited in their capacity to empower marginalized individuals had they not also been accompanied by increases in individuals’ sense of self-confidence, self-esteem and self-appreciation- the love of self necessary for them to continue using such skills in productive ways. Why is this the case? Based on what many DTES residents who patronize the Learning Exchange have told me, not being able to fully participate in the labour market has resulted in them being socially and economically stripped of opportunities where they can use and develop the knowledge and skills they already have in productive ways. This in turn has led to them being stripped of opportunities where they can feel like they are valued members of our society. It is for these reasons that creating opportunities where such individuals can get involved in ways that not only allow them to use and develop their skills, but to revitalize their sense of self-confidence (or sense of “I can”) is so crucial.

This “need to be needed” is one that might be difficult for some people living in the mainstream to understand because, although everyone experiences rejection at some point in their lives, few people can understand how living on the margins of society on a more permanent basis (due to chronic poverty and/or various forms of disability) can make people think and feel. Even fewer people can understand how
debilitating it can be to not have the power to *give* to others. The dialogue included in the “Reflections” section of chapter 3, as well as the following comments made by ESL facilitators, illustrate just how much the opportunity to contribute to the lives of others impacted the ESL facilitators’ own levels of self-confidence.

When you see newcomers that are asking questions, you reap rewards that are intangible. I feel good for the rest of my day about myself. Especially because I’m unemployed and I have the impression I did something useful.

I really appreciated the fact that other people appreciated me. Look at our environment. It’s a very degrading sort of inhospitable place to be. And here people are actually happy to be in your company. It’s such a nice change.

It built my confidence to stand up in front of people and um, actually do a presentation and actually be a teacher. It gave me a role, a role that I ended up being very very good at.

All the ESL facilitators who participated in the focus group discussions said that they had experienced increases in their levels of self-confidence as a result of their participation in the pilot project. This is a fundamental part of the self-empowerment process according to Friedmann who, in *Empowerment, the Politics of an Alternative Development*, argues:

> As moral beings, we have not only wants and desires, but also needs, among which are the psycho-social needs of affection, self-expression, and esteem which are not available as commodities but arise directly from human encounter” (1992: 39).

Of course, my ability to analyze the extent to which the pilot impacted ESL facilitators’ lives above and beyond what they told me in our focus groups is constrained by the scope of this thesis. That said, seeing that the ESL facilitators were able to shed their social inhibitions in order to lead ESL conversation classes with immigrants signifies, in itself, that they had benefited from participating in this “role reversal” of sorts (where instead of playing a subordinate role in their interactions with “outsiders,” they were playing a leadership role). This is because doing so enabled them to not only believe in “I can,” but actually know with some degree of certainty that “yes, I CAN!” Although

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48 Here I mean “giving to others” in a way that makes us feel that we are making a meaningful contribution to society (usually through the sharing of our knowledge, skills, time, and/or care with others). Indeed giving in this way validates what we know and feel as human beings- our life experiences, our beliefs, and our sense of identity (who and why we are). NOT having this opportunity, however, is an alienating and destructive force; one that has the potential to break the human spirit.
there are several unused quotes that I could use to support this conclusion, I think the following quote says it all:

For me it was the thing about leadership. I never considered myself the leader. I always waited for somebody else to follow. This way I took a leadership role and I thought ‘damn, I’m pretty good at this.’ Not just for teaching but for other parts of my life.

6.6 SUMMARY

What this analysis reveals is that there is a need for the planning literature and profession to recognize, and give legitimacy to, the importance of spending time with people, of hanging out, and of cross-culturally “chatting” in ways that can enable heart to heart relationships to form; not just between planners and community members, but also amongst and between the community members themselves (ones that are based in TRUST). There is no science to this kind of work, or at least, there should not be. Rather, as McKnight has poignantly argued, “Care is the only thing a system cannot reproduce [and] every institutional effort to replace the real thing is a counterfeit (McKnight 1995:x).”

For these reasons, it is my conclusion that empowerment planning projects must necessarily emerge from a strong foundation of mutually trusting, mindful, and caring “planner-participant,” and eventually, “participant-participant” relationships; ones that rely on the continued use of cross-cultural dialogue to link people’s knowledge (through mutual learning) and love (through self-empowerment) to action (through leadership) in the public domain. It is only in so doing that social mobilization and transformation can begin to take place in multicultural communities.

The question that this thesis has aimed to provide an answer to is whether or not conversational ESL plays a role in empowerment planning processes. This analysis has shown that, in the case of the ESL Summer Pilot Project, it has. The next chapter will briefly consider what implications this finding may have on the planning profession.

49 McKnight has argued that ever since the Second World War, we have professionalized acts of caring that had once been an integral part of community life by creating industries of human and social services. McKnight therefore sounds a warning about the unintended weakening of communities that can result from the tendency to expect professional systems to care for marginalized people: “As the power of profession and the service system ascends, the legitimacy, authority, and capacity of citizens and communities descend. The citizen retreats. The client advances” (McKnight 1995: 106).
while also identifying some next step recommendations with regards to further actions and research.
Chapter 7

NEXT STEP RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final chapter, I will summarize some of the key lessons learned from my thesis with regards to the empowerment planning process, the role conversational ESL can play in this process, and the implications these findings may have on the planning profession and its scholarship. The purpose in so doing is not only to bring my thesis to a close, but more importantly, to raise new questions, spark new interests, and hopefully inspire others to create their own empowerment planning stories.

7.1 THE LESSONS LEARNED…THE EMPOWERMENT PLANNING PROCESS

I am convinced that what made the ESL Summer Pilot Project the success it became was not so much how I planned and implemented my project at the Learning Exchange, but rather, how the relationships I formed with patrons of the Learning Exchange enabled us to collaboratively plan and implement our project together. The distinction here is one that is analogous with the differences between empowerment and advocacy in planning; that is, planning with as opposed to for marginalized individuals and communities. It is a distinction that I will refer back to later in this chapter, but for now let me just say that it was because “we,” a small group of committed patrons and I, believed so strongly in our idea and invested so much of ourselves (our time, knowledge, skills, and care) into making it a reality, that the pilot was a success. Indeed, our shared commitment and sense of ownership is what proved that the ESL Summer Pilot Project was more than a pilot for community building…it was community building.50

Preparing for the Challenges: the Importance of Story-Sharing

What has been made very clear to me since I began my studies at SCARP, is that in order to engage people in an empowerment planning process, planners must first

50 That being the case, one could argue that even if the ESL conversation sessions ended up not working out, the pilot project would have still been a success because it got a group of individuals working together to reach a shared goal.
overcome several challenges; the first and foremost of which relate to the
development of interpersonal relationships with community members (relationships
that are based in TRUST- truthfulness, reliability, understanding, self-awareness, and
timeliness). For example, for many planners developing trusting relationships with
people while maintaining one’s “professional Planner” role or identity can be very
difficult.\footnote{In our society, this challenge can be exacerbated by the fact that “professionals” are generally regarded as experts who exhibit impartiality towards their “clients.” And, as a result, those who do not live up to these expectations (by being personable and compassionate for example) can run the risk of being subjected to scrutiny and initial distrust; particularly if the planner is unable to convincingly articulate why taking such an interpersonal approach is appropriate and worthwhile.}

Yet another challenge planners might face relates to the fact that developing trusting
relationships with people takes a lot of time (especially when working in marginalized
settings). This is why if practitioners do not have mentors (professional planners they
can touch base with, seek advice from, and be reassured by) or other points of
reference (planners’ stories of what worked and what did not) to refer to, they may
end up asking themselves questions similar to those I found myself asking when I
started “hanging out” at the Learning Exchange. These include: “How long should I be
working on a given project before I can expect my deliberative practices to yield
transformative or even empowering outcomes?” Is it reasonable to expect transformative learning to be generated from all my deliberative interactions with
people? If not, why not? If so, how can these outcomes be measured? How do I know
if participants are engaging in “learning processes in which they create, appropriate
and share knowledge, tools and techniques in order to change and improve the
quality of their own lives and societies” (UNESCO, 2005)?

Admittedly, when it came to discerning how I should go about overcoming the
aforementioned challenges I was initially at a loss. For the most part I relied on my
intuition. I also relied quite heavily on stories such as Reardon’s, which served as my
points of reference and reassured me that I was on the right track. Still, I found myself
struggling with feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt on several occasions (in fact,
had I not been receiving course credit for “consulting” patrons, I probably would have
given up). For this reason, one of the questions that I think planning practitioners,
scholars, and/or educators should be seeking creative answers to is: “When it comes
to empowerment planning, how can new and inexperienced planning practitioners be made better prepared for facing these (and surely other) challenges?" Unfortunately, I do not have an answer to this question. I do, however, have a suggestion.

Since each empowerment planning project will ultimately unfold in its own way (reflecting not only the personalities, interests, and strengths of the participants or "characters" directly involved, but the relationships between them), it is impossible for planners to predict how one can, should, and will end up going about the "doing" of empowerment planning before they actually do it. Consequently, each empowerment planning project ends up involving an element of learning-by-doing for even some of the most experienced planners. That said, I do not think that this means that planners cannot prepare themselves to some extent for dealing with the challenges and rewards that they might encounter along the way. On the contrary, I think that by connecting with other planners to share stories of what is working well, what is not, what one is doing to overcome certain challenges, for what purpose, etc (whether it is in person over coffee, or virtually over the Internet for example), planners can learn from each other; that is, they can learn new ideas and skills while developing a greater sense of confidence in themselves and the approaches they are taking. To facilitate the building of these planner-to-planner connections (or networks), I think that planners who are, or were, involved in empowerment planning projects should be encouraged to re-p resent them as stories (their rising and falling actions, conflicts, and resolutions… or in other words, their "plots"), be it in oral, written, visual, or other creative forms. This way, planners can learn what the theories cannot otherwise teach: the "ah-ha moments" that occur when a planner learns what is already locally known, the celebrated feelings of accomplishment when a collective goal is met, etc. All in all, I think that through interacting with other planners and engaging with their stories, planners can reap the rewards of "experiential learning" on a second hand basis.\(^\text{52}\)

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\(^{52}\) In my experience, Reardon's story of planning in East St. Louis was not only an inspiring read, but also a very sobering one. It made me realise that in order to "do" empowerment planning, I would need to devote a lot more energy and time to one specific project/community than I would have otherwise thought necessary. At the same time, it made me realise how, when it comes to community development, the spectrum of possibility is as broad as one's willingness to be creative…particularly when it comes to collaboratively identifying ways in which human capital can be turned into social capital.
Chapter 7

Cultivating Community: the Importance of “Genuine Dialogue”

One of the key points I have tried to convey throughout my thesis is just how critical the building of interpersonal relationships is to the empowerment planning process. Therefore, in the ESL Summer Pilot Project story, I paid particular attention to how, instead of formally “consulting” patrons, I spent a lot of time informally “hanging out” with them. I also tried to highlight how, in so doing, we got to know each other as people first, and DTES (or in my case, Kitsilano) residents second. Of course, this interpersonal relationship-building process did not simply occur as a result of my spending time with patrons at the Learning Exchange. It occurred as the result of how, during that time, we participated in what Friedmann calls “genuine dialogue”- a kind of dialogue where each person is considered to be a full human being with contributions that matter. In this way, we appreciated each other for who we were, not for who we were not.53

Earlier I made reference to the differences between empowerment and advocacy in planning. I will elaborate on these differences here by arguing that the empowerment planning approach involves interpersonally connecting with people (through genuine dialogue) and giving them the chance to give to others in a meaningful way (namely by building upon their knowledge and skills in order to build up their love of self). The advocacy approach does not accomplish this in the same way. Rather, since its aim is to help people by doing services for them, it responds to people’s needs, and not their strengths).54 While I think there is a place for both the empowerment and advocacy approaches to planning in our society, I believe that in order for either to be successful, there needs to be a balance between the two. From what I have gathered from patrons at the Learning Exchange, in the DTES of Vancouver there is no balance. Instead, there is an over-abundance of services that “help” inner city residents, and few that support them (on an interpersonal level) to help themselves and others by drawing on the knowledge and skills they already have. I also learned that for many individuals, not having

53 The true potential of empowerment planning lies in the potentially transformative outcomes can come from genuine dialogue. This is largely because it is through genuine dialogue that marginalized individuals begin to feel that they do have something to contribute, and that they are needed.

54 For an excellent critique of the advocacy approach and how it can lead to the breakdown of self-sufficiency and, conversely, the build up of dependency (both on an individual and collective scale), see John McKnight’s *The Careless Society: Community and its Counterfeits*, 1995.
these opportunities is detrimental to their sense of identity, purpose, and self-confidence (their love of self).

These findings suggest to me that what we, as planners and concerned citizens, need to be investigating is why so few empowerment opportunities exist for residents of Vancouver’s DTES (and elsewhere); namely by identifying the forces that are inhibiting such opportunities from flourishing (including, from a planning perspective, some of the challenges planners are facing when taking such approaches), and, from a policy perspective, what can be done to change this.

7.2 THE ROLE CONVERSATIONAL ESL CAN PLAY...

Initially, I began this research by asking whether or not conversational ESL training has a role to play in the empowerment approach to planning. Now, at the end of my thesis, I am arguing that the answer to this question is “it does.” In summarizing how I think the ESL Summer Pilot Project case study can support this claim, I will begin by quoting Leonie Sandercock who, in *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities in the 21st Century*, asks one of the most critical questions that we as planners and citizens need to begin acting upon if our intention is to continue living in peaceful coexistence with “others.”

> A truly multicultural society not only encourages and supports community organizations *within* immigrant groups, but also works to incorporate immigrants into wider, cross-cultural activities and organizations. How is this [...] achieved? How do societies establish civility, then conviviality, across difference? How do we (migrants and host society) generate an everyday capacity to live and work with, and alongside, those who are (perceived as) different” (2003: 136)?

What the ESL Summer Pilot Project taught me is that, in multicultural cities, one of the ways we can go about incorporating marginalized individuals (both immigrants and inner city residents) into “wider, cross-cultural activities and organizations” is through the teaching and learning of conversational ESL. Generally, this is owing to the fact that conversational ESL has the potential to attract two typically marginalized populations of people together in ways that enable them to reach out, expand their social networks, learn from one another, and develop a greater sense of belonging to, and understanding of, wider society (as it did in the ESL Summer Pilot Project).

More specifically though, from the ESL Summer Pilot Project I learned that for the DTES residents involved, teaching conversational ESL was something that allowed
them to use their knowledge and skills (that is, their fluency in the English language, their understanding of Canadian society and culture, and their capacity to empathize with others who, like them, were struggling to “fit in”) in a flexible manner.\textsuperscript{55} It was also something that provided them with the chance to develop their leadership capacities while discovering that they can help others in truly meaningful, fun, and self-fulfilling ways.

Likewise, for the immigrants participating in the pilot as “ESL participants,” being able to learn conversational ESL from a native English speaker enabled them the chance to practice the colloquial parts of the English language (the “tacit” language skills that would enable them to use English vocabulary, body language, slang, idioms, and sounds such as “uh-huh,” “ya,” “oh-no,” “geeze,” “heh,” “um,” “eh” in a locally appropriate way), while learning more about Canadian culture. Developing these practical linguistic and cultural skills was something that the ESL participants said that they desperately needed in order to effectively communicate with people “out there” in the real world. Indeed, as one ESL participant was overheard telling his ESL facilitator: “You are teaching us real English, not teacher English. That’s what we need. Thanks man.”

The effectiveness with which conversational ESL training was used to bring diverse individuals together is what indicates to me that what the ESL Summer Pilot Project started should no doubt be continued, both at the Learning Exchange (which is currently happening) and elsewhere. And, although I would be the last to deny that there are a myriad of alternative ways that the knowledge and skills of inner city residents and/or immigrants can be further capitalized upon,\textsuperscript{56} I would argue that there is still something special about the potential role conversational ESL can play in this regard. To give you an example, when I was “hanging out” with patrons at the Learning Exchange, I learned that many of them were highly proficient in a variety of IT applications (information technology), gardening, and writing skills. And, although

\begin{footnotes}
\item[55] Many of the ESL facilitators (most of whom were on some form of disability assistance) really appreciated the fact that the pilot was structured in such a way that they were able to participate in as many or as few classes as they wanted on a day-to-day basis.

\item[56] While “consulting” residents of the DTES who patronized the Learning Exchange, I discovered that many of them were highly talented people with incredible life experiences. Likewise, I learned while coordinating the pilot project that so too were the majority of newcomers to Canada (most of whom remained unemployed due to language barriers and a lack of recognition of their credentials).
\end{footnotes}
the ESL Summer Pilot Project was not designed to capitalize on these particular skills, once patrons started facilitating their individual ESL conversation groups, they naturally started sharing their individual skills with the ESL participants. For example, one patron spent a few sessions talking about the Strathcona Community Gardens and how her ESL participants could get involved. Another showed his ESL participants how they could use the computers at the Learning Exchange to access free ESL websites. In this way, no matter what specific skills or interests the ESL facilitators had, they were able to share them with their ESL participants while, at the same time, helping them with their English. In sum, I think the value of using conversational ESL training as an empowerment planning tool, lies in its ability to bring diverse people together so that they can learn from one another.

7.3 CONTINUING WHAT THE ESL SUMMER PILOT PROJECT STARTED: POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

As I have mentioned elsewhere in my thesis, the Learning Exchange began offering an ongoing ESL conversation program in January of 2005. As the Coordinator of the “Learning Exchange ESL Conversation Program Supported by HSBC Bank Canada,” I have been able to put what would have been some of my “next step recommendations” directly into action. For example, while implementing the pilot project, it became clear that in order to expand upon the “learning exchanges” that were taking place amongst and between ESL facilitators and participants, an ESL facilitator training component would be beneficial. Therefore, after receiving initial funding from the Vancouver Foundation, a weekly “ESL facilitator workshop series” was developed to educate ESL facilitators on topics such as group dynamics, time management, and cross-cultural communications.

Upon the completion of the ongoing program’s first 10-week term, the ESL facilitators said that they would appreciate more hands on training around language

57 This conclusion was mainly based on the requests I received from ESL facilitators who wanted to improve their skills in order to better address the needs of the ESL participants. It was also based on my own observation that, with some training, the quality of the learning exchanges taking place between ESL facilitators and participants could be greatly improved.

58 The ongoing ESL program is structured into four, 10-week terms annually. The ESL facilitators can participate in a maximum of two terms, whereas the ESL participants can continue for as long as they feel they are still learning. Some ESL participants have been attending conversation classes at the Learning Exchange for more than a year and a half.
awareness, the correction of ESL participants’ pronunciation, lesson planning, and the teaching of new vocabulary. To accommodate their requests, collaborations between UBC’s English Language Institute (ELI) and the Learning Exchange were initiated, and eventually evolving into a formal partnership in May 2005. Since then, the ELI has been financially and pedagogically supporting the training of ESL facilitators who, each Friday, travel to UBC for a two-hour workshop where they learn skills that they can apply to their weekly ESL conversation groups held at the Learning Exchange. In this truly “learning-by-doing” or “train-the-trainer” fashion, the ESL facilitators receive a high standard of training with which they can supplement the knowledge and skills they already have. In turn, they can provide a high standard of training to their ESL participants.⁵⁹

Since the ESL facilitator training component has been added to the ESL Conversation Program, the participation of ESL facilitators has become limited to two, 10-week terms. This is because many ESL facilitators were continuing to volunteer term after term leaving few spots available to others wanting to take part. Moreover, for those repeating from one term to the next, the training workshops started becoming redundant, limiting the amount of new learning taking place.

Initially, I found it difficult to tell very committed volunteers that, after two, 10-week terms, they could no longer continue in the program. Interestingly though, after “graduating” from the Learning Exchange’s ESL Conversation Program, many of the ESL facilitators started getting involved in other ESL-related volunteer jobs. For example, four started offering their own ESL conversation classes at local community centres and neighbourhood houses, and another even started his own program at the Multicultural Family Centre located on Commercial Drive.⁶⁰

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⁵⁹ The facilitator training component of the ongoing ESL Conversation Program has positively impacted ESL participants, whose attendance has continued to improve as a result. Indeed, approximately two thirds of all the ESL participants registered in the ongoing program have participated in more than one 10-week term. And, as a testament to the high value the ESL participants have placed on this learning exchange opportunity, approximately 35 percent have been travelling all the way to the DTES from Burnaby, Richmond, Surrey, or North Vancouver.

⁶⁰ This graduated ESL facilitator purchased the same ESL books that are used at the Learning Exchange and, as a result of the growing numbers of students he began teaching, he started recruiting other graduated ESL facilitators to join him in his program. What is more, I have started referring ESL participants who live in the Commercial Drive area to this fellow’s program and he has done the same in return.
Expanding the Learning Exchange's ESL Conversation Program

Now that the ongoing ESL Conversation Program has become relatively well established (operating for more than one year and a half), my recommendations to the Learning Exchange are as follows:

1. Increase the current program’s capacity to meet growing demands amongst DTES residents and immigrants wanting to register in the program; namely by adding more class times to the weekly schedule.\(^{61}\)

2. Develop the current program as a capacity building “hub” where ESL facilitators are initially oriented, trained (through UBC’s English Language Institute), and supported to lead their ESL conversation group sessions. Then encourage and support them to move into other roles within the program.

3. Hire graduated ESL facilitators as program assistants who will collaboratively assist staff with the administration of the program (meeting and greeting participants, setting up classrooms, taking attendance, photocopying, answering phones, etc). Gradually train these program assistants to conduct ESL facilitator orientation and evaluation sessions, assess and register new ESL participants, do marketing and recruitment, and basically contribute to making the program sustainable over the long term.

4. Begin seeding smaller-scaled versions of the ESL Conversation Program at inner city schools (as after school programs for immigrant parents for example), neighbourhood houses, and community centres. Train program assistants (graduated ESL facilitators) to coordinate these smaller programs in collaboration with Learning Exchange staff.

5. Begin hanging out with ESL participants in order to identify how the Learning Exchange could capitalize on some of their skills (by offering Mandarin conversation groups for example).

It should be noted that these suggestions are not intended to be implemented at the Learning Exchange over night. Rather, they are meant to serve as a vision, one that Learning Exchange staff can be working towards (and adapting) over the next several years.

Replicating the ESL Conversation Program

Given the fact that in Canada, immigrants (defined as foreign-born citizens) make up approximately 22% of the total population, and that 62% of these immigrants are

\(^{61}\) Due to space constraints, the ongoing ESL Conversation Program has not been able to offer more than 18 ESL conversation sessions (which are one and a half hours each in length) per week. To accommodate some of the demand amongst ESL participants, the class sizes have increased from a maximum of four to a maximum of eight ESL participants. Thus, in each 10-week term, a maximum of 9 ESL facilitators and 70 ESL participants are currently being registered.
settled in one of only three Canadian cities- Vancouver, Toronto or Montreal (Hou and Picott, 2003), replicating the ESL Summer Pilot Project could be a very good idea. Indeed, I think that so doing could help to alleviate some of the integration problems that, in my opinion, largely stem from a general lack of cross-cultural understanding in Canadian cities. Indeed, with few opportunities to interpersonally interact with, and learn from, “native” Canadians, many immigrants understandably find it hard to socially integrate into mainstream society. Likewise, with few opportunities to interpersonally interact with, and learn from, immigrants, “native” Canadians are also finding it difficult to understand “others.” Consequently, in many multicultural cities there seems to be a pattern forming, one that is typically characterized by high levels of ethnic (and socio-economic) enclaving, low levels of cross-cultural understanding, and growing levels of discrimination and violence. Perhaps the most disturbing part in all this is that, in many cases, this is not because people do not want to socially interact with “others.” It is more often because the opportunities to do so are simply not very accessible (and the ones that are, are not visible enough in the sense that many people simply do not realise they are there). Thus, the question is this: “Should the ESL Summer Pilot Project become one of these opportunities in inner city areas throughout the Lower Mainland and across Canada?”

While the possibility of replicating (or decentralizing) the ESL Summer Pilot Project elsewhere is very exciting, I think that there are a few key factors that need to be considered. One is that while I think that the ESL Summer Pilot Project could be replicated in other suburban areas (where there are also large numbers of immigrants and inner city residents who could benefit from such a program), care would need to be taken to ensure that the project remained a community-based initiative that reflects the local community’s interests, ideas, and concerns. In other words, care would need to be taken to ensure that the ESL Summer Pilot Project was not being used as a

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62 Despite the fact that Vancouver is becoming increasingly multicultural, our host society is receiving very little education (from the media, the public school system, and the workplace) on how to effectively communicate cross-culturally with people (where linguistic, cultural and racial politics are likely to come into play). Consequently, many citizens fear and/or resist interacting with “others.”

63 Part of the reason that this “ethnic enclaving” is happening is because within many ethnically defined communities, there are a lot of internal supports for newcomers. So naturally, people gravitate to these supports and to what is culturally familiar. That said, without opportunities to interact with and learn from “others” in the mainstream, many immigrants get “trapped” in the comforts of these ethnically defined communities.
cookie-cutter model that, with a bit of funding, would evolve out of the hiring of a coordinator, the setting up of some classrooms, and the posting of some flyers, for example. Rather, the replication of the ESL Summer Pilot Project would have to begin at the beginning: with a leader “hanging out” with locals, proposing conversational ESL training as an idea, and taking it from there.

When it comes to the pilot project’s replication, another key consideration that should be taken into account relates to the role the university has played in the pilot’s success. Although it was not the focus of my thesis, it should be acknowledged that conversational ESL was not the only draw attracting people to the ESL Summer Pilot Project. The fact that the project was being offered through the University of British Columbia, a credible learning institution, was also a significant factor for many people who were drawn to the project. Indeed, it could be why the ESL Summer Pilot Project was such an immediate success, in some cases, attracting more participants than some of the more established ESL programs being offered through churches or community centres in the DTES area. My feeling is that while the teaching and learning of conversational ESL holds a lot of power when it comes to bringing diverse groups of people together, the power of the university is equally strong. Thus, when the two are combined (as they were by the ESL Summer Pilot Project), the potential for creating (or replicating) a community-based ESL initiative is very strong.

7.4 IN CONCLUSION
As already mentioned, “upon starting my master’s degree at SCARP, my goals were to learn how, or through which processes, unity could be generated out of difference to form communities of people who can, and do, effect their own change.” In my second semester at SCARP, I was given the chance to explore the answers to these questions with DTES residents who patronized the Learning Exchange. What we learned together is that John McKnight was right when he said that “the raw material of community is capacity (Mc Knight, 1995: 76).” Correspondingly, we learned that, more than anything, community building and self-empowerment is about harvesting this capacity by creating spaces where people can not only meet, but where they can also engage in meaningful “learning exchanges” with one another; ones that over time, enable the lines separating “us” from “them” to be broken down.
What I have personally learned throughout this “learning by doing” empowerment planning process is incalculable. In terms of the planning profession though, I have learned that radical planners do not only create physical spaces where diverse people can engage in mutual learning, but ideological ones where such learning is valued as the powerful change agent it is, or can be…
BIBLIOGRAPHY


