WHAT'S VIDEO GOT TO DO WITH IT?

A COMMUNITY-UNIVERSITY RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP
IN VANCOUVER'S DOWNTOWN EASTSIDE

by

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that collaborative video projects offer a new, innovative model for community-university research partnerships to inform community planning processes. We begin with a brief review of participatory planning theory in the broader planning theory field. The work of Ken Reardon in East St. Louis is then used to illustrate the emergence of community-university research partnerships as a conduit for increasing participation in community planning processes. Building on the successes of Reardon's work the paper moves on to explore the use of video in community-university research partnerships. Using the author's participation in a community-university research partnership in the form of a collaborative video project in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, the paper sheds light on the opportunities and challenges collaborative video projects present in pursuit of a more inclusive, democratic planning process.
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1. Introduction.

I can't help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiply not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep. Perhaps it would invent them sometimes — all the better. All the better.

Criticism that hands down sentences sends me to sleep; I'd like a criticism of scintillating leaps of the imagination. It would not be sovereign or dressed in red. It would bear the lightning of possible storms.

Michel Foucault, *The Masked Philosopher*

Number 1 Hastings Street lies in the heart of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. From inside the Interurban Gallery one can hear the voices and vehicles flowing through the busy intersecting streets of Carrall and Hastings. On an early morning in April of 2006 a small gathering of Vancouverites occurred to try something different in the Downtown Eastside. A mixture of inner-city youth, graduate students and members of a local non-profit and planning consultancy form the roots of this collective. Their presence is a result of the organizers' vision and desire to create a communicative space, a medium for storytelling that encourages multiple narratives — many beginnings with just as many ends.

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) inspires judgment. Death, disease and addiction: the common frames through which this neighbourhood is presented, perceived and judged by mainstream media and accompanying audience. A common re-action among passing commuters, lost tourists and other Vancouverites upon visiting the neighbourhood is one of discomfort, unease and vulnerability. Often, as in the case of the DTES, these emotions reaffirm prior stereotypes and morph into calls for increased policing and greater regulation.
of space and the bodies therein. Shallow, dis-connected judgment acts as one of the simplest,
most severe, and questionable of human capacities. All too often such judgments concretize
the foundations for revitalization strategies in depressed urban neighbourhoods like the
DTES. This needs to change.

My research has three objectives:

1. Chart the evolution of calls to democratize planning in the broader planning theory
   field.

2. Examine the emergence of community-university research partnerships as a conduit
   for practicing a more inclusive, democratic planning process.

3. Determine to what extent collaborative video projects offer a new, innovative model
   for community-university research partnerships to encourage more inclusive,
   democratic community planning processes.

This is a story of stories - a set of reflections, observations and insights emerging from
participation in a community-university research partnership in the form of a collaborative
video project in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. I can only hope this study lends itself to
that of which Foucault dreamed, a criticism that bears the lightning of possible storms.
2. Democratize Planning!

A Brief Review of Participatory Planning Theory

We begin with a brief review of participatory planning theory in the broader planning theory field. From advocacy planning (Davidoff, 1965) to equity planning (Krumholz and Forester, 1990) and from social learning and communicative action (Friedmann, 1973, 1987; Innes, 1995; Forester, 1989; Healey, 1997) to insurgent planning (Sandercock, 1998, 2003), the evolving models and strategies to democratize planning have been met with both praise and criticism. Each model survives, championed by some and challenged by others.

Participatory planning theory is an evolving field of inquiry that continues to reshape perspectives on community, politics, and public decision making in the realm of planning. It grows from the realization that traditional planning theory and practice based wholly within the realm of scientific thinking and instrumental rationality rarely represents or reports the experiences of citizens at the community level (Innes, 1995). Over the years participatory planning theorists have developed a new vision of planning as an interactive, communicative activity where planners are active participants in a process of social learning (Friedmann, 1973, 1987; Forester, 1989; Innes, 1995). This position represents a significant detour from the traditional role of planner as observer. Instead of trying to impose order on planning processes, participatory planning requires that the planner engage community members in an active, participatory planning process. Allowing for civic engagement and participation in planning processes creates a forum to communicate stories and draw new insights in community planning (Mandelbaum, 1991; Sandercock, 2003).
As theories of participatory planning mature and become more comprehensive there is a
need to develop a vehicle through which the guiding principles of social learning,
communicative practice, and participatory planning are activated. According to Innes
(1995:183) the practical goal of participatory planning theorists is to “help planners develop
a new type of critical, reflective practice which is both ethical and creative.”

The desire among participatory planning theorists to create a learning, development, and
planning tool for putting participatory planning into practice corresponds with a growing
demand among civil society groups, local authorities and citizens for a greater role for
universities in public service activities. As a result, various types of community-university
research partnerships have emerged to encourage community-based research projects in
pursuit of a more inclusive, democratic planning process.
3. Bridging the Town-Gown Divide:
The Emergence of Community-University Partnerships.

In the 1970s the Dutch ‘science shop’ model became a pioneer in community-based research strategies. Located on university campuses the ‘science shop’ provides a physical location where community organizations access academic researchers to help solve community-related issues. Much of the contemporary science shop research responds to the needs and concerns within civil society to develop effective responses to social and environmental changes. Caspar de Bok (2002:22), project coordinator of the biology science shop at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, suggests: “Science shops are demand-driven and they perform research that is actually used in society … science shops offer opportunities for citizens to participate in the production and use of knowledge.” This trend towards community-service learning holds significant potential for supporting research on community planning issues ranging from social justice to environmental degradation, and from economic development to cultural revitalization.

In order to develop sustainable community-university research partnerships, the research priorities of the university system must be reassessed to better serve the public interest. Given the increasing concerns surrounding social justice in public discourse, community-university partnerships can act as a catalyst for research involving communities managing complex social change processes. Social planning theorist Barry Checkoway suggests “social, economic, and political changes are challenging communities – and their universities - to develop their capacity for the years ahead . . . Communities have needs, universities have resources, and collaboration has benefits for both parties” (1997:307-08). Not only do such
partnerships respond to public interest issues, but research collaborations between planning students and faculty and community members can also create mutual benefits for all involved. For example, Checkoway goes on to consider that “on the campus, collaboration can provide opportunities for students to serve the community and learn from experience … In the community, collaboration can provide a source of basic and applied research, consultation and technical assistance, and durable linkages with the university” (1997:308). Making academic knowledge and resources more accessible to community members and providing students with practical, meaningful work experience in the form of a research partnership has the potential to create a wealth of new informed responses to pressing social issues.

Where the rational comprehensive model of planning was made to be a science and disconnected from meaningful community input, community-university research partnerships empower communities to develop planning policies and practices from the ground up. In recent years, in the realm of community planning, the work of Ken Reardon in East St. Louis provides an inspiring example of how research partnerships between community members and academic researchers support participation in community planning activities. It is to this story that we now turn.

Ken Reardon and the East St. Louis Experience.

The beginning of this community-university partnership can be traced to the late 1980s when at the urging of a State representative the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) committed funding to launch the Urban Extension and Minority Access Project (UEMAP). The goal of UEMAP was to engage students in research projects aimed at
investigating local issues in a depressed area of East St. Louis. What is remarkable about this partnership lies not in what it was able to achieve from its inception, but rather the project's original shortfalls that led to critical insights among organizers to re-think and re-engage both students and community members in pursuit of long-term community-level social change.

The early years of UEMAP produced a watershed of student projects that gained little traction and generated even less interest among local community leaders in East St. Louis. Then, in the spring of 1990, Ken Reardon was hired as an assistant professor in UIUC's Department of Urban and Regional Planning and tasked with directing UEMAP. A few months later during Reardon's first visit to East St. Louis, the stark state of the city's once vibrant neighbourhoods set in:

Two-thirds of the city's downtown office buildings and retail stores were vacant. All of the city's street lights and traffic signals were dark because of the municipality's inability to pay its electric bill. The city air smelled of burning garbage because of a 6-year hiatus in residential trash collection triggered by the city's fiscal problems. Forty percent of the city's building lots were vacant and 30 percent of its existing buildings were abandoned. I quickly realized that little in my previous 10 years of community organizing and urban planning practice ... prepared me for the work I was about to undertake (Reardon, 2003:113-14).

Upon meeting and interviewing local leaders Reardon soon discovered the community's strong distaste for expensive, time- and energy-consuming university research that simply reiterated realities community members already understood, felt, and experienced. Struggling to find community organizations willing to (yet again) partner with university researchers,
Reardon was introduced to members of the Emerson Park Development Corporation (EPDC). After meeting with EPDC and local faith-based leaders on two different occasions, Reardon, referencing his own community organizing experiences and describing the work he and his students were able to undertake, was close to reaching agreement on a community-university partnership. EPDC decided that if the partnership were to move forward, Reardon’s department would have to commit to five basic principles EPDC had developed. The substance and strategy informing these principles offer important insights to those interested in creating similar community-university partnerships:

1. The residents of Emerson Park and their organization, EPDC, would determine the local issues that the University of Illinois would work on.
2. Local residents would have to be actively involved with UIUC students at every step of the research and planning process.
3. UIUC’s Department of Urban and Regional Planning must make a minimum 5-year commitment to Emerson Park following its 1-year probationary period.
4. The university must help EPDC gain access to regional funding agencies to secure the resources needed to implement local development projects.
5. The university must help EPDC create a nonprofit organization to sustain the community revitalization process after the university left the community (Reardon, 2003:118).

After discussing the principles with UIUC’s Department head, Reardon received the go-ahead and accepted the five principles, then quickly got to work with community residents to draft a plan of action to guide the partnership. Following some debate and discussion there was agreement to create a 5-year stabilization plan and a commitment to undertake new neighbourhood improvement projects. It is important to consider Reardon’s response when
voicing support for his proposed stabilization plan in the face of community leader's initial objections:

I asked them if they would, as members of the city council or county board, recommend funding for [infrastructure improvements] in the absence of a blueprint revealing how these initiatives might contribute to the area's short-term stabilization and long-term revitalization. I reminded them of the intense competition that existed for discretionary housing and community development funds (Reardon, 2003: 119).

What is happening here is a negotiation over process and product. EPDC is clearly tired of participating in yet another planning and visioning process, wanting instead to see on-the-ground implementation of physical improvement projects in the neighbourhood (ex: rehabilitation of bungalows, reclamation of the neighbourhood's boulevard). Reardon is concerned that without a clear neighbourhood plan, funding support for such projects will not be forthcoming. After argument and counter-argument Reardon recalls, EPDC “agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to work with my students on this [5-year stabilization planning] effort provided it led to the implementation of specific neighbourhood improvement projects within the year” (Reardon, 2003: 119). A critical balance was found between process and product that led to agreement between the partners in research and action.

Nearly ten years later the accomplishments are impressive. By the year 1999 the EPDC-UIUC partnership had produced plans that helped secure $45 million in public and private investment in the community, offered more than 3,500 UIUC students with powerful, meaningful community-based research experiences, and maybe most importantly, built hope and trust in the shared visions, desires, and futures of those involved.
This East St. Louis story is a telling example of what opportunities and challenges grow from community-university research partnerships. Building on the lessons of Reardon's work we now move on to explore the use of video in a community-university research partnership in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.
4. Through the Lens:  
Project Background and Methodology.

Background:

Now let us return to the opening scene of this paper, that early morning in the Interurban Gallery. A small group of graduate students, inner city youth and project organizers from Projections¹ and Ear to the Ground Planning² are gathered for their first collective meeting. At the outset, this collaborative video project was envisioned as an opportunity to connect inner city youth and graduate students around a topical planning issue: the Carrall Street Greenway. While the original vision and marketing of this project was as a “participatory” video project, my experience, observations, and insight gained from interviewing fellow participants and organizers suggests that the project was, in practice, collaborative – hence, the use of “collaborative” rather than “participatory” when referring to the video project. The distinction between participatory and collaborative video processes will be examined further in a later section of this paper.

With partial funding support from the City, project organizers facilitated film-training exercises and provided guidance in the video production stages. The youth and students co-developed short film scripts and shooting schedules in three sub-groups. This project produced three film shorts informed by a mix of imagination, emotion, and creative representation; there was also a short ‘process piece’ that documented the collaborative

¹ Projections is a film-training program for at-risk youth, it is based in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside.  
² Ear to the Ground Planning is a Vancouver-based planning firm that uses innovative tools like video in community planning processes.
video project as it unfolded. Digital video was emphasized as a core way of knowing and used to explore the politics and perspectives surrounding the planned revitalization of Carrall Street as a greenway corridor in the DTES. One of the main goals was to produce short videos about people, issues, and perspectives in the DTES in an attempt to confront, challenge, and re-think common perceptions of the area. As Barbara Eckstein suggests:

“The will to change … has to come from a storyteller’s ability to make a narrative and physical space in which to juxtapose multiple, traditional stories so that they enrich, renarrate, and transform that space rather than compete for ultimate control of a single, linear, temporal history of an impermeably bounded geopolitical space (2003:24).”

This video project reflects a desire to search out a terrain of cultural fluency; a place where Michelle LeBaron believes we can engage others with a spirit of inquiry, learning about the ways our and their perceptions differ rather than seeing only the familiar picture that shows us the world as we would like it to be (2003:85).

The community-university dynamic in this partnership acts to legitimize both the students and youth as possessing valid knowledge of urban planning issues. This commitment to community service-learning builds on the work of Ken Reardon in East St. Louis and others who challenge the knowledge/power nexus that so often legitimizes one (often professional or academic) knowledge over other ways of knowing. The collaborative video project was also an attempt to challenge and go beyond what American educator Ernest Boyer refers to as the “scholarship of discovery”. By embracing a process that re-conceptualizes university
research we help emphasize the importance of community-service learning to foster other ways of knowing.

Methodology:

Outline of Study Design.

This research project used an inductive case study approach that was part of a larger collaborative video project entitled "Through the Eyes of Youth: A Participatory Video Exploration of Urban Revitalization and the Carrall Street Greenway" led by Jonathan Frantz of Ear to the Ground Planning. As already noted, the focal area of this research was Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES), in particular the Carrall Street area. Participants used video editing facilities at UBC in the Cosmopolis Lab, as well as the Projections office in the DTES. Group meetings occurred at various locations around campus and in downtown Vancouver.

This study is based on a combination of personal experience, participant observation and in-depth individual interviews with key project participants. This approach helps shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of collaborative video projects as a model for building community-university research partnerships to encourage participation in community planning processes. In the context of this research project, my role was two-fold: (i) as a participant-observer of a larger collaborative video project, and (ii) as an interviewer of participants involved in the organization or production of the collaborative video project.
The Interviews.

A mix of youth, students, and organizers were interviewed near the end of the video production process. The interviews were each approximately one hour in length and occurred at a place of the subject's choosing. At the start of the project, I verbally declared my role as a student and my intentions of learning about collaborative video through participant observation, interviews, and my personal experience. I provided a consent form (see Appendix 1) to seek permission from the subjects regarding my intentions.

The interviews were open ended, ensuring subjects had time for personal reflection on their role(s) and experience(s) in the video project. Why in-depth individual interviews? I selected in-depth individual interviews as a qualitative method because they are interactive and allow for self-reporting on the part of the participant (Palys, 2003:150). The flexibility and open-endedness of the interview offered an opportunity for meaningful dialogue between me and my fellow project participants. Palys remarks “gathering data is easy; gathering meaningful data is a whole other challenge” (2003:150). I took significant steps to develop interesting and appropriate questions in order to provoke insightful responses from the participants.

During the interviews participants were asked general questions regarding why they chose to get involved in the project and whether it was what they expected. This lead to significant debate on issues of ‘participation’ in planning, community-based research and creative forms of expression; as such, responses provided general insight into the reasons for participation in the project. In order to address deeper issues of trust, friendship and frustrations emerging from the collaborative video project, more engaging, constructive and challenging questions were then posed in light of the latter themes. The ideas and reflections expressed

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in the interviews combined with participant observations enabled a better understanding of what challenges and opportunities exist in using collaborative video projects to build community-university research partnerships that promote creative forms of participation in community planning processes. Specific insights emerging from participant interviews will be considered in a later section of this paper.

Reflections on Research Process.

The nature of my role as a participant-observer and the relationship that exists between project participants and myself must be considered. The observational process was unstructured in nature allowing for personal, narrative reports regarding how the participatory video project relates to my thesis research objectives. Procedurally, I used field notes gathered from observations of the participatory video process in combination with individual interviews to determine what project components (e.g., participants, activities, words and meanings, relationships, settings) influenced the experiences of project participants.

A significant challenge for this researcher was to avoid potential misunderstandings and misrepresentations of participants observed and interviewed. In order to do so I must confront hidden assumptions and stereotypes. As a white, middle class, university-educated male, I have personal life experiences that are likely quite different from the youth I worked with, not to mention the characteristics and personalities that differentiate myself from my fellow graduate researchers. How then could I conduct participant observations and interviews so as to ensure my interpretation of events and responses correctly reflect the perspectives of project participants (i.e., “what was really being said”)? According to Palys one
possible solution to this predicament is to develop interview questions that "(1) ask respondents to articulate their definition or sense of a term; (2) provide a definition for respondents; or (3) not even use the term but, rather, describe the scenario/stimulus you have in mind … since you’re the one doing the research and hence have some objective in mind” (2003:197). Based on Palys’ solution I developed questions that address themes relating to community-university research partnerships and participatory planning theory but avoid academic jargon. This research was, of course, an iterative process and required ongoing reflection based on project experiences as they unfolded in the DTES.
5. **Video as an Integrative Way of Knowing.**

How do you come to know, understand, and express a place? If asked to describe the home, neighbourhood, or community you grew up in, what would be your initial reaction? For many of us such words conjure strong emotions and reflections of recent and distant memories; home can be both a material reference point and a personal, intimate experience. Our neighbourhoods and communities exist as physical entities but are also infused with sometimes hidden social relations mixed with the emotional forces of history and memory. Ways of knowing a place – its birth, being, and becoming – often demand an integrated, multi-layered examination.

The use of video in community planning processes enables creative forms of engagement and expression. Mixing the time-tested quality of storytelling with images and sounds brings both the filmmaker and audience closer to understanding the multiplicity of knowledge, experiences, and emotions that permeate a community. But before exploring video as an integrative way of knowing and re-presenting a place, it is appropriate to identify the contemporary factors that justify its use as an innovative tool in community planning processes.

**Writing Place.**

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside (DTES) is often presented and described in written form through government reports. The bureaucratic nature of such documents results in a picture of the DTES being painted under administrative headings like “context”, “key findings”, “options and implications”, and “council requirements”. Getting to know the DTES
through this lens leaves the reader with a limited understanding and appreciation for the
“hustle and bustle” of sounds, people, and day-to-day interactions that give this community
life. Rooted in scientific analysis and coloured with budgetary concerns, official planning
reports are often constrained in their outlook; the focus is on moving the agenda forward in
the face of perceived political realities. John Forester suggests: “planners and policy analysts
regularly and selectively shape what parties know or believe about cases, how they defer or
consent to norms, and how they develop or lose trust in the identities of others.” (Forester,
1999:202) The result is often one story about what the deal is, and what should be done
about it.

One Story, Many Stories: A Multiplicity of Plans and Processes.

The Carrall Street Greenway Project was formed and exists at multiple social and political
scales. From each level emerges a mix of narratives that together account for the ongoing
planning processes around the Greenway Project. The official version as presented by the
City and Council tells the story of the Greenway Project as a major public realm initiative
meant to connect three distinct communities located along Carrall Street: Gastown, the
DTES, and Chinatown. According to the official version, the Greenway Project originated as
part of the much larger Vancouver Greenways Plan adopted by Vancouver City Council in
1995. Yet, as the Greenway Project grew, developed and matured, City planning staff
facilitated and collaborated with a variety of community organizations who given their
history, location, and role in the community, have vested interests and concerns regarding
how the Greenway would impact the community. Community engagement processes
emerging out of and in response to the proposed Greenway Project are multi-layered and
involve a range of creative forms of expression and organization. From an official planning
standpoint, these community-led processes occur “behind the scenes” – the activities are not housed within the City planning department or reported through official government reports. The collaborative video project along with community art projects, community stewardship councils, and an assortment of other grassroots initiatives form the fabric of these unofficial planning processes. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate both the official and unofficial timelines and events of the Carrall Street Greenway Project.

Figure 1. The Official Timeline and Events of the Carrall Street Greenway Project
In recent years the City of Vancouver has striven to diversify ways of knowing and presenting the issues, people, and ideas of Greater Vancouver. Through a partnership with the Greater Vancouver Regional District and Shaw Television the City co-produces GVTV, a video series meant to educate citizens about the context for municipal policy decisions. While creative in its use of video as a form of storytelling and tool for education, GVTV programs receive limited input from and involvement of community members in the production process. The marked need for increased involvement in similar video projects sets the context for an innovative community-university partnership in the form of a collaborative video project in the DTES.
Ways of Knowing and Representation, Re-visited.

The use of digital video in this community-university partnership represents a progressive, albeit challenging, attempt to introduce a creative communication tool into a collaborative learning environment. The videos produced in this project were limited, constrained and influenced by the eventual need to present some coherent story in the form of a final film piece. A five-minute time limit for each group's film necessitated significant edits, narrow storylines, and a concise reading and presentation of issues in the DTES. Possibilities for social learning in this case were ultimately (and intimately) connected to and shaped by the processes underlying the collaborative video project. In the end, each video sought to give voice to issues often invisible in planning consultations: history and memory, language and persuasion, imagination and desire.

The collaborative video project had other restrictive elements as well. Schedules, budgets, and the politics of collaboration resulted in negotiated agreements around who would and would not be interviewed, and what issues would and would not be featured. Using video as the means to compile and communicate our research meant other ways of knowing and presenting issues in the DTES through statistical analysis, design graphics, and report writing were not emphasized or included. The implications of excluding these latter mediums results in a story being told about the DTES that limits the representation and input of planning practitioners, engineers and other professionals in the storytelling process. This raises the question of whether or not to expand the ways of knowing or learning in and around similar collaborative video projects in the future. There is no easy answer to this question.
This collaborative video project was both exploratory and insurgent in nature. The videos produced were both complementary to and critical of the ongoing planning processes around the Carrall Street Greenway. Certain approaches to video production constituted “radical practice”, diverging from “a logical continuum with rational planning for societal guidance” where participants found themselves “in opposition to either state or corporate economy, or both.” (Sandercock, 1998:99) These participants found their strength and message acting in opposition to government; they accepted the bias inherent in their video work as necessary to present certain ideas and experiences. Other participants sought to use video as a creative means to engage planners, policy analysts, and the wider community around issues they believe require more attention and consideration in the planning process. This approach produced video work that explored how the ongoing planning process could be enriched, textured, and informed by alternative ways of knowing and presenting the DTES.

The Project's Not Over Yet.

It was in late August, upon arriving back to Vancouver from a month away, that I was able to organize the final interview for my thesis research. Sitting in a small café in Gastown, I met with one of the project organizers to discuss their experience working in the collaborative video project. After some initial reflections regarding project expectations and realities, this organizer pronounced: "in some ways I don’t think that the project is over yet ... that’s a fundamental problem with this kind of [community-university] partnership" (Participant Interview, 2006). This organizer went on to express their frustration with a number of graduate students who had either moved on, left town, or ceased involvement in the community-university partnership after screening the videos at the World Urban Forum and World Planners Congress in June.

In retrospect, I was extremely fortunate to conduct this interview when I did. Most of my interviews were held near the end of the video production and public screening stages in June, interwoven with global conference schedules and hectic last minute presentation preparations. With only a few lines this organizer opened my eyes to a critical component of any successful community-university partnership, but that was sorely lacking in our case: a long-term relationship built on trust, understanding, and commitment. For me, this interview triggered a number of emotional, philosophical, and personal reflections on my role as a participant in this project and the goals of the project as a whole. In the time since, having listened to my other recorded interviews and reviewed my field notes, there are a number of
key issues that deserve examination as a set of insights to consider in future community-university partnerships in the form of collaborative video projects.

**Participatory or Collaborative: Who are the “Participants”?**

An interactive dynamic exists between those who constitute a “participant” in this video project and whether the process is “participatory” or “collaborative” in nature. Lars Johansson *et al.* define participatory video as

> a scriptless video process, directed by a group of grassroots people, moving forward in iterative cycles of shooting–reviewing. This process aims at creating video narratives that communicate what those who participate in the process really want to communicate, in a way they think is appropriate. (1999:35)

The “participants” who directed the filmmaking processes included a collection of graduate students and inner city youth. What makes this group formation distinctly different from, and not fitting of the “participatory video” label as defined by Johansson *et al.* is the lack of grassroots people involved as participants in the co-production of the short films.

“Grassroots” in this context is considered to be individuals known, connected, and committed to the Carrall Street community in the DTES. It became clear while working with the inner city youth that none had strong connections to the Carrall Street community; nor did the graduate students have much experience working in this area of the DTES.

Participants were forced to rely primarily on Projections’ contacts within the community as a means to access community members for information and perspectives to present in each of the short films. Contacted community members and planning professionals who agreed to be represented in the films – either in voice or in person – were collaborators in the process.
They engaged in a process of collaborative storytelling, through which their mix of stories and experiences infused the ideas, images, and storylines that played out in each of the three films. But as grassroots collaborators they did not share an equal role with project participants when it came to script development, editing, and video production processes.

On the other hand, a common criticism among students and youth regarding a lack of participant control in the video project concerns the dynamic within and between group participants and organizers, not the actual community members who were engaged as storytellers, etcetera. This is an important distinction because at one level the project lacked community control and input, while at another level, participants and organizers had different perspectives on what constitutes “participatory” video and whether the project did or did not fit the definition (Appendix 2).

Sara Kindon, reflecting on her experience working on participatory video projects with members of a Maaori tribe in Aotearoa New Zealand, believes participatory video if used within carefully negotiated relationships, has potential to destabilize hierarchical power relations and create spaces for transformation by providing a practice of looking ‘alongside’ rather than ‘at’ research subjects. (2003:142)

For ours to be a truly participatory, community-based video project, the list of participants directly involved in the filmmaking process must include those residents in and of the DTES. This is a seemingly obvious point, but one that was abandoned in light of the administrative pressures and realities of a time-constrained pilot project. For example, the pressure to identify and recruit a group of youth and students in time for the
start of the project demonstrates how project administration demands influenced community and participant engagement processes. A number of project participants believe closer connections and participation among community members in the video project would have led to stronger, more persuasive and legitimate film re-presentations of Carrall Street and the DTES. It is worth noting that a number of these same participants identified time and budget constraints as factors limiting the group’s ability to build the necessary trust and relations to form these partnerships.

Is It Time and Money?

If only we had more time and money. So often this is the line of last regret. It was no different in this case, with a number of students, youth, and organizers at one point or another remarking that more time and money would have allowed for better planning, training, and production processes. The project timeline (Appendix 3) provides the reader with a general sense of how the pre-production, production, and screening stages unfolded during the six-month project period. It was not until April, already the mid-point in the project, that the students and youth were brought together for the first time. Reflecting on this, a number of participants and organizers suggested that stronger group dynamics and relationships, and a shared commitment to and understanding of “participatory video” would have resulted if the group had joined together in January or early February. But this still does not address the larger questions of time and money: was six months too short a time period to perform this project? Was the budget too small to command the necessary resources? One organizer observed the following:
With more time you would end up with a better process because you could spend more time discussing the details and flushing out a lot of the concerns and answering questions that we kind of had to skim over and move ahead. You could have more involvement with the community, I think that would have helped a lot. But then from a practical point of view it gets difficult to spend more time because you are asking a lot of the participants, the costs go up (Participant Interview, 2006).

There exists a tension in this project between a desire to build an inclusive, participatory video project rooted in the community, and the need to deliver video training opportunities and produce a set of short films in the context of time and budgetary constraints. While clearly a challenge, I see this as a productive tension, one that encourages participants and organizers alike to consider what they hold as desired outcomes for the video project.

**Planning Tool or Learning Tool or Both?**

If the goal is to use video as a planning tool to communicate a message to effect social change and influence policy-making and planning processes, what does that project look like? Or, if the priority is to support video training, capacity-building and knowledge exchange processes, how does that shape the project? Are the two options mutually exclusive or is there an opportunity to combine both and build something different? I think it is fair to say, based on initial observations and more recently reflected in a number of interviews with project participants, that the original goal was indeed to combine the two in the context of the Carrall Street Greenway.

Early on, as project participants became acquainted with the Carrall Street Greenway Plan, it was clear that the visioning and planning processes for the Greenway project were in their
later stages. The sense among participants and organizers was that video could still be used to explore the politics and perspectives surrounding the planned revitalization of Carrall Street as a greenway corridor in the DTES. Given the chance to do it again, one participant believes:

I think it would be better to use this process earlier on in a planning project; so say like the [soccer] stadium that's just now being initially discussed. But I still think there's a lot of ways that this video can impact the Carrall Street project.

Participant observation and personal experience suggests this was a common perspective among project participants. The role of video as a planning tool to communicate a message and influence policy-making and planning processes is believed by participants to be most effective when incorporated early on in the process. In this capacity it can help frame issues, tell stories, and creatively represent the people, ideas, and perspectives of the community.

Reflecting on our project and its relationship with the Carrall Street Greenway, and given the late stage of the planning process, I think it would have been most beneficial to produce videos that evaluated the actual Greenway planning processes that had already taken place. Instead each group decided to pursue themes and ideas emerging from group discussion among participants. This is another example of the project being led by a select group of student and youth participants with limited prior contact, engagement, and participation of community members and planning professionals involved in the Greenway plan.

It is also important to consider the successes and challenges of this video project as a learning tool. While the planning tool dimension of the project was limited in some respects by the late stage of the Greenway planning process, its potential as a training and capacity-
building tool remained. In fact, I would argue that the greatest strength and most tangible (albeit often invisible) outcome of the project was the increased video making capacity among both youth and students. At the beginning of the project the majority of participants had limited if any training in and application of video making skills. Over a period of a few months we worked on a range of skills and processes, from pre-production script development to production and video recorded interviews, finishing with post-production and screenings of our short films. Based on the interviews, there are a number of participants who believe the video skills and production knowledge gained from this project will enable them to critically, and creatively, engage in future planning and professional activities where video can be a unique asset.

**Intersections: East St. Louis and Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside.**

Separated by thousands of miles and born out of different experiences and histories, the East St. Louis and Vancouver projects represent two distinct approaches to community-university research partnerships. The East St. Louis story illustrates what opportunities and challenges grow from community-university research partnerships and provides important guiding principles for building and sustaining successful projects. We learn that local residents should determine the research focus and be actively involved in all stages of research and planning, that universities should commit to a minimum of a 5-year partnership with a given community, assist community groups with gaining access to regional funding agencies, and provide the necessary support to create a local nonprofit organization to sustain the project beyond the duration of the initial partnership. Likewise, the collaborative video project in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside demonstrates the benefits, strengths and strategic role of video in connecting the university and community around topical planning
and policy-related issues. As a pilot project it provides important insights for how best to introduce video into a collaborative learning environment and details a possible framework and approach of use to students, faculty, and community groups with similar aspirations. Together the two projects reveal the potential pitfalls and opportunities inherent in such partnerships and suggest important lessons to consider when developing similar projects in the future. This talk of the future leads us to the final section of this paper, where I provide one possible recommendation for moving forward in light of the issues discussed earlier: community participation and control, time and money, and the use of video as a planning and/or learning tool.

The Learning Exchange Connection.

It is no easy task to establish a long-term, sustainable community-university research partnership (Reardon, 1999). So it would seem advantageous to search out opportunities and programs that already exist. I believe UBC’s Learning Exchange is just such a program and that it would be useful to consider ways to develop similar video partnerships using its existing resources, contacts, and reputation in the DTES.

As a pilot project the collaborative video project was infused with vision and idealism, and like most progressive experiments lots of hard work, effort and patience on the part of organizers, not to mention participants. A number of organizers remarked that most of their time involved getting the partners and funding in place. For participants it was the issue of participation and control of the training and video making process and the lack of contact with community organizations that led to misunderstandings about what it was that we were trying to accomplish in this project.
The Learning Exchange grows from UBC's attempt to reorient its research priorities towards applying the institution's vast knowledge base and research resources to better serve the public interest, in this case the DTES. With a growing concern regarding pressing social issues, community-based research is gaining a more central role in academic and public discourse, and the Learning Exchange is one of UBC's responses. The Learning Exchange's community service-learning partnerships involve collaboration among academic researchers, students, and communities who share an interest in planning for social change. Such partnerships can empower community organizations and schools in the DTES to develop workable, community-based solutions to issues of interest. By offering university resources in the form of technical tools, research expertise, and volunteer labour, UBC provides strong support for communities grappling with complex social change issues.

UBC's School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP) has recently hired Jonathan Frantz, one of the organizers of our collaborative video project, to teach a graduate course in Multimedia and Planning. The course builds on insight and experiences gained from involvement in organizing our video project, and offers students an opportunity to gain filmmaking skills through training and video projects based on campus. I welcome this course addition as one of the options available to graduate planning students and believe the student video projects should be rooted in and grow out of pressing issues in the DTES and other communities in and around Vancouver. The opportunity is ripe to connect these course participants with the Learning Exchange and its partner organizations in the DTES to explore and communicate local ideas, perspectives, and experiences through the innovative use of video.
Through community-university research collaborations, students, faculty and community members are able to develop a framework for planning that works to empower communities interested in tackling social issues at the local level. Writing on the issue of community-based participatory research, Verna St. Denis (1992:55) suggests community-based participatory research is “a way in which communities without socio-political power can use social science research to support their struggle for self-determination by gaining control of information that can influence decisions about their lives.” Empowering community members by helping mobilize and give voice to community interests and perspectives through video is a core component of practicing more inclusive, democratic planning processes. As Dr. Margo Fryer, Director of UBC’s Learning Exchange, points out: “you can take any course and turn it into a service learning course,” but faculty need to be educated about the concept” (Charbonneau, 2004:3). The Learning Exchange’s work towards community-service learning holds significant potential for supporting research on community planning issues and represents a promising opportunity to bridge the community-university divide through collaborative video projects.
7. **Concluding Remarks:**

Subtle Resistances, Promising Creations.

By offering a re-mix of the way in which the DTES is often perceived, the collaborative video project uncovers new ways of thinking, presenting, and knowing the DTES, and if put into wider circulation, can create networks of ideas that inspire integrative knowledge and action. As agents of expression, collaborative video projects have the potential to support students, educators, and community members in a process of local inquiry and to provide an opportunity for developing community-university research partnerships. The short films produced through this project generate more questions than answers, but that is the point. Cultivating multiple storylines, rather than a story about Carrall Street, is an emancipatory project. Bringing together different ideas and conceptions of revitalization and a greater respect for diverse planning histories allows for a re-casting of place. Instead of altogether abandoning the official city report we can re-imagine and re-present ideas in creative new ways. Collaborative video projects add value, knowledge, and insight to traditional planning reports; they can be both controversial and complimentary in nature. Through sounds, images, and creative forms of emotional and political expression, video is an integrative way of knowing and a promising contribution in pursuit of more inclusive, democratic planning processes.
Bibliography:


Participant Interviews. (June-August, 2006). Information gathered from one-on-one interviews with youth and student participants and organizers.


Appendix II: “Participatory Video” as Defined by Project Participants

A process in which everyone involved in a group that is making a video project gives, donates their time, energy, input, and thought into creating a compelling and original piece of work, as well as being open to other group member’s ideas about how to develop the project, as a means of getting a second or third opinion.

Participatory video attempts to gauge what voices are being left out of the decision-making process and then craft a plan of engagement, using video to make those voices heard.

It's kind of like show and tell from grade 4. We all stand up and explain a concept and why it is important to us and through this, we try to include it in a larger group process. At the end of it we've all been heard, learned something and been part of something bigger than ourselves. Then we go for recess.

We're collecting video interviews from community members in an attempt to communicate the community's diverse perspectives on the Carrall Street Greenway.

Creative control is controlled by a group, not an individual. Conflicting opinions of people producing the project will be compromised or contrasted. Also specific duties aren't assigned to specific people, everyone does everything.

A term that describes both the process and product, a specific mode of production, articulation, and dissemination. A sharing of opinions, values that produce a participatory process and product.

Participatory video provides a catalyst for political change and engagement through a process of participation, listening, and dialogue. Through this process, participants build understanding, self-awareness, critical reflection, and ultimately political voice towards social change.

People who share common stakes in something use video to express their feelings or views about it with the goal of enhancing engagement, empowerment, skills, consensus, and understanding.

Video which attempts to involve the ideas and skills of all involved in the production of a film or video. Video that is an open and involved creative process.

Participatory video is allowing those involved to have a say in how they're portrayed. They can in a way choose what parts of themselves they feel are important, and are allowed to share those parts in a place and time that they have expressed is comfortable for them...so they aren't puppets, but are able to be the people they are, accessing this outlet for their expression that we are making available to them...we are able to shape it too, instead of just following someone else's strict vision.

Process and output that engages a group define at the beginning of a project to collaboratively participate in a project where opinions are acknowledged.
Video as a means of communicating an idea/s and perspective/s.

A process which all parties involved have a chance to voice their opinions, thoughts, emotions, whereby coming to a satisfactory final product.
Appendix III: Project Timeline

January 2006 – March 2006
- Selection of youth and student teams
- Training on participatory values, downtown eastside issues, the Carrall Street Greenway, basic filmmaking, documentation of public processes by youth.

April - Preparation
- Youths and students brought together
- Discussion and exploration on planning issues, the meaning of participatory video, DTES themes etc
- Filmmaking skills activities including in-camera editing exercises, interviewing practice, making short in-camera documentaries etc.
- Identified break out teams
- Teams decided on topic and basic story development

May – Production
- Shooting begins.
- Working with mentors to collect footage and interviews.
- Screening of material.
- Editing. Working in teams with film mentors for preliminary (rough) edit
- Rough cut screened for community

June – Production / Distribution
- Editing and shooting completed
- Videos screened at World Urban Youth Forum, World Planner’s Congress, Planners for Tomorrow etc.

July / August - Distribution.
- Interurban Gallery exhibition
- Learning Exchange screening
- Distribution and festival submissions continue.
- Evaluation of project
Appendix IV: UBC Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval