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Beyond Participation: the Practical Application of an Empowerment Process to Bring about Environmental and Social Change

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Article abstract

The ability to communicate empowers individuals, enabling them to share information, needs and experiences with others (Cockerill, 2002). For many, society's general reliance upon verbal and written communication is taken for granted. However for the vulnerable minority, including people with learning disabilities (PWLD), this is a key issue. Physiological, psychological, environmental and social barriers make traditional methods of communication extremely frustrating or impossible, continuing their legacy of exclusion from decision-making society. Moreover, whilst the Habermas ideal of a society where "communication will no longer be distorted by the effects of power, self-interest or ignorance" (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998 citing Norris, 1985, p. 149) propels the acceptance of communicative rationality in policy and practice (Healey, 1999), there is limited evidence regarding its practical employment to extend inclusion to underrepresented groups such as PWLD. In order to address this evident lack in employment of participatory processes that value difference, the Experiemic process was developed as part of a two year research program funded by the UK Leverhulme Trust. Through its employment, it is seen how we can facilitate more inclusive partnerships that have the capability to augment and challenge current consultation techniques. We illustrate this through a longitudinal qualitative fieldwork study into a United Kingdom (UK) city's local public transport system. Here, the Experiemic process's catalytic capability is revealed in its ability to empower and facilitate PWLD. As a consequence the learning disability participants evolve as key players in environmental decision-making, whilst partnerships developed across academia, the community, practice and policy result in positive environmental and social change.

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Beyond Participation : the Practical Application of an Empowerment Process to Bring about Environmental and Social Change

"*PWLD [people with learning disabilities] can take an active role, with support and advocacy, in reshaping the spaces within which they live*" (Hall, 2007, p. 133)

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Abstract : The ability to communicate empowers individuals, enabling them to share information, needs and experiences with others (Cockerill, 2002). For many, society's general reliance upon verbal and written communication is taken for granted. However for the vulnerable minority, including people with learning disabilities (PWLD), this is a key issue. Physiological, psychological, environmental and social barriers make traditional methods of communication extremely frustrating or impossible, continuing their legacy of exclusion from decision-making society. Moreover, whilst the Habermas ideal of a society where "communication will no longer be distorted by the effects of power, self-interest or ignorance" (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998 citing Norris, 1985, p. 149) propels the acceptance of communicative rationality in policy and practice (Healey, 1999), there is limited evidence regarding its practical employment to extend inclusion to underrepresented groups such as PWLD. In order to address this evident lack in employment of participatory processes that value difference, the Experiemic process was developed as part of a two year research program funded by the UK Leverhulme Trust. Through its employment, it is seen how we can facilitate more inclusive partnerships that have the capability to augment and challenge current consultation techniques. We illustrate this through a longitudinal qualitative fieldwork study into a United Kingdom (UK) city's local public transport system. Here, the Experiemic process's catalytic capability is revealed in its ability to empower and facilitate PWLD. As a consequence the learning disability participants evolve as key players in environmental decision-making, whilst partnerships developed across academia, the community, practice and policy result in positive environmental and social change.

Keywords : learning disability, partnership, social and environmental change, place making, social exclusion and participatory processes

Résumé : La capacité de communiquer permet aux individus de partager des informations, leurs besoins et des expériences avec autrui (Cockerill, 2002). Nombreuses sont les personnes qui considèrent la prédominance de la communication verbale et écrite dans nos sociétés comme allant de soi. Une telle situation peut constituer pour certains groupes minoritaires vulnérables, incluant les personnes ayant des troubles d'apprentissage, un problème important. Les barrières physiologiques, psychologiques, environnementales et sociales existantes peuvent rendre extrêmement frustrante, voire impossible, l'utilisation des méthodes traditionnelles de communication, confirmant par le fait même leur situation d'exclusion sociale et leur faible participation dans les mécanismes de prise de décision de leurs sociétés. De même, l'idéal d'Habermas d'une société où « la communication ne sera plus faussée par les effets du pouvoir, de l'intérêt personnel et de l'ignorance » (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998, cité par Norris, 1985, p.149, traduction libre) a pour conséquence de promouvoir la rationalité communicative dans la politique et dans les pratiques (Healey, 1999). L'application réelle d'une telle perspective afin de favoriser l'inclusion des groupes sous-représentés, tels que les personnes ayant des troubles d'apprentissage, s'est avérée jusqu'à présent plutôt limitée. De façon à combler ce manque évident de prise en compte de la différence dans les processus participatifs, un programme de recherche de deux ans, fondé par Uk Leverhulme Trust, s'est affairé à développer le processus Experiemic au Royaume-Uni. Son utilisation nous permet de voir comment il est possible de mettre sur pied des partenariats plus inclusifs et ayant la capacité de remettre en question ou d'améliorer les techniques de consultations couramment employées. Cet article présente l'utilisation du processus Experiemic dans le cadre d'une étude de terrain longitudinale qualitative dans le cadre d'un système de transport public local dans une ville du Royaume-Uni. Elle montrera que le processus Experiemic est en mesure de renforcer les capacités des personnes ayant des troubles d'apprentissage et de faciliter leurs échanges avec les autorités. Les participants ayant des troubles d'apprentissage peuvent ainsi se transformer en acteurs clés dans les processus décisionnels ayant un impact sur leur milieu de vie, et ce, parallèlement aux efforts des différents partenariats développés entre les milieux universitaires, la communauté, les milieux politiques et de pratiques favorables à des changements environnementaux et sociaux positifs pour les personnes ayant des troubles d'apprentissage.

Mots-clés : troubles d'apprentissage, partenariat, changement social et environnemental, aménagement de places publiques, processus d'exclusion sociale et de participation

Introduction

This paper seeks to address the ongoing lack of engagement between environmental design disciplines and disability studies regarding issues of exclusion of PWLD in everyday environments.

Understanding and preventing sociospatial exclusion has been a topic of continuing concern for theorists from the fields of geography and planning. In geography, for nearly four decades, the seminal work of David Harvey has spearheaded a call for a new social justice (Harvey, 1972; 1973; 1996; 2003) where "extra resources are allocated to help overcome special difficulties stemming from the physical and social environment" and "the mechanisms (institutional, organizational, political, and economic) should be such that the prospects of the least advantaged territory are as great as they possibly can be" (Harvey, 1973, p. 116-117). Following this, support for a politics of difference has seen discrimination challenged in terms of (for example) disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender, and the dominance of "the supposedly universal 'we' based of the particular world view of the Western, male, bourgeois subject" disputed (Smith, 2000, p. 1150 citing McDowell, 1995, p. 285). As a result this broader understanding of difference, a more shared and universal human characteristic with the capability to unite and strengthen the voices of many, has challenged why inequality should still exist and begun to identify processes necessary to address it.

In planning, participation has long been identified as a key process by which equality may begin to be built (Turner, 1976). More recently, the advance of communicative and collaborative approaches to planning (Healey, 1999) has drawn attention to communication as a means to widen participation. With this, opportunity appeared to challenge the dominance of the professional, whilst addressing power imbalances that favour the few and are the ultimate disempowerment of the many. However, concerns have been voiced that communicative approaches continue to ignore the more underrepresented sections of the community, and hence provide no guidance on how their involvement might be achieved (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998). In response, proponents of collaborative approaches have cited their capability to evolve new social understanding thereby extending inclusion as the involved "individuals might learn new identities and construct their interests differently through social learning encounters" (Healey, 1999). Yet, in order for the participation of underrepresented communities such as PWLD to become a reality, consideration must be given to the hierarchical system that has constrained more inclusive approaches and the communication barriers that not only "other" PWLD from general debate, but separate and divide our professions, our disciplines, our communities and our policymakers. Therefore, identified is the need for a means by which we can generate "a common professional language to research and report on environment…[which] need not eliminate poetic expression in favour of technical jargon, but it would establish separate more general terms of reference with which to build knowledge" (Habraken, 2005).

The silent power of social exclusion

Within the environmental design professions the lack of engagement in decision-making as experienced by PWLD is an extreme example of a wider societal problem. People are increasingly regarded as receivers of professionally specified environments (top-down) rather than participants in the creation of places they use (bottom-up). This approach raises considerable concerns as important territorial opportunities are suppressed through which people naturally develop environmental competencies and thereby establish independence and self esteem (Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987; Habraken, 1998, 2005; Dovey, 2005; Frank & Stevens, 2007). Therefore the subsequent absence of PWLD from these professionally planned and designed environments is testament to a discreditable acceptance by the majority of professionals (and society) who would rather "understand PWLD as excluded - rather than as experiencing material and representational discrimination

and poverty" (Enable, 1999 cited by Hall, 2004, p. 300).

In the UK, the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, 1995) was seen as significant legislative advance in the fight against disability discrimination and the associated spatial exclusion of PWLD. However on closer inspection it appears to trumpet a somewhat additive approach to accessible design, or a "token response to the needs of people with disabilities" (Imrie & Hall, 2001), ultimately engendering further discrimination and separation. The Disability Discrimination Act's focus upon the right of access is restricted to an understanding of physical elements and little is offered in terms of consultation mechanisms. This response to social exclusion therefore not only overlooks the experiential dimensions of place but it also fails to develop mechanisms by which spatial experiences are understood. Consequently, as Hall (2010) recently identified "one key limitation is the lack of clear transformation of the broader structures and processes that sustain the exclusion, discrimination and abjection of people with IDs (intellectual disabilities)" (Hall, 2010, p. 56). The pattern of professional conceptualisation and creation of environments continues, places are planned and built where those who are most vulnerable to change have no place to be, and are therefore absent or removed (Hall, 2010).

There is however evidence, that when PWLD are empowered by appropriate processes of participation to express environmental experience, open space planning and design processes can be informed to the benefit of all users. Nevertheless, as disability studies and urban planning and design processes have yet to become mutually informative, such benefits currently remain unavailable. Our aim in generating the Experiemic process has been to facilitate the inclusive engagement of PWLD in urban planning and design. In so doing, we anticipate it will contribute socially responsive and internationally relevant urban design theory and practice by providing a means to reconcile the polarity prevalent in current approaches between top-down planning and design processes and bottom-up participatory methods.

Communicating professionalism

The professions of architecture, landscape architecture and planning continue to be driven by the goal of individualism, unable to relinquish a level of control embedded through their historic development (Turner, 1976; Habraken, 2005; Paget, 2008). However, the emancipation of these professions has been detrimental to the public's need to participate in the development of everyday places for people; places of belonging (Habraken, 2005). Challenging the dominance of professional control in environmental decision-making requires an approach that addresses both the hierarchical system that has constrained public participation, and the communication barriers that separate professions, communities and policy (Healey, 1997).

Communicative rationality first appeared in the early 1980's through the work of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas conceived the hypothesis of ideal speech where "communication will no longer be distorted by the effects of power, self-interest or ignorance" (Norris, 1985, p. 149), and therefore might form "the basis for consensus and action" (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998, p. 1976). In the UK, drawing heavily upon these theoretical foundations, a number of new approaches to planning emerged including communicative planning (Forester, 1989), argumentative planning (Forester, 1993), planning through debate (Healey, 1992), inclusionary discourse (Healey, 1993) and collaborative planning (Healey, 1997). This new planning paradigm aimed to advance the planning profession towards adopting "an interactive, communicative activity and deeply embedded in the fabric of community, politics and public decision-making" (Healey, 1999, p. 1129 citing Innes, 1995, p. 183). However, as communicative planning gained a visible profile, debate erupted as to its practical effectiveness, its value to the planning profession, its theoretical rigor and its practical operation. Most notable was concern that "communicative rationality also assumes that all sections of the

community can be included within the collaborative planning discourse, although little has been said on how this could be achieved, or even how all these stakeholders can be identified, and by whom" (Tewdwr-Jones & Allmendinger, 1998, p. 1980).

In planning and design discourses, where power relations are in evidence, Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger argue that the outcome will always be in favour of the more influential party. This implies that should less dominant communities such as PWLD wish to affect real change, their current lack of social, political and economic standing, when compared with more powerful stakeholders, will only lead to individual frustration and disappointment. However, advocates for the communicative turn have countered that these approaches provide the means by which territorial understanding by all parties will be conceived. Therefore if such processes of participation are adopted, facilitation of shared and equal discourse between stakeholders including PWLD will occur. Without this opportunity for exchange and reconceptualisation of one's position it is to be expected that individual positions and understanding become entrenched with little regard for alternative viewpoints. When this is applied to the participation of PWLD in urban decision-making, we can therefore envisage that they will bring valuable understanding of how society can design and plan for places that deliver fulfilment and wellbeing for a wide spectrum of individual requirements.

Disabling environment dialogues

So how is this understanding of people environment relations to be manifest through the participation of PWLD? In order to reveal the experiential dimension of urban environments as understood by PWLD it is necessary to conceptualise a synthesis between people's individuality, their social relationships and the places where these are expressed. This requires methodology by which it is possible to capture a form of environmental knowledge and experience that cannot be derived from professional training alone, but evolves from common understandings of the surroundings we routinely use (Habraken, 2005; Thwaites & Simkins, 2007). Although acknowledged as important to the establishment of urban environments capable of sustaining human well-being and environmental competence, it remains undeveloped in the mainstream of urban planning and design practice (Dovey, 1993; Thwaites, 2001). Through developments in place theory, there has been a bringing together of personal, social, and physical characteristics of environmental experience into a series of more unified models (Tuan, 1974; Relph, 1976; Canter, 1977; Proshansky, 1983; Thwaites, 2000). However in the context of contemporary urban planning and design, such models have failed to become sufficiently embedded and developments on theories of place here have been relatively neglected. There is evidence emerging, however, that this is a key area of research with far reaching implications for environmental resilience, requiring robust evidence and theoretical development (Frank & Stevens, 2007; Dovey, 2010; Mehafey et al, 2010).

Evidence of a clear relationship between place experience and the participation of disabled people in everyday life may be traced back to the 1970's, where research in North America by Mayer Spivak (1973) developed archetypal place theory, which was then employed in the context of disability studies by Lifchez and Winslow (1979). Spivak's work in mental health (hospital) settings proposes that individuals who are deprived from routine experiences, conceptualized by Spivak as archetypal places, are liable to suffer from "retarded (syc) emotional or even physical development" (Spivak, 1973, p. 49). Mathers (2004; 2006; 2007; 2008a; 2008b) has shown that many PWLD live with very limited environmental experiences as a result of the inflexibility of many social and cultural environments and their ensuing daily routines (often highly restricted) which impact on physical, psychological and social well-being. Similarly, geographers interested in embodiment have pursued analogous studies exploring the relationship between impairment and socio-spatial exclusion (e.g. Hall, 2004, 2005, 2010; Parr, 2000, 2007), with Hall (2007, p. 131)

commenting that exclusion from environmental space is mirrored by exclusion from "forms of participation determined by existing power networks" resulting in their needs being further ignored. The participation of PWLD is therefore a concern for both disability studies and the sub-discipline of the geography of disability, with cross-citation occurring but little sustained dialogue.

This is a recognised issue in disability research and geographies of embodiment, with Hansen and Philo (2007), amongst others, calling for greater use of participatory methods to enable disabled people to play a more active role in research where they and their actions can become more visible contributors to social cohesion (Parr, 2007). Parr's work regarding the exclusion of marginalised communities highlights another key problem in community participation by underrepresented groups, that of public invisibility. Many people including PWLD, are currently involved in traditional, supported activities such as community gardening projects, cafes and workshops, which although fêted as facilitating inclusion, are often gated, hidden from the public and therefore may be of limited impact in consideration of their "transformative [ability] in both personal and social terms" (Parr, 2007, p. 538). However, positive examples of participation do exist, where contributions by seemingly "hidden" populations have resulted in noticeable improvements and developments to the wider public environment which they and the whole community use, as part of everyday life (Parr, 2007).

Normal environments for all

Creating public environments where all people are welcome is not merely a matter of physical design but of social experience, which is of key importance for PWLD who regularly face open discrimination. It seems we are still far from a society where discrimination is absent and PWLD are not seen as "other" but equally included. Indeed, it has been said that in order for PWLD to participate fully in everyday society and environments they would have to achieve an appearance of normalcy, and reflect what the majority see in themselves and their daily experiences (Hall, 2004), which would encompass changes to "bodily behaviour and appearance, social location (ideally independent living, at least community housing) and/or economic engagement" (Sibley, 1995; Hall, 2004, p. 300). In relation to this, a general lack of public understanding regarding hidden impairments and behavioural spectrums has resulted in many PWLD being forced to retreat further down the path of segregation (Ryan, 2005). As a consequence, seeking security in environments where they will not face confrontation, rejection and exclusion, PWLD are removed from the daily life of our public spaces.

The voluntary removal of self from everyday environments by PWLD, in order to take refuge in more hidden spaces of acceptance, is worrying. If it is perceived that in order to be included in mainstream society one must display the so-called characteristics of normalcy, and remove individual identity that emanates from difference, we are suggesting a homogenous fantasy for PWLD that is both bland and unreal. Many disabled people, including PWLD, are acutely aware of how difference is perceived and how their inclusion is only ever partial. Evidence of this approach to partial inclusion may be seen in the environmental adjustments that began to appear across the UK following enforcement of the Disability Discrimination Act in 2004. Whilst the introduction of physical additions such as ramps and level entry, handrails and accessible amenities was designed to facilitate equality, in many cases (as has been cited internationally) these adjustments appeared as "an add-on or an afterthought rather than a natural or automatic part of the process" (Hansen & Philo, 2007, p. 500). This suggests that little practical progress has yet to occur regarding the active participation of disabled people in planning and design processes. A statement supported by Imrie and Hall (2001) who revealed that within the already inadequate consultation of disabled people carried out by architects during the design process, PWLD were always the least consulted group (Imrie & Hall, 2001, p. 103). Furthermore this additive approach appears acutely limited in

addressing inequality and creating the type of environments where PWLD "could satisfy their material needs (through benefits and/or work), participate in politics and decision-making, and achieve socio-spatial inclusion" (Gleeson, 1999, p. 150). Evidently, there is a need for mechanisms capable of increasing the participatory involvement of PWLD within the place creation, ensuring inclusion can be centrally embodied, and the add-on or afterthought effect avoided.

Case study : participatory urban transport evaluation

In response to these issues our research to identify and evaluate the importance of participatory processes, has required a dynamic and mixed methodology whereby the experiences of PWLD can be rigorously understood and represented in formats that seek to impact on policy and practice. Another key concern for us was that the research outcomes had practical purpose and visible impact in order for the general public to re-evaluate and redress preconceived notions of marginalised communities and witness the social contribution they have to offer. Central to this was a concern to try to develop a participatory process that could reach beyond the aspiration simply to supply professional agencies with information to improve their decision making, important though this undoubtedly is. PhD research preceding the urban transport project work had highlighted that, in many cases, the participatory process itself was capable of yielding tangible benefits to those participating, above and beyond what might ultimately be delivered into planning and design contexts (Mathers, 2008a; 2008b). In particular, there was a social, as well as informational, value in participatory processes that often went overlooked in conventional public consultation methodologies.

Moving forward from this premise with our own response we were also mindful of something that Habraken had drawn attention to in 1986, but increasingly evident more recently (Cuthbert, 2007; Mehaffey, 2008; Mehaffey and al., 2010), that particularly in environmental planning and design contexts, use of the word participation usually meant that users must participate in what professionals decide to do (Habraken, 1986). Despite an implication that participation is advocated by those who refuse the conventional paternalistic model, recognising instead the valuable experience and knowledge held by lay people, what people are invited to participate in is usually tightly controlled from the outset by professional agencies. We would acknowledge that there are many sound reasons why this may be the case in environmental planning and design contexts, yet it serves to perpetuate a culture in which the lay public must almost inevitably accept themselves as receivers of professional decision making rather than genuine participants in the determination of places they routinely use. Axel Honneth (1995) has suggested that such subliminal external control can impact on the human capability to achieve and sustain a sense of self-esteem which, in the context of the marginalised and disenfranchised experiences of many with learning disability, could have heightened impact on their well-being.

Honneth (ibid) identified the importance of recognition as a vital human need suggesting that, through their mental and physical actions, individuals make their ideas into something permanent and thereby become aware that they have a mind of their own. Having their actions recognised and valued enables individuals to enjoy self-esteem. Achieving this requires the recognition of others who share common concerns within a mutually supporting community where people can experience themselves as having status either as a focus of concern, a responsible agent, or as a valued contributor in a shared project. According to Honneth (ibid), the achievement of human self-esteem extends to a requirement for recognition that their actions have value within a particular cultural context. Against a background of concern, expressed by Habraken (1986) and others, about the professionalization of participatory processes, Honneth's emphasis on the experience of recognition within a supporting community serves to highlight the importance of the social value of participation to which we subsequently sought to give greater promi-

nence in the participatory process we developed.

What follows is an account of that process, called the Experiemic Process, as it developed from a preliminary framework arising from PhD work (Mathers, 2008a) and initial pilot study, through to a larger scale fieldwork application involving the UK city of Sheffield's local bus travel services and the local authority's development of a mobility strategy to provide a new policy framework for aspects of its disability services provision.

The Experiemic Process

Some of the foundations of the Experiemic Process lay in PhD work undertaken by the lead author, involving the development of inclusive methods (in the form of a toolkit) to facilitate PWLD to engage more effectively with professional agencies in outdoor environmental improvement (Mathers, 2008a). This work identified six key themes which, in relation to open space experience, affected the individual's ability to participate confidently. These were daily life experiences (current routines), communication methods, environmental choice, social experiences, activity in the landscape and experiential benefits. This pattern of interacting factors also appeared to have transferable potential "when unravelling a person with learning disabilities experience of many environments and decision making situations i.e. health, housing, education or accessing travel" (Mathers, 2008a, p. 273-274).

From the participatory communication toolkit developed within Mathers' PhD, the Experiemic Process evolved as a means by which partnerships could be developed and current consultation processes challenged due to standardized (and unresponsive) approaches that were insufficiently responsive to meet PWLD needs. A characteristic of the suite of methods developed in the research was to give participants greater levels of choice over what they wished to do and how they wished to do it. Transferring decision making to participants more normally used to having decisions made for them aimed to show how the act of participation, in taking decisions as well as taking part, could develop environmental confidence and competence in addition to revealing rich details about their environmental perceptions. To test this hypothesis funding was sought and obtained from the University of Sheffield Knowledge Transfer Fund[1] in 2008, providing an opportunity to do further fieldwork. This facilitated a six-month collaboration with a local learning disability organisation, Sheffield Mencap[2], focusing upon the accessibility of a singular method of public transport (the Stagecoach Supertram[3]). Subsequent evaluation of the benefits to participants from engagement with the methods developed further highlighted the potential social significance of the process, both at individual and group levels, suggesting that this should be developed further in subsequent work.

Following completion of this work we were able to develop a preliminary framework consisting nominally of seven stages of participative activity which sought to emphasise involvement of all participants in decisions about specific details of the process, how it would be operationalised, and findings subsequently disseminated (Table 1). The following material outlines the further development and impact of the Experiemic Process through its application in another participative study of public transport provision in Sheffield, an opportunity afforded by the award of a research project grant from The Leverhulme Trust (UK).

[1] The Knowledge Transfer funding programme was created by the University Sheffield to provide small grants to facilitate prime early stage collaborations with external organisations.

[2] Sheffield Mencap is a registered UK charity that provides support activities and services for people with learning disabilities and their families. They are local service branch of the national UK learning disability charity Mencap.

[3] The Stagecoach Supertram is a public tram transport service operating across the city of Sheffield, run by the national private transport company Stagecoach.

TABLE 1 : THE EXPERIEMIC PROCESS

THE EXPERIEMIC CODE A mechanism for evaluation of information throughout the process			EXPERIEMIC PROCESS MONITOR The monitoring mechanism throughout the process (monitors the growth in social capital against criteria for environmental competence)
	1	Establishing Project Context Determined by client group/environmental and /or social context.	
	2	Identifying Project Partners Creating a network of equal partnership with community, service providers, policy makers, practitioners.	
	3	Revealing the Issues Facilitation sessions with project partners to reveal "grass roots" issues of significance or concern within project context.	
	4	Bringing together the Issues Commonalities and differences identified in stage 3 are grouped to determine a project focus.	
	5	Project Methods Project focus explored through an inclusive process of participation using person centred methods appropriate to the individuals and project brief.	
	6	Representation and Evaluation Tools of representation and evaluation identify and reveal project outputs.	
	7	Findings and Recommendations Project outputs framed to achieve : - understanding of issues from all partners perspectives. - identification of opportunities for change. - ownership of existing and aspirational project processes and outputs. - changes identified to generate socially restorative environment and fulfil the project brief.	

1. Establishing the project context

An important first stage in the Experiemic Process is to ensure that the issues to be investigated are grounded in the community, rather than imposed by external agencies, to begin the process of establishing ownership of the project context with those who have direct experience of it. This is an attempt to respond to and reverse Habraken's (1986) observation that participative processes are frequently those determined and framed by professional agencies.

One of the most significant outcomes to emerge from the work on the tram transport project was concern from the learning disability participants about aspects of the local bus service provision that hindered their mobility and a desire to explore this further. The project context was thus informed by this previous related exploration which had been able to identify strengths and weaknesses in detailed aspects of public transport provision, highlighting where improvements could be made. The purpose of this project would be, therefore, to see how this formative experience of public transport use by members of Sheffield's learning disability community could be expanded and to explore to what extent findings might impact on local service provision policy and practice.

2. Identifying the project partners

The main purpose of this second stage is to assemble a network of project partners appropriate to investigating the project context and then delivering outputs. During this stage the research team takes on a facilitating role which helps identify and bring together relevant agencies, community and professional.

In this context it was a key objective, not only to identify matters of concern in relation to local

bus use, but to try to influence change. Accordingly, a network of project partners was created, including the learning disability community (the project fieldwork participants), policymakers and practitioner agencies. Twenty-four PWLD volunteered to be involved. These participants were members of three local learning disability organisations : Sheffield Mencap, SUFA[4] and WORK Ltd.[5] In order to affect real change in peoples' lives the project ran in partnership with policy makers from the Sheffield City Council Mobility Strategy Team[6], and key transport providers including, the South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive[7], First South Yorkshire[8], Stagecoach Sheffield[9] and Sheffield Community Transport[10]. Finally as the academic partner in the project, our role within the process focused on facilitating a program of open communication between the partners and learning disability participants (through the applied methodologies), rather than directing the process formally. This catalytic role enabled participants to gain true ownership over the issue under study. Demonstration of participant ownership evolved and became formalised in the later stages of the project when they began direction of methods used within the process's "Representation and Evaluation" stage.

[4] SUFA is a self advocacy organisation involved in the provision of advocacy services for people with learning disabilities including : self-advocacy, citizen or one-to-one advocacy, crisis advocacy and peer advocacy

[5] WORK Ltd is a registered charity established in 1995 which trains and educates young people and adults with learning difficulties within a real life working environment, to enable them to obtain work experience and to promote independent living and personal development.

[6] The Sheffield City Council Mobility Strategy Team are division of Sheffield City Council Adult Services responsible for providing services to people who need support to live independent lives.

[7] The SYPTE is the coordinating body responsible for the development of public transport across the South Yorkshire region.

[8] First South Yorkshire is the regional branch of the UK's largest public transport provider First.

[9] Stagecoach Sheffield is the citywide branch of the national public transport provider Stagecoach.

[10] Sheffield Community Transport (SCT) is a social enterprise with charitable status, which provides a range of transport related services across Sheffield.

It is important to recognise that this participatory process regarded all learning disability participants and partner groups as equal contributors, where each was recognised and valued for their own expertise : this follows Honneth's (1995) emphasis on the importance of achieving a context for recognition of the value of individual acts. However, in order to facilitate the empowerment of the learning disability participants their primacy in ownership of the project context was made publically visible, reflected in their ownership over the naming of the project "What's the Fuss, We Want the Bus".

3. Revealing the issues

Once the project participants and partners had been identified, a series of focus groups were held with the learning disability participants to establish specific aspects of the overall project context to be investigated in detail (Figure 1). This stage represents a framing of achievable tasks and again primacy is given to the learning disability participants to express particular areas of concern arising from their own experiences, serving to reinforce their ownership of the project. The focus groups made explicit that a concern common to all three learning disability participant groups was a desire to be able to use bus services more freely. However, each group identified specific issues from their own experiences that made this difficult to achieve. These were : poor treatment of PWLD by bus drivers (Sheffield Mencap participants); feelings of insecurity and vulnerability arising from the behavior of other passengers (SUFA participants); confusing and fearful experiences that obstructed safe and enjoyable bus travel (WORK Ltd participants).

4. Bringing together the issues

This stage of the process continues to establish a framework of common understanding within which each participant can have their own contribution recognized and valued. The wider project context of local bus travel experience was gradually brought into sharper focus through identification of a collective desire for all learning disability participants to be able to

FIGURE 1 : DISCUSSION FOCUS GROUPS TO REVEAL SPECIFIC ISSUES COMMUNITY PARTNERS WISHED TO EXPLORE

enjoy using buses safely and with confidence as part of normal daily life. Within this common framework, each participant group also retained ownership of their own particular area of interest. This highlighted the implications for policy and practitioner partners, which in this case came to focus on issues relevant to driver training, passenger conduct policy, and clarity and safety of bus use experience. This centred on addressing four key questions determined during the previous stage, which were : what is it like getting to the bus stop; what is it like at the bus stop; what is it like on the bus; what is it like getting off? This then formed the catalyst for the identification of project methods.

5. Project methods

Selection of project methods was agreed in collaboration with the learning disability participants to reflect individual and group communication preferences, and to facilitate the phenomenological exploration of their public transport experiences. Work by Cambridge and Forrester-Jones supports this approach stating, "methods for consulting with and involving people with intellectual disability should be based on the imperative to extend participation through inclusive approaches to communication" (Cambridge & Forrester-Jones, 2003, p. 20). At each of the three participant study sites, a series of eight one-day workshops were held with eight participants over a five-month period, punctuated by a public intermediate project review meeting. The catalyst for the series of onsite workshops was an initial participant directed bus journey; undertaken by each group in order to capture existing experiences through photography, sound recording and film (Figure 2). Each of the three participant groups then took part in a series of drawing, photo elicitation (photo novella), film and discussion workshops. Considerable literature exists to support use of these participatory techniques as effective tools of empowerment when working with underrepresented groups (Mathers, 2008a; Orobitg Canal, 2004; Hurworth, 2003; Buxó, 1999; Wang & Burris,

FIGURE 2 : PARTICIPANT DIRECTED BUS JOURNEY REVEALING TIMETABLES AT THE WRONG HEIGHT FOR WHEELCHAIR USERS

1994; King and al., 1989). Responsive development of these methods, to include participant produced animation, for example, was facilitated at the request of one of the participant groups. This developed the static narrative of the participants' experiences (captured through their drawings, photographs and words) into a sinuous representation of their person environment interactions.

An intermediate public project review meeting was held at Sheffield Town Hall to facilitate dissemination of research findings and to obtain feedback from the wider learning disability community, policy makers and practitioners. Following evaluation of this public review, the learning disability participants engaged in a further series of workshops to reveal their aspirational travel experiences, which subsequently formed a basis for engagement with policy and practitioner project partners (Figure 3). Answers to the questions previously identified were sought through semi-structured group discussion workshops. Previous experience orchestrating semi-structured interviews with PWLD revealed the limitations of formal one-to-one interview situations, as participants were not comfortable in this setting. The effect of power relations was often in evidence (Cochrane 1998, p. 2123) and pre-prescribed question formats constrained the conversation of the learning disability interviewees (Mathers,

FIGURE 3 : SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW BEING UNDERTAKEN BY A MEMBER OF WORK LTD WITH SHEFFIELD CITY COUNCIL'S MOBILITY STRATEGY OFFICE

2008a). Therefore in response, semi-structured group discussion workshops were employed. This approach, augmented by the use of visual methodologies and creation of participant workbooks (to record thoughts and experiences), provides both a progressive structured record of relevant information in response to core questions, and ensures each participant retains a sense of ownership over their own contribution and the value of this in relation to the collective task (Figure 3).

6. Representation and evaluation

Undertaking the project method tasks produced a rich and highly detailed range of information based on the authentic routine experiences of the community project participant groups. Representing and communicating this effectively to diverse audiences presents particular and potentially polarising challenges. At one extreme is the need to effectively engage with the policy and practitioner project partners so that they could assimilate the implications of the project's outcomes within their existing professional structures. At the other extreme is the essential need to ensure that the community partners retained ownership over the way their messages were communicated. Without this latter consideration the process risks repeating the limitations of many conventional processes of participation, where communities simply deliver information into the hands of professional agencies for reinterpretation.

Reconciliation of these issues emerged within review and feedback sessions with the learning disability participant groups, during which their perspectives on central issues arising from the project, and how best to communicate them, were refined. This provided a particular focus for the individual participant groups who went on to represent their findings in ways they felt would have the most direct impact. WORK Ltd participants, for example, organised and carried out interviews with representatives from the policy and practitioner project partners who they identified as having impact upon their current travel experiences. In addition, the Head Teacher and student representatives of a local college were interviewed to address issues arising from intimidating behavior of college students on buses used by WORK Ltd trainees. The SUFA participants reviewed a bus journey to and from the city centre, and then wrote and performed a short drama to highlight in particular : the need for safer crossings; difficulties getting buses to stop; condition of bus shelters and stops; passenger and driver attitudes. The Sheffield Mencap participants chose to work with a professional animator who helped them develop a script and learn various graphic and technical skills which enabled them to produce an animated film, showing their experiences of bus travel through the activities of animated characters they designed to represent themselves on film.

7. Findings and recommendations

The final stage of the Experiemic Process involved a qualitative evaluation of the project's outputs using a specially developed coding system to establish core themes and make recommendations (Simkins, 2008). An important characteristic of this stage is to ensure that findings and recommendations remain accessible to all participants in the process and can be understood as inclusively as possible. Achieving this requires careful attention to language used and methods of presentation to ensure that participant ownership does not become compromised through, for example, translation of materials into excessively professionalized formats and specialized terminology. Throughout this stage language used by the learning disability participants to express their thoughts and ideas remains present, and the use of photographic and drawn images they have produced retains the essential personalization of the project and makes its origins recognizable. In this instance, the evaluation resulted in the emergence of five key themes : social issues; safety; customer care; information; place and object issues. Examples of issues identified in each are summarised in table 2 :

In relation to the five key themes outlined by the findings, a number of recommendations arose for policy and practice partners and these were delivered in the form of accessible

TABLE 2 : EXPERIEMIC PROCESS SUMMARY TABLE

Social issues	*Anti-social behavior :* (including that of children at bus stops and on buses) was of great concern to many participants. *Lack of personal space and respect by others* : inc. bullying, pushing and swearing. *Potential for bus travel to be a positive experience :* i.e. making new friends (interacting with others) on journey and as a means of independent travel. Some participants did not currently use public transport as they wished to travel with friends who used the community transport minibuses. *The importance of familiarity :* of both passengers and staff. One of the college students interviewed suggested that some students misbehave because they assume they will never see the other passengers again. If they saw people regularly they might not act in the same way. This is an interesting aspect which the travel operators have acknowledged by assigning a particular driver to a particular route to engender familiarity.
Safety	*Absence of crossings and speeding traffic :* were seen as a barrier to safe self-travel. *Poor current condition of some crossings and those that did not sound :* were seen as potentially dangerous. *Distance people needed to travel to the bus stop :* was seen as an issue affecting safety, convenience and accessibility. *Bars on buses were seen as a sign of safety :* and used by some as comfortable support for bumpy journeys.
Customer Care	*Being able to sit down before the bus sets off :* (this issue was subsequently addressed, following an interim project presentation to the travel operators, with travel providers informing drivers in response to passenger requests). *Stopping buses :* was seen as a problem when more than one uses the same bus stop - leading to frustration and missed buses. *Wheelchair users appreciated the driver letting down the ramp for their access.* *Having a priority designated space on the bus is important, yet can lead to conflict with pram users.*
Information	*Information provided was often confusing and relied on jargon :* i.e. “high frequency buses” and “interchange”. *Use of the 24-hour clock on timetables :* was not appropriate for all. *Size of fonts used :* (generally small) made information difficult to read i.e. on timetables, travel guides and websites. *Newly introduced passenger technology was not user friendly*. *Signage was confusing or absent.* *Use of colours was confusing :* eg. timetable routes implied the colour of the bus, however bus destination boards did not match the bus colour. *Position of timetables on shelters :* caused difficulty for wheelchair users to see the timetables, as they were too high.

Place and Object Issues	*Condition of bus shelters and buses :* was seen as significant in how participants felt about a place and whether they chose to use it or not. *Maintenance of small-scale details at bus stops and in the surrounding area,* alongside the provision of comfortable objects such as seats was viewed as highly significant. *Getting to the central bus station was not a good experience* : with confusion as to its location, the condition of pathways, the number of steps and the amount of litter and graffiti. *Colour coding of shelters was seen as confusing :* i.e. the relevance of yellow, blue and grey dots on various shelters was not clear. Their positioning was also raised as an issue for people sat down at bus shelters as they obscured view of oncoming buses. *Bus ramp :* whilst important for access, were usually in disappointing condition (dirty and under-maintained) when opened. *Wheelchair users like to face the direction of travel*. *Choice of seating place varied* : some participants preferred to be at the front so they did not miss their stop and took comfort from being close to the driver, others saw this as potential for crowding and preferred to be at the rear, although getting off was seen as challenging.

reports and a DVD film documentary containing each of the participant group's chosen means of representation and a summary of the key findings from each. Findings generated under these key themes and the associated recommendations are as follows :

Social issues

- Anti-social behaviour was of concern to many of the learning disability participants. WORK Ltd participants identified specific issues relating to the intimidating behaviour of young people at bus stops and on buses. This greatly affected their confidence when travelling. Therefore, in order to avoid travelling at service times used by the young people they caught later buses where possible.
- The need for personal space was raised by SUFA participants, as well as a lack of respect by others i.e. bullying, being pushed or sworn at. However, bus travel was also seen as a means to facilitate positive social experiences, with participants describing the potential for making new friends (increasing social contact) and developing confidence in independent travel.
- Travelling with friends was important to some participants and a key reason why some currently didn't travel on public transport, as their friends used the Community Transport service.
- Social issues regarding familiarity (of other travellers and the transport staff) were seen as having a potentially significant impact upon behaviour of passengers. In WORK Ltd participant interviews with local college students, the students suggested that young people might "misbehave" if they assumed that they would never see the other passengers again. Where passengers and bus drivers became associated with particular services at particular times there was a perceived development of ownership and community, and it was envisaged that through recognition of perpetrators this antisocial behaviour would be less likely. This is an interesting social solution and one that was revealed to be effective, as some of the travel operators confirmed an ideal in practice was to assign a particular driver to a particular route.
- Recommendations : A greater civic authority presence (i.e. community officers) in public

places would reduce fear of anti-social behaviour.

- Developing relationships through partnership between communities (such as schools and the learning disability community) and policy and practice is effective in addressing local issues.
- Further training opportunities for PWLD to learn to travel independently would facilitate self-esteem.

Safety

- All learning disability participant groups expressed concerns about being able to safely get to the bus stop. The distance people needed to travel to bus stops (particularly from their homes) was seen as an issue of safety, convenience and accessibility. In relation to this, the absence of crossings in many areas and speeding traffic were seen as key reasons why people could not safely self-travel.
- The current condition of some crossings was also highlighted. Those that did not sound when it is safe to cross were seen as potentially dangerous. Meanwhile the bars on buses were seen as a sign of safety and used by some as comfortable support for bumpy journeys.
- Recommendations : local authorities should re-examine the relationship between road crossings and the position of bus stops, and consider more crossing points.
- The inclusion of both audio and visual signals at all crossing points should be a standard specification.

Customer care

- Being able to sit down before the bus departure was raised as being of concern by one of the learning disability participant groups. Disclosure of this issue at the interim project presentation resulted in a development of training by the travel operators, whereby drivers were made aware to respond to such passenger requests.
- The ability to draw attention to oneself and prompt the bus to pull into a bus stop was seen as a problem when more than one bus used the same stop. For many participants this led to frustration as well as missing the bus.
- Wheelchair users appreciated the driver letting down the ramp for their access. However, in many situations the ramps were not clean or in good repair, which made individuals feel devalued.
- Having a priority disabled passenger space (particularly for wheelchair users) on the bus was important, yet this often led to conflict with pram users.
- Recommendations : travel operators should consider the issue of stopping buses when more than one bus is at a stop. In association, driver training should develop awareness that disabled passengers find this difficult.
- There should be further training of transport staff to be respectful of all passengers. Associated practical measures should also be included in training programmes, such as drivers pulling in close to the kerb for ease of access. Implementing and upholding the designation of no-parking zones around bus stops would further facilitate this.

Information

- Methods of transport information were often confusing or difficult to read. This was brought up as an issue by participants in relation to use of the 24-hour clock on timetables as well as the predominance of jargon on signage and timetables : i.e. the central bus station is known as the “Interchange” yet for the participants this wording had little obvious relationship to bus travel.
- Many participants felt that the size of font used made information difficult to read, and concerns were expressed with regard to the travel guides and website.
- The journey planner (a newly installed information device) was indecipherable to the participants and could not be described as “user friendly”.

- The use of colours was seen as confusing in terms of the timetable routes (where these bore no correlation to the colour of the associated buses) and destination boards on buses.
- The position of timetables at bus shelters appeared illogical, as they were often located at the opposite end of the bus shelter to the direction from which the buses arrived. Participants who were wheelchair users expressed difficulties regarding timetables positioning as these were at height beyond eye level.
- Transport signs were viewed as confusing or not present at all.
- Recommendations : use of the 12-hour clock on bus timetables, production of clearer maps and removal of jargon from information (in particular signage) should be implemented.
- Travel operators should ensure consistency in their use of colour between timetables, buses and the design of shelters in order to facilitate orientation and confidence in travel.
- There should be greater investment in communication and equality training of staff at travel centres i.e. British Sign Language (BSL) and Makaton.

Place and object issues

- The condition of bus stops, shelters and buses was seen as significant in how the participants felt about a place or travel system and whether they chose to use it or not.
- Clean streets and bus stops were regarded as good. As well as maintenance, the provision and quality of objects such as seats was viewed as significant.
- Locating the central bus station was not a good experience for the participants. Participants were confused due to the lack of signage and discouraged by the condition of pathways, the number of steps (on the access route) and the amount of litter and graffiti.
- The apparent colour coding of shelters was also seen as confusing. The difference between the yellow, blue and grey dots that appeared on many shelters was not clear : i.e. was this a corporate image or indication of a particular route? The positioning of these dots was also raised as an issue, as when people were sat down at the bus shelter this obscured their view of oncoming buses.
- Wheelchair users appreciated being able to face the direction that the bus was travelling in, so they could see when their stop was approaching. The choice of seating place varied. Some participants preferred to be at the front so they did not miss their stop and also took comfort from being close to the driver. Others saw this as potential for crowding and preferred to be at the rear, however departing the bus was then seen as sometimes challenging.
- Recommendations : there should be greater partnership between travel operators and local authorities to maintain buses, bus stops and the areas around bus stops.
- Seats at bus stops should be at an appropriate height for people to use easily, and the local authority should consider footpath surfacing and handrails on sloping ground.
- The position and number of litterbins around bus stops should be reviewed and improvements to lighting in public places made to facilitate safer travel at night.

Among the rich diversity of detailed information to emerge from the project there are two significant issues that we believe add weight to advocates of “bottom-up” approaches to environmental planning and design.

The first of these is that a significant majority of the recommendations that emerged from the process pointed toward the need for relatively minor adjustment and adaptation to the existing situation. This suggests that substantial improvements could be made to the quality of experience that PWLD have of bus use, and with this their encouragement to use it more, through the accumulated impact of small interventions, most of which require no expensive infrastructural change and could be accommodated within routine maintenance, monitoring and training procedures.

The second relates to the presentation of findings. A common characteristic of conventional processes of participation tends to see outputs as a source of data, much like any other form of survey information gathered to inform the initial planning stages of a project. There are good reasons why, important to the subsequent justification of decisions made. However, and especially in the case of information derived from participation events, this process acts to remove the information from its context and detaches the authentic voices which initially gave it expression, recasting it in professionally specialized formats. Our previous research suggested that this process of professionalization can have such a sterilizing effect on locally generated information as to make the important messages it contains almost inaudible in extreme cases. In response the findings from this project were presented publicly at a dissemination event in July 2008 at Sheffield Town Hall at a special sitting of the regular Peoples' Parliament event that many of the learning disability participants were familiar with attending from previous occasions (figure 4). These familiar surroundings gave participants the opportunity to deliver their findings in person in the ways they had chosen for themselves; as an exhibition of canvases, a short drama performance, a presentation of the animation film, and other film and image based materials. An audience of over 150 people, including people with learning disabilities, the local authority and transport providers, attended the event. As a result of this direct communication, which retained the authentic voices of the participant groups, "What's the fuss we want the bus!" recommendations have since been included in the 2010 Sheffield City Council Adult Social Care Mobility Strategy, whilst the transport providers have employed the project DVD as a staff training resource. Through the sharing of experiences, the project has built learning disability community empowerment and cohesion : proof that participation does have a place in affecting policy and practice and that partnership with communities can promote positive change.

FIGURE 4 : WORKBOOK IN PROGRESS

Conclusion

In this paper we have sought to demonstrate that new forms of participatory process are required in order for the, hitherto unrecognized yet important, voices of underrepresented groups in society to be heard and valued within professional agencies who influence the form and content of places they use. We have suggested that such processes have far greater potential than to simply provide an effective means whereby professional agencies can access the experiences of user groups, important though this is as an end in itself. Our research has shown that achieving empowerment can depend as much on the participatory process itself as on what it delivers to the decision makers. By recognizing that participation in actions seen to be making a valued contribution to an issue of shared concern within a mutually supporting community can raise levels of self-esteem and community cohesion, we assert that there are significant social as well as informational outcomes from participation. We believe that the former needs to be better understood and more explicitly incorporated into participatory processes used in environmental planning and design arenas, and that the potential this has for developing local social capital through inclusivity much more widely recognized as a desirable outcome in itself. Through conducting this research we hope to have been able to demonstrate that aspects of the disciplines of disability studies, participatory practices, and urban design theory can be mutually and beneficially informative and that this may help inform better urban place making for the benefit of all in society.

One of the driving forces of this project was to achieve positive change in the lives of the participants, but in ways that gave the opportunity for them to experience being actively participant rather than merely a recipient of change. The seven stages of the Experiemic Process places control over what is investigated, how it is done and finally how findings are represented and communicated firmly in the hands of those who have first-hand experience. It achieves this by stripping away the polarization of “expert” and “lay” participants, a familiar characteristic of many participatory methodologies, recognizing instead that all participants are differently expert, either by virtue of special training or by virtue of routine daily experience (Figure 5). Presently, most approaches to decision-making that affects the environments people routinely use are delivered in a top-down manner, in which professional agencies determine process and make master plans for implementation. Even in the more enlightened of these processes where public participation is sought and valued, this remains firmly a part of top-down decision making as local experience is usually extracted from the context and recast as problems requiring professional solution.

FIGURE 5 : PRESENTING FINDINGS AT THE PEOPLES’ PARLIAMENT, SHEFFIELD TOWN HALL

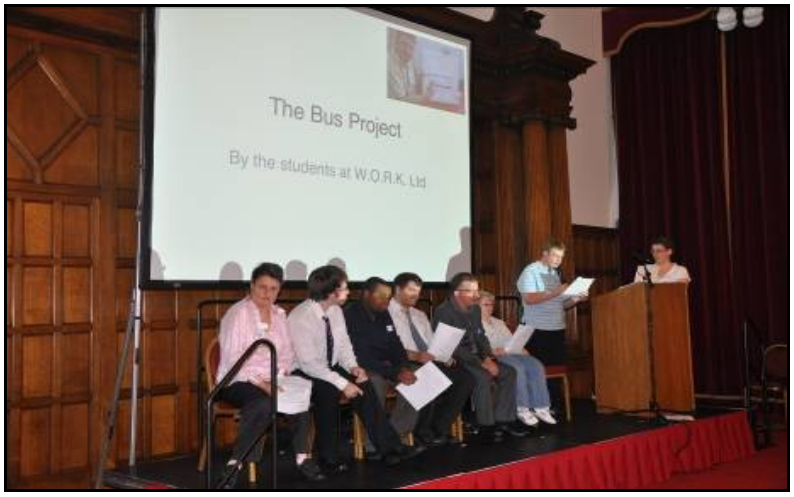

FIGURE 6 : INTERVIEWING BUS SERVICE PROVIDERS

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