

# Making Sense of Tenant's Learning: Reflecting on tenant participation within housing communities

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***Abstract:** Due to intrinsic challenges in measuring subtle learning that are attributed to participation, there has been less interest in conducting empirical studies on the individual-level effects of participation. This qualitative study explores the informal learning of citizenry through political participation in the context of Toronto Community Housing; it intends to narrow the gap between theoretical hypotheses and the perceived reality of educative effects of participation. This study also sheds light on our understanding of the shift in values, roles and responsibilities of public servants calling for community participation and how such participatory mechanisms contribute to active learning of citizens.*

## Introduction

It is over two decades now that there has been an overwhelming attention to the idea of active participation of communities and individuals in the development of policies and programs that affect their lives and livelihoods. There have been normative and theoretical arguments demonstrating policy efficiency and effectiveness that result from more engaged citizenry within stronger forms of democracy (Fung & Wright, 2003). In addition to policy outcomes, there has also been a view that upholds participation as a social instrument to build democratic capacities amongst citizenry (Abers, 2000; Barber, 1984; Mansbridge, 1999; Pateman, 1999; Santos, 2007; Schugurensky, 2004). The core argument is that people's current involvement in politics is too narrowly defined to produce significant educative effects and that deeper political participation is an effective tool for fostering democratic learning within our societies (Barber, 1984; Fung & Wright, 2003; Schugurensky, 2004).

The literature mostly provides theoretical analysis supported by quantitative studies of voting patterns, volunteer engagement and organizational membership (Campbell, 2006). A survey of the literature highlights a gap between theoretical hypotheses and perceived reality of pedagogical effects of participation. Due to intrinsic challenges in measuring subtle learning and psychological effects that are attributed to participation, there has been less interest in conducting empirical studies on

the educative effects of political participation on citizenry (Lerner & Schugurensky, 2005; Mansbridge, 1999; Pinnington & Schugurensky, 2010). This paper is a short report of a research, which examined individual-level effects of participation as experienced and expressed by tenants in a city-wide participatory social housing governance in Toronto. This is done through a qualitative approach: over one hundred hours of observation of the work of Community Housing Councils (CHUs) and in-depth interviews with over 35 tenant representatives, staff and managers.

## Research Context

The Tenant Participation System (TPS) of the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) is a state-sponsored practice of participatory social housing governance in Toronto. The TPS works in the following way. Within each Community Housing Unit (CHU), the manager develops local business plans and allocates resources in partnership with the tenant council, also known as the "CHU council". Each CHU council develops an accountability framework so that tenants can keep the TCHC accountable on decisions made and issues that need to be addressed. Within the framework of the TPS, tenant representatives are also involved in budget allocation at both the CHU and city-wide levels. At the CHU level, through their input into the CHU business plans, tenant representatives have the opportunity to influence funding priorities, and at an annual city-wide participatory budgeting exercise, tenant representatives allocate scarce capital dollars in areas with the highest impact on tenants' lives (TCHC, 2006). In short, the TPS enables a collaborative governance structure in which tenant representatives work with each other and with management. The potential that a participatory process such as this has to encourage learning and development of new skills, attitudes and knowledge provides the basis for this paper.

## Conceptual Framework

Citizenship in the participatory mode, or as a membership in political community, is "mindful of

the extent to which citizens take it upon themselves to participate in civic and political life” (Mettre, 2002, p. 362);<sup>1</sup> and it is promoted through allowing citizens’ voices in crafting policies and programs that affect their lives (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2002; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2003; Fung & Wright, 2003). Rousseau, in his classic work *The Social Contract*, argues that the very qualities that are required of individuals for governance to work successfully are those that the process of participation itself develops and fosters (Rousseau, 1762/1968). This work emphasizes the fact that there is an interrelationship between the working of institutions and the psychological qualities and attitudes of individuals interacting with them (Pateman, 1970/1999). Building on Rousseau’s argument, Pateman suggests that large housing developments are good sites to provide an opportunity for residents to participate in decision-making and “the psychological effects of such participation might prove extremely valuable in this context” (p. 109). Here, the learning associated with participation is categorized as informal for it occurs outside of any formal and institutionalized curriculum.

The term “informal learning” projects itself vividly and there seems to be a consensus among scholars on the general definition of the term. Livingstone (2002, p.3) defines the concept vis-à-vis other related learning paradigms: “formal education denotes full-time school programs; non-formal education refers to classroom-based courses; informal learning refers to all other deliberate forms of self-directed or collective learning.” Foley (1999: p.2) distinguishes incidental learning from informal learning, arguing that incidental learning occurs through people’s engagement in social action at work and in their lives, while informal learning occurs as “people teach and learn from each other”. Schugurensky (2000) views informal learning as a kind of learning that occurs “outside the curricula of educational institutions and not [necessarily] outside educational institutions, because informal learning can also take place inside formal and non-formal educational institutions.” In other words, informal learning, Schugurensky argues, is not associated with any “educational institutions, institutionally authorized instructors or prescribed curricula,” and, as such, informal learning may occur within institutions, but independent from planned

curricula. Schugurensky also draws a distinction between informal and incidental learning, he incorporates incidental learning as a category, defining it as learning that occurs when the learner has no prior intention to learn and would only become conscious of his/her learning through reflection following the experience.

Accordingly, the learning of tenants, presented in the following section, is therefore categorized as informal for it took place outside of the curricula of any educational institutions and is distinguished from non-formal learning acquired through TCHC-sponsored workshops and forums. In this context informal learning has been intentional, sometimes, self-directed, and/or incidental, recognized through tenant’s reflections prior to or at the time of interviews.

### Tenants’ Informal Learning

In broad terms, the TPS provides tenant representatives with opportunities to exercise leadership within their housing communities; and the assumption is that they significantly yet informally learn through these opportunities. Due to its procedural, intertwined and multi-layered nature, tenants’ informal learning cannot be convincingly catalogued in distinct categories, nonetheless drawing from the instances, experiences, and consequences of the respondents’ informal learning the research findings suggest four categories. The first is knowledge about the political and organizational structure of social housing management and municipal governance. Second is learning that augments social, political, and civic skills of tenant representatives that help them to engage with and affect the community at large. Third is learning that enhances self-esteem and self-confidence encouraging tenants to pursue community change through political action. Fourth is learning that improves the practice of the TPS.

*Learning the political and organizational structure of social housing:* One major motivation for tenants to step forward as representatives of their communities, as they argued, is the potential for learning about the TCHC. And indeed they acknowledge that this position provides an opportunity for them to educate themselves and the community on the workings of TCHC, in hopes of securing more attention and resources for their communities. Being mindful of the need to learn how decisions are made and resources allocated, some respondents even describe that they pursue self-directed informal learning projects to figure out how best they could exercise their influence over TCHC,

<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the participatory mode, ‘citizenship’ has traditionally had a more limited usage, being defined as a legal status in which the State extends social, civil, and political guarantees upon citizens through law and public policy.

while others explained that they learn through post-reflections on their experiences within the TPS.

As a result of engaging in the TPS, the tenant representatives are become more aware of the major policies governing social housing in Toronto including how decisions are made and resources allocated at the macro level. As a result, they explain that they have been able to develop insights into how they could effectively impact the bureaucracy. One representative explains:

I learned what button to push to get something done... I learned how the system works, who you should get hold of to get something done.

Tenant representatives are also more aware of wider legal structures relevant to social housing in Toronto. As one tenant representative explains, she studied the relevant laws and by-laws: "I went from A to Z." She intends to advocate for residents in her building, those who face problems without receiving an appropriate response from the management.

Reflecting on her experience at one of the capital budget allocation meetings, a young newcomer tenant explains:

I learned a lot, actually, when I went through the capital fund meeting; I believe that was a great experience because it actually showed all the politics that was involved in these communities.

*Learning to engage with and affect the wider community:* This category of learning motivates change in tenant's civic behaviour. Within the TPS, tenant representatives are in constant communication with other tenants, other tenant representatives and TCHC staff and management. This, as tenant respondents describe, increases their connections with their neighbours and people from other CHUs, helping them develop a sense of belonging and community even beyond their own buildings. As one respondent explains:

I have made friendships not only in my own CHU but in all other... Honestly, I built a relationship with these other individuals and... [they became an] extended part of my family.

Another respondent highlights how this process has helped her develop a greater understanding of the problems and needs of people in their community and in other communities.

Something you think is so trivial to you is explosive to the other person... So it's a good experience. I see myself different in the way that I have gained more knowledge... I have seen a lot of different things in different perspectives.

From this and other stories, one can argue that TPS connects individuals within this diverse population and has a great potential to forge inter-ethnic friendships and co-operations.

*Learning Confidence:* Associated with increased knowledge and active involvement in the TCHC and the wider community is an increased sense of confidence and feeling that one can impact decisions that once seemed remote. Tenant representatives report how their experience with the TPS contributes to feeling more capable to impact political and management decisions within their CHU and even beyond the TCHC. A tenant representative from an underrepresented ethnic minority explains:

I never campaigned before. I've never gotten involved in politics [this experience] made me feel like I can do something... the participatory budget was a really good experience because we were able to fight for what we wanted but in a democratic way.

The younger respondents also mentioned that their participation has made them feel that they "mattered". A youth tenant representative feels fulfilled that her participation has motivated other youth to become active; this gives her "a good feeling motivating to continue." During the first months of her involvement with the council she was too shy to talk about her concerns. Gradually she realized that she should not "hold back" her ideas and concerns; she made it her priority that she was going to say what she had to say.

Another tenant representative said that what participation has taught her is that she would "never be intimidated by titles... people at any rank are still people." The importance of learning self-confidence should not be underestimated. It forms the cornerstone from which participants have the courage to learn how to affect the wider community as one respondent argues that participation has radically changed the way she used to complain:

Instead of passive and tedious nagging and begging that the management has to do this and that... TCHC has opened up for tenants to be part of the CHU management, so if you do not participate you should not complain, but if you do participate you could.

She notes that there are still challenges but, "we can now be part of the change we would like to see."

*Learning to enhance the quality of participatory management:* It is becoming evident that informal learning plays a significant role in shaping respondents' overall learning experiences. It is important to note that there

are immediate consequences to tenants' informal learning in regards to the functioning of the TPS and the behaviour of tenant representatives.

As tenant representatives continue to work with each other, they learn how to better interact and work as a council. Abers (2000) describing the transformation of participatory budget councils in Porto Alegre, Brazil, says that over time the meetings changed from chaotic events with people interrupting to more respectful and organized proceedings, as budget council members learned how to better facilitate meetings and participants gained deliberative skills. Learning that can improve the participatory process is also noted within the TPS as well. Nineteen out of the twenty tenant respondents emphasized that they have learned a great deal of political and civic skills. As participants explain, they have been learning how to better resolve conflicts, chair council meetings, organize group work and make collective decisions. One representative describes his experience chairing CHU council meetings:

...I remember one of the things I learned was how to chair the meeting and so I did it; I listened to everybody's business... like a judge... set the stage...read the minutes, confirm them... made notes...I balanced it out... you got to wait for everybody gets a chance...if you do not balance it you [are] going to choke...you got to be fair so everybody can put what they want to put in...you cannot get hot-headed... you can't be for one side you have to be for everybody...

Another respondent mentions how her council has become more accepting of each other and tolerant to conflicts and differences. Staff has also noticed attitudinal changes; CHU managers speak of changes in tenant representatives' behaviour as they gain experience and confidence in their new roles:

I have observed changes; some have started initiatives on their own... Some have started their safety committee. I helped with the [X] association and then it led to other initiatives. As they get involved they get initiatives on their own which is very good.

Tenant rep[resentative]s organized stuff. As they grow, it has been a help for the CHU and the council. As they understood how [the] budget works it helped. They also know how to apply pressure, how to negotiate.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study outlines some connections between tenants' activities and informal learning within a program where they practice active participation on is-

ues that affect their communities. Informal learning through the TPS emerged into several themes. Learning related to increased self-confidence and overcoming fear of authority helps transform the traditional tenant-management relationship into "be[ing] part of the change" tenants would like to see. An increased understanding of the needs within one's own community is connected to one's understanding of the needs of other CHUs, and an increased understanding of how change happens at each level. In addition, the skills learned through the participatory process also result in increased managerial efficiency – a self-looping process whereby the participatory project improves through time and through the very act of participation.

In this context, informal learning occurs both intentionally, as a result of conscious planning through informal paths; or tacitly, acknowledged through self-reflections on one's experiences. Based on the interviews and the observations, tenant representatives heavily rely on informal learning to enhance their effectiveness as advocates for their communities. One solid conclusion is that through rearranging governance structures, removing bureaucratic impediments to tenant participation, and providing deliberative public spaces for active engagement of tenants in this praxis of community planning, citizenship learning is integrated into the domain of social housing governance. In this format, learning is not designed but is designed for; and tenants while exercising and consolidating their rights reshape their subjective experience of what it means to be a citizen.

Lastly, it should be noted that one active element in shaping tenants' learning is the conduct of the staff. They are the hosts and conveners of the practice of participation; the curriculum is, at least partially, defined through the dynamic interactions between tenants and staff. The staff who used to be, and some still are, property managers and welfare bureaucrats are now playing a major role in developing collaborative relationships with tenants who used to be their formal clients and recipients of services for which they had no say. What becomes highly evident is that facilitating a tenant-driven community planning process requires a shift in the values, roles and responsibilities of conventional public servants. Rather than control by property managers and bureaucrats this calls for housing authorities to lead by stepping back and complementing managerial efficiency and formal accountability by instilling political sensitivity, responsiveness to community values, and social equity into the practice of social housing governance. Understanding the dynamism

between the staff and tenants' agency and how their relationships and interactions constitute and characterize the spaces of participation is extremely beneficial to community planners and adult educators inter-

ested in exploring how such collaborations are forged and how participatory processes contribute to active learning of tenants.

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