

ARE SELF-ORGANIZED COMMUNITIES A LEARNING SITE? (A case study of informal learning and social action in Maribor, Slovenia)

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Abstract

Article deals with participatory democracy as an informal experience-based learning process in communities. It investigates the mutual community learning that takes place through collaborative public action and elaborates the insights into the processes of social learning in self-organized district communities' assemblies in the second largest Slovenian city, Maribor.

Research, conducted in 2015 and 2016, is based on observations of democratic participatory practices in different communities, 12 interviews with participants of self-organized community assemblies and a focus group with self-organized community assemblies' member. Following the Schugurensky's research (2013), where he developed methodology for informal learning that occur in the public deliberation and community direct decision-making process, in our research we tried to reveal participant's personal biography on civic and political engagement and reasons to join self-organized communities, participant's positive and negative experiences with it and democratic and political learning. The 'learning outcomes' were measured through a series of indicators considering knowledge, values, skills and practices and by 5-point Likert scale. Comparison with related scientific work, especially with Schugurensky pioneer study on informal learning through participatory budgeting by assemblies in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay (Schugurensky 2013; 2001; 2000; Schugurensky & Pinnington 2010), is made. Results show a strong emphasis on the collective nature of learning, the production of knowledge from below and 'learning democracy by doing it'. Self-organized community assemblies create epistemic communities where new knowledge is produced, shared and communicated, and where several social learning strategies are generated.

Key words: participatory democracy, informal learning, collective learning, empowerment, self-organized community.

INTRODUCTION

The central issue of this article is a case study of the pedagogical dimensions of the participatory democracy that was developed by self-organized district community assemblies in Maribor, the second largest city in Slovenia, in the beginning of 2013. Participatory democracy refers to the autonomous, local involvement of people in decisions that affect their lives (Held, 2006), to a 'living democracy' experiment (Fung & Wright, 2003) and to participatory budgeting (PB) as an institutional invention of redistributive democracy, a system of co-governance in which self-organized citizens and engaged civic society exert public control over the

municipality 'by means of institutionalized forms of cooperation and conflict' (de Sousa Santos, 2005, p. 308). Sintomer et al. (2014, p. 29) proposed five minimal requisites to differentiate PB from other participatory practices: the financial dimension has to be discussed; the city level has to be involved; the process has to be repeated; there has to be some form of public deliberation; and some accountability is required. All five criteria, along with many others that have been proposed by other scholars (the empowerment of civil society; extensive social and mutual learning combined with civic and political education (Pateman, 1988; Bista & Cowell 2012; Biesta, 2014; Wildemeersch, 2014); thematic workgroups (Wilhelmson, 2002); social actions addressed to local and national government; know-how, assignments and role rotation (Hall, 2012; Lave, 2009) were met in the case of Maribor.

Our case study is based on the pioneering work of Schugurensky (2002; 2004; 2006a; 2006b; 2010; 2013) and his colleagues (Cohen, Schugurensky, & Wiek, 2015; Lerner & Schugurensky, 2007; Schugurensky, Mündle, & Duguid, 2006), who proved that participatory democracy not only contributes to the construction of more transparent, efficient, equitable and democratic ways of governing, but also that it provides a privileged learning site, because in addition to a variety of civic virtues such as solidarity, tolerance, openness, responsibility and respect, citizens also develop social, cultural and political capital, and thus the capacity for self-governance and for influencing political decisions (Schugurensky, 2010, p. 11).

The next section briefly explains the social and political background of Maribor and introduces the participatory process that emerged after the popular uprising in November 2012. The third section specifies the methodological approach and elucidates the application of Schugurensky's instrument of learning and change to the Slovenian context. The fourth section discusses the knowledge, skills, attitudes and practices gained by the active citizens in Maribor and reveals how the self-organized community assemblies created epistemic communities where new knowledge is produced, shared and communicated, and where several social learning strategies are generated through the process of learning and change. The last section highlights research that has dealt with informal community learning in participatory democracy process, summarizes main findings of our case study and anticipates our further writings.

BACKGROUND OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT IN MARIBOR

The result of the global financial crisis and economic downturn in 2008 was socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor. It was in fact 'the privatization of gain and the socialization of loss' (Stiglitz, 2010), forcing citizens to shoulder the debt through economic austerity measures that had different implications in different continents. These circumstances combined with local specifics sparked protests and riots throughout Europe, including Maribor in Slovenia. In this context Maribor, a city of 100,000 people located near the Austrian border, and Slovenia's second largest, woke up in the nightmare of the crisis and austerity policy, and almost fifteen per cent of its citizens went on the streets shouting 'Gotof je!' (He is done!), uncompromisingly demanding the prompt resignation of the corrupt mayor and the city council in November 2012.

Maribor became one of the important transit, cultural and industrial centres of socialistic Yugoslavia soon after the Second World War and was renowned for having an excellent multicultural workforce from the federal republics and leading metal, electro, textile, bus and truck factories. In 1988 workers in the TAM bus and truck factory first drew attention to the failure of socialistic industrialisation, when heavy industry collapsed, unemployment

skyrocketed and the impoverished population soon faced a difficult period of neoliberal plundering, corruption, and clientelism, which has remained until the present day. Twenty-five years after the impressive protests of TAM workers that gained solidarity throughout Yugoslavia, new social unrest in Maribor, including huge protests, riots, marches and social movement organisations, again inspired solidarity protests all over Slovenia and led to the resignation of the mayor of Maribor on December 6, 2012 and the prime minister of the national government on March 20, 2013.

In Maribor two to three hundred activists gathered every evening at the end of 2012, discussed the heated situation and considered the social change in Porto Alegre, Brazil and elsewhere (Zapatistas movement in Mexico and many other counter-hegemonic struggles in Latin America, co-governance in the Spanish city Marinaleda, PB in the French city Grenoble, e-PB in Reykjavik in Iceland, etc.). Concerned that a huge social mobilization would end in disappointment and no real change, and already facing disagreement in priorities and goals between each other, they established the City-wide Assembly Initiative (CAI). CAI pursued a twofold goal: to make the 'content' of the protests visible, articulated and authentic instead of escalating the physical confrontation with the police on the streets and later impose some form of co-governance or participatory democracy experiment (not knowing at that time which practice would be best for Maribor nor how to implement it). CAI led demonstrations, occupations and sits-in in the municipality, and immediately after the resignation of the mayor and even before the new election introduced PB practices. The PB discussion flooded the election campaign and public discourse.

Our case study investigated two interrelated groups of active citizens: the initiators of the PB in Maribor, the so-called moderators working under the CAI and assembly members at the Self-organized Districts and Self-organized Local Communities (SDC and SLC). SDCs and SLCs were organized in 11 out of 17 districts and local communities in Maribor and thus included slightly more than half of the citizens of Maribor during our research. CAI mostly consisted of 30 young people aged between 23 and 40 who were students, working class activists and NGO members with extensive experience in direct democracy practices and a wide range of civic engagement in the last decade, while SDC and SLC assembly members consisted mostly of retirees aged between 55 and 83 from middle and working class origins who had fully experienced the socialist period. Although a small number of people under 30 years also attended assembly meetings, the age group between 30 and 50 years was strongly underrepresented. SDC and SLC consisted of 10-80 assembly members, but the number varied depending on the problems and open issues in each community. Males prevailed in some SDCs and SLCs while gender polarisation in CAI was balanced. The interrelation of both groups soon proved fundamental for the dynamic of the whole process. In addition to highlighting the importance, need and effect of intergenerational cooperation, it also indicated achievements that would not have been realized without intergenerational solidarity.

METHODOLOGY AND SCHUGURENSKY'S INSTRUMENT

The pedagogical dimensions of participatory democracy in Maribor were researched in four stages: militant research, passive observation of the process, a focus group and twelve semi-structured interviews. To explore the learning and change experienced by participating citizens, we adopted Schugurensky's instrument (2002; 2006a; 2013) where the learning outcomes are classified in four categories: a) knowledge, b) attitudes and values, c) skills and d) dispositions

and practices, or KASP in short form, with which the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of informal learning are covered. Since informal learning is not always conscious and intentional and occurs through lived experiences and group socialization, learning during PB experiences is also invisible and unconscious to most active citizens as well as researchers. Schugurensky (2006a; 2013) has overcome this methodological challenge through prompts that trigger conversation and elicit the tacit knowledge of active citizens. Eventually, 55 indicators were selected as a guide for complex qualitative research that includes an ethnographic and participatory approach based on stories and reflections of learning and change conveyed by the citizens. Schugurensky's instrument has been adopted and adjusted for the Slovenian context; indicators were elaborated from his previous studies and remodified to correspond to Slovenian political and social reality.

The first stage of our case study – militant research as perceived by Colectivo Situaciones (2003; 2005) – took place between January 2013 and May 2013 with CAI and the first five established SDCs since the first author of this article has been an active member of CAI since the beginning. The second stage, passive observation and follow-up of the process, has been carried out by the first author of this article until the present time. Although she moved from Maribor, she discussed the process with all key moderators and visited them numerous times. In addition, she followed up the whole process on a daily basis via an internal CAI e-moderator group, where she observed the successes and difficulties that emerged during the process. In this way she became a passive observer. She did not suggest or comment on anything or interfere in any way since she was no longer an active member of CAI. The third stage of our case study was a focus group in the first established SDC of Nova vas conducted on 7 January 2016 (with 12 assembly members). The concise discussion lasted one hour and contributed fruitful self-reflection on the pedagogical dimensions of participatory democracy; however, it also raised a number of questions concerning other fields (policy, participation, media, etc.).

The last and the main stage of our case study was consisted of twelve semi-structured interviews conducted between December 2015 and March 2016 with 6 moderators and 6 assembly members (6 males and 6 females, of which 6 were retired, 4 were employed, one was a student and one was unemployed), ranging in age from 25 to 83. The interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours and were organized in five parts. The first part consisted of 14 open-ended questions about the participants' prior history of civic engagement, their lifelong civic learning and reasons for joining participatory democracy practice. The second part consisted of 5 open-ended questions on the strengths and weaknesses, the empowerment and shortcomings arising in their personal life as a result of the participatory democracy process. The interviewees were asked and encouraged to give examples, to describe a concrete event or situation and to share their personal stories about their engagement in participatory democracy in this and the next two parts of the interview.

In the third part they were asked to list what they gained throughout the process according to the four KASP categories of learning defined by Schugurensky (2002; 2006a; 2013). For each stated indicator the interviewees were asked to rate it on a 5-point Likert scale: if their KASP improved or positively changed, they could choose 4 (better) or 5 (much better), but when there was a negative change, they could choose 2 (worse) or 1 (much worse). The number 3 marked the KASP position before they entered participatory democracy practices. In the fourth part the interviewees were asked to rate 70 counted indicators on the same 5-point Likert scale. The indicators were based on previous observations, Schugurensky's research and knowledge about the specific municipality and local/national context. Although we assumed that most

indicators would overlap with the third part (and in fact they did), we tried to 'capture' all relevant indicators that the interviewees might unconsciously not list or simply forget. The last part concluded the interview with three open questions on community learning, intergenerational learning and related quality of life.

RESEARCH FINDINGS REGARDING LEARNING AND CHANGE

Through the first two parts of the interview most of the CAI interviewees listed an extensive range of local civic engagement practices that they had experienced prior to being involved in the PB process. Half of them had also had important work experience in nongovernmental organizations. Libertarian horizontal practices by definition call into question old habits and beliefs, and raise new options for participation and action. They are prime sites for critical learning or 'conscientisation' in Freirean terms and provide many opportunities for learning active citizenship. In addition, prior to being involved in the PB process CAI interviewees reported active learning on very different issues (foreign language courses, learning bureaucratic skills, studying emancipatory theories and practices, etc.), while SDC and SLC assembly members reported a diverse and broad knowledge of self-management, which they had experienced in the socialistic period. In a sense it was a social learning process in communities of practice, as perceived by Lave (1991), exercised in work and neighbourhood environment in 1970s and 1980s, and in humanitarian and voluntary work, etc.; they also reported social alienation and apathy after the change of the regime and the state in 1991.

In our case study the interviewees reported that they had experienced significant learning and change from their involvement in participatory democracy. As indicated in Schugurensky's studies (2002; 2006a; 2013), our interviewees' attitudes, values, feelings, and dispositions also changed noticeably in a variety of areas. The average of all self-reported changes for 70 indicators was exactly 1, wherein the maximum average increase could be 2 and the minimum 0.01. The average is high despite the fact that two indicators were evaluated extremely negatively (trust in politicians (-0.83) and trust in the municipality government (-1.17)), what proved to be symptomatic for most of PB experiments in the first few years (see de Sousa Santos, 2005; Sintomer et al., 2014; etc.).

Table 1 identifies the 30 highest ranked indicators in our research with a reported value change higher than 1. The numeric change in the table summarizes only the average value increase for each indicator, and not the quality of the change, which means that one interviewee might substantially improve an already good knowledge on a specific topic while another reveal a new area or specific issue during the PB process. In addition, the numeric changes reflect the self-assessment and self-perception of the interviewees. To avoid the above-stated limitations, the following interpretation of the research findings combines all four stages of our case study, focused on personal stories and learning situations and change observed through interviews; however, due to space constraints, the results connected to the proposed indicators are highlighted.

The most significant learning occurred in the area of knowledge, as presented in Table 1, and most of the changes occurred in the area of skills. Although practices was the least frequently cited area of KASP, it appeared that the interviewees most often exercised it and that most of the changes in the city were gained through new political actions, cooperation and mutual exchange.

Table 1. Indicators of learning and change (>1) ranked by average increase

<i>KASP</i>	<i>Indicators of learning and change</i>	<i>Ave. increase</i>
K	knowledge of management and work of public enterprises	1.66
K	understanding of needs of own community or group	1.58
K	understanding of needs of other communities	1.58
K	knowledge of discussion necessary for consensus building	1.50
K	knowledge of 'active' listening on the assemblies	1.50
S	ability to make collective decisions	1.50
S	ability to engage in teamwork and cooperation	1.50
A	appreciate citizens participation more than before	1.50
A	feeling of being heard	1.50
S	ability to rank and prioritize demands	1.45
S	ability to achieve consensus	1.42
S	ability to listen carefully to others	1.42
P	writes public letters, petitions, argument problems for media	1.42
P	proposes ideas/solutions for community problems	1.42
S	ability to resolve conflicts	1.36
A	confidence in capacity to influence political decisions	1.33
A	accepts and tolerates conflict	1.27
S	ability for intergenerational exchange	1.25
S	ability to speak in public with clarity	1.25
S	ability to build an argument, argue, persuade	1.25
A	concern for the problems of the city	1.25
A	double number of friends	1.25
P	strengthen intergenerational cooperation	1.25
K	knowledge of criteria/mechanisms used to allocate public funds	1.17
S	ability to monitor and keep track of actions of city government	1.08
S	ability to contact government agencies and officials	1.08
S	ability to negotiate, bargain, build alliances	1.08
A	now happier than before	1.08
A	tolerance and respect for others	1.08
K	knowledge of municipal politics and local affairs	1.02

Our interviewees stressed that involvement in participatory democracy has strongly influenced their personal values and attitudes; many have not only doubled their number of friends and 'significantly expanded their social environment' but have found 'a new family', a new social community, and 'a new meaning in life', and they have become happier, more self-confident and more tolerant. In addition to all just mentioned attitudes and those presented in Table 1, the interviewees reported a greater concern for the problems of the neighbourhood, stressed higher interest in community participation, expressed greater responsibility for the preservation of the city and enhanced respect for some (groups of) people, especially for the younger and older members of the community, Roma people, migrants, refugees and gay and lesbian groups.

Knowledge of the management, obligations and work of public enterprises, a deeper understanding of the needs of their own community and other communities, knowledge of constructive discussion necessary for consensus reaching and knowledge of 'active' listening were the most significant changes in the area of knowledge. Besides knowledge about public funds and municipal politics, interviewees deepened their knowledge of city government, jurisdictional responsibilities, citizens' rights and duties, etc. As observed by one of the interviewees, CAI became 'a great civilizational factor in the city. It is a school of democracy for everyday use'. Moderators indeed took over the role of educating assembly members about the rules and methods for assembly meetings, principles of direct action, tools of non-violent communication, about specific topics concerning social transformation, communicated and disseminated achievements and finally, linked SDC and SLC with local, national and

international professionals, related groups and practices. This process combines diverse forms of informal learning, including situational and social learning (Wenger 1998; 1999; Pateman, 1988), learning-by-struggling and learning-in-struggle, characterized by counter-hegemonic movements (Gregorčič, 2011), community learning (Longo, 2007; Thompson, 2002), intergenerational learning (Schmidt-Herta, Jelenc Krašovec, & Formosa, 2014; etc.), emancipatory learning (Inglis, 1997), and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997; Illeris, 2014; Dirkx, 1998).

On the other hand, SDC and SLC assembly members' main activities became civic engagement, which had characteristics of situated learning in communities of practice (Lave, 1991). They developed heterogeneous forms of informal organizations (such as work groups, action groups, initiatives and roundtables) according to the problems and needs in the specific community and if necessary connected SDC and SLC representatives on common topics, issues and problems in a newly established council. Both groups consisted of active citizens that worked according to the principles of horizontality, inclusion of diversity, non-discrimination, consensus decision-making, democracy and common interest. As observed by one of the interviewees: 'The meaning of power has changed. There is no more hierarchy and no more powerlessness. Everyone has discovered their personal strengths and a new structure is taking shape, a horizontal network structure.' Rather accidentally, the interaction between moderators and assembly members fostered the participatory democratic process as well as significantly contributed to learning outcomes.

Most of the interviewees were surprised by the findings that they learned more about public enterprises than about the municipality. Although liberalisation of the economy has happened slowly in Slovenia, the ruthless plundering perpetrated by managers of public administrations and enterprises has only recently been disclosed. In this regard the active citizens of Maribor started to discover corruption, theft, and clientelism and unplanned popularize civic engagement. Public funds allocation and knowledge about public enterprises became very important in the participatory process. Although in these particular cases most interviewees were not familiar with the issue before entering the democratic process, they became very self-confident and presented sophisticated arguments during public discussions and especially during negotiations and conflicts with city authorities and directors of public enterprises.

The political culture of community organizations in Maribor has changed tremendously since PB started there. Through the transformation from a culture of protest and confrontation to a culture of conflict and negotiation (de Sousa Santos, 2005, 335) interviewees gained many new skills, including cooperation, consensus building, 'careful listening', digital literacy and analytical skills. The ability to make a collective decision and to engage in teamwork and cooperation were the most valued changes identified by the interviewees. The interviewees also developed the ability to organize group work, develop and defend proposals and projects, interpret official documents and seek out relevant social and political information, as well as social skills and leadership skills. The ability to rank and prioritize demands proved to be one of the most frequently gained new skills in the PB process in Schugurensky's studies. Among the 12 most ranked skills in Table 1, consensus building and intergenerational cooperation and exchange deserve special attention, so we plan to explore these skills in more detail in another article.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Since first emerging in 1989 in Porto Alegre, Brazil PB significantly redistributed wealth towards the poor, increased transparency, improved quality of life, and reduced crime and corruption (de Sousa Santos, 2005; Goldfrank, 2011; Abers, 2000; Baiocchi, 2005; Schugurensky, 2013). Although PB in Porto Alegre initially arose as an innovative, popular and revolutionary response to economic crisis, corruption, and clientelism, and as a 'bottom-up process' for social and political change, it eventually spread to other cities around the world with new intentions and goals. PB projects were mostly implemented and incentivised with the aid and recommendations of the World Bank, United Nations, OECD, UNESCO, USAID, and European Union (URB-AL) as a 'top-down process' and 'neo-colonial approach' through the rhetoric of 'inclusive democracy', 'active citizenship', 'modernisation and accountability of public sector', etc., to advance and strengthen a neoliberal agenda, privatization, liberalization, deregulation, reducing the role of the state, and rather weaken and fragment than enforce civic engagement and empowerment (for these arguments see Cammack, 2004; Jackson, 2005; Rückert, 2007; Masser, 2013).

In many such cases PB simply became an instrument to help national governments or cities 'to legitimize old (or new) consultation practices that give citizens no power to decide spending' (Lerner, 2011, p. 31) or simply an e-voting instrument with no group or face-to-face cooperation, self-organization or collective civic engagement. This is exemplified by Eastern Europe, where very few cities have seen considerable improvement in social justice through PB projects (Sintomer et al., 2014, p. 35). Unlike World Bank's founded PB projects in Albania and Bosnia, which are subjects of above stated criticism, the cases of short-term pilot projects (such as in Pula, Mali Lošinj and Karlovac in Croatia), or national projects as it is the case of Estonia, there are encouraging examples from Poland, where the initial PB programs of public-private partnership has been transformed into more participatory process.

Although changes in Maribor were unplanned and occurred in different contexts and in places with specific backgrounds, with no funds or external interference, the results have been remarkable. Maribor is becoming a rare city in Eastern Europe with an intensive bottom-up decision-making process, strong and articulated self-organized community pressure groups and a goal for wider social and political change. Unfortunately, this has come with constant difficulties with city authorities, where 'institutionalized forms of cooperation and conflict' (de Sousa Santos, 2005) already demonstrated the extent and tirelessness of 'techno-bureaucratic culture' (de Sousa Santos, 2005). CAI became an attractive experiment for Slovenian municipalities, and even more so for many European social struggles, such as the campaigning of 'the Ministry of Space collective', resisting Savamala in Belgrade, and other cultural and political initiatives in different EU countries in 2016. Some well-established grassroots PBs, such as Lisbon, are particularly interested in CAI's effective moderation and consensus building techniques, which have proved to encourage constructive, inclusive, nonviolent and fruitful public discussions in different contexts.

Since PB is a very dynamic social and political process, many national and international organizations are more interested in its technical virtues (efficiency and effectiveness in resource distribution and utilization) than in its democratic virtues (sustainability of a complex system of participation and distributive justice) (de Sousa Santos, 2005, p. 357). In addition, the learning virtues of PB have largely been ignored, with the exception of the already presented pioneering work of Schugurensky. Our case study revealed that in fact the pedagogical dimensions of PB on

the individual and collective level mark the main change or shift that occurred in the PB experiment, where the learning outcomes of the PB process influenced personal and group development and quality of life much more than the actual outcome of PB. Some authors pursue this idea within the discussions on revolutionary citizenship as pedagogy of resistance (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2001; Pontual, 2014); education and empowerment (Salgado, 2015; Koga, 2007; McLaren, 2000), pedagogical dimensions of counter hegemonic movements (Borg, Buttigieg, & Mayo, 2002; Holloway, 2001; Gregorčič, 2011), 'educational effect' of participatory democracy practice (Pateman, 1988; Schugurensky, 2010; Lerner & Schugurensky 2007; Wildemersch, 2012, etc.).

Although Schugurensky's instrument for eliciting informal, community and social learning and tacit knowledge is not the only methodological approach to capture self-reflection on informal learning and, as author himself has pointed out, has some limitations (Schugurensky, 2006a; 2006b), we identified its advantages before doing the research and confirmed them when the research was completed, as the analysis of learning outcomes proved that much more is gained from the semi-structured interview guide with proposed and ranked indicators than from the open-ended questions on informal learning and the codification method. Our case study confirmed, like Schugurensky's studies (Lerner & Schugurensky, 2007; Schugurensky, 2013; etc.), that interviewees acquired instrumental and technical knowledge about politics and citizenship, developed analytical, leadership and deliberative skills, and, even more importantly, that they have translated the new understanding, abilities and dispositions into new emancipatory practices, social struggles, solidarity actions and libertarian behaviours. They have developed emancipatory learning that includes not only understanding existing power structures but also how to resist and challenge these structures and their underlying ideologies (Inglis, 1997).

The results of our case study showed remarkable changes among our interviewees in the broad-based area of KASP due to the variety of new informal learning practices that emerged among the self-organized and active citizens of Maribor. As many scholars have argued, the most effective learning is embedded in action, and above all in group action (Foley, 1998; Wildemeersch, 2012; Wilhelmson, 2002). Schugurensky's findings confirmed that participatory democracy provides a powerful learning experience in a wide variety of fields, and revealed not only what citizens learned but also how they learned. In this regard, we intend to reveal an extensive analysis of the results as well as an in-depth interpretation of specific aspects of learning in future articles.

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