

LEARNING CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRACY THROUGH PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING: THE CASE OF ROSARIO, ARGENTINA

Josh Lerner (New School for Social Research)

Daniel Schugurensky (University of Toronto)

Paper presented at the conference [Democratic Practices as Learning Opportunities](#), Teachers College, Columbia University, November 4-5, 2005

“It convinced me to go back to get my high school degree, to learn what I didn’t know.” (Beatriz)

“I learned that there are all sorts of neighborhoods, with very different needs.” (Carlos)

“I learned to leave my house once again. I became more sociable, more open to other people.” (Julio)

“I began to communicate more openly with my husband and family, to stand up for myself more.” (Liliana)

The learning and changes experienced by these women and men are not the result of self-help books, counseling, or formal schooling. Rather, they came about through involvement in participatory budgeting, an innovative democratic process that is practiced in hundreds of cities in Latin America and elsewhere. In 1970, Carole Pateman suggested that the justification of such participatory democratic processes rests largely on their educative effects, but these effects remain largely unknown. Twenty-five years later, Jane Mansbridge asked, ‘Does participation make better citizens?’ and responded that we do not have enough empirical research to answer the question. Since then, research of citizen participation has increased, but we still know few details about what participants learn and how this might make them better citizens.

To better understand how participation can make more educated and better citizens, we are undertaking an international research project on the pedagogical dimension of participatory democracy. In several cities, we are examining changes in civic learning, political skills, and democratic dispositions experienced by ordinary citizens engaged in participatory local governance. The research focuses on participatory budgeting, an annual process of deliberation and decision-making in which city residents decide how to allocate a portion of the municipal budget. This paper uses the participatory budget in the Argentine city of Rosario as a case study, in order to develop broader conclusions about the theory and practice of citizenship education and participatory democracy.

In Rosario, we conducted in-depth interviews with 40 people involved in the participatory budget, to determine what and how they learned through participation. Our findings indicate that participatory budgeting is an informal educative space that provides powerful learning experiences in citizenship and democracy. Participants become more knowledgeable, skilled, democratic, engaged, and caring, which demonstrates that participatory budgeting serves as an innovative “school of citizenship.” Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to capacity-building strategies for democratic deliberation and decision-making, and to the development of a more democratic and educative political culture.

BACKGROUND

Prior studies in different contexts have found that the practice of democracy itself is a great source of learning, especially for the development of deliberative skills, democratic attitudes, and political efficacy (Pateman 1970, Berry et al. 1993, Regents 1999, Hahn 1997, Parker et al. 2000, Moll and Fischer 2000). Most of the literature, however, focuses on voting and formal educational institutions, such as schools, with little attention to citizenship learning acquired in informal settings. Moreover, although much of the research on adult learning documents the learning processes people engage in and the amount of time that they participate, very little research addresses the actual competencies gained from these learning

activities, or breaks learning down into discrete components (Merrifield 2002, Livingstone 2001, Heater 1999).

This paper addresses some of these research gaps through the case study of participatory budgeting in Rosario, selected because of Rosario's reputation for good governance and participatory budgeting's record in promoting local democratic participation. With over a million residents, Rosario is the third largest city in Argentina. Since 1989, the municipality has initiated many progressive and participatory programs in the areas of public health, solidarity economy, children's wellbeing, and decentralization – programs that led the United Nations Development Program to recognize Rosario as a model of good governance and local development. After the success of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and other Latin American cities, the municipality of Rosario initiated a participatory budget in 2002.

Rosario's participatory budget consists of an annual cycle in which over 4,000 city residents deliberate and decide how to allocate \$8 million of the municipal budget. The process begins with a round of neighborhood assemblies throughout the six city districts. At these assemblies, residents identify local needs and potential projects to address these needs, and elect budget delegates to represent them in their district's Participatory Council. During the following three to four months, each Council meets on a weekly basis to develop projects that respond to the identified community needs, in consultation with city staff. Outside of these official sessions, delegates often participate in tours of community projects and informal feedback meetings with neighborhood residents. Finally, the Councils present project proposals at a round of district assemblies, where community residents vote on which projects to approve. During the rest of the year, delegates are responsible for monitoring the implementation of approved projects.

METHODOLOGY

To explore the learning experienced through participatory budgeting, we observed 12 assemblies and meetings, and conducted one-on-one interviews with several staff coordinators and 40 elected budget delegates. The assemblies and interviews provided an understanding of the process and of the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions influencing participation. Most of the findings on learning and change emerged from the in-depth interviews with delegates. To protect participants' anonymity, we use fictional names in this paper.

The sample of delegates was balanced and representative in terms of gender, seniority, and district. Regarding gender, the participatory budget requires that anyone who votes at a budget assembly select one male and one female delegate to promote gender equality. Regarding seniority, delegates are generally not allowed to serve for more than two years, to democratize leadership. All interviewees had participated as delegates for at least a full year, half for at least one year and half for at least two years. Finally, we interviewed six or seven delegates from each of the city's six districts.

Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were organized in two parts. The first part consisted of open-ended questions about the delegates' history of civic engagement, their lifelong civic learning, their involvement in and opinions of participatory budgeting, and what they learned from this involvement. Because much of this learning is informal and results in tacit knowledge, participants usually had difficulty identifying what they learned. Thus, in the second part of the interview, we explored four categories of learning and change – *knowledge*, *skills*, *attitudes*, and *practices* – through 55 indicators that emerged from previous interviews in Toronto, Porto Alegre, and Montevideo. Participants were asked to indicate their level for each indicator (on a 1-5 scale) for two points in time: before getting involved in the participatory budget and at the time of the interview. When the interviewees reported a change, we asked them to explain how and why the change occurred, using examples or stories when possible.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS LEARNED

All interviewees reported experiencing some learning and change from their involvement in the participatory budget. The most significant learning occurred in the area of knowledge, but important changes were also observed in relation to many skills, attitudes, and practices. *On average, participants reported having moderate levels of citizenship knowledge, skills, attitudes, and practices before joining the participatory budget, and having high levels at the time of the interview.* The table below depicts the average amount of change for each of the 55 indicators, within a total range of 1 to 5.

Table 1: What Delegates Learned: Indicators of Learning & Change Ranked by Average Increase

Ave. Increase	Indicator of Learning and Change	Area
1.9	knows people from other neighborhoods and organizations	Knowledge
1.9	ability to monitor and keep track of actions of city government	Skill
1.7	knowledge of the city government (e.g. how things get done)	Knowledge
1.7	understanding of needs of other communities	Knowledge
1.7	feels that citizen participation in local government is important	Attitude
1.6	ability to contact government agencies and officials	Skill
1.6	monitors and keeps track of the public budget	Practice
1.6	monitors and keeps track of the quality of public works	Practice
1.5	knowledge of criteria/mechanisms used to allocate public funds	Knowledge
1.5	feels that she/he has potential to participate in city government	Attitude
1.4	understanding of needs of own community or group	Knowledge
1.4	personally knows elected politicians	Knowledge
1.4	ability to rank and prioritize demands	Skill
1.3	knowledge of municipal politics and local affairs	Knowledge
1.3	trust in the municipal government	Attitude
1.3	concern for the problems of the city	Attitude
1.3	thinks up ideas and solutions for community problems	Practice
1.3	attends community meetings	Practice
1.2	ability to develop and defend proposals and projects	Skill
1.2	talks with neighbors about problems in the area	Practice
1.2	participates actively in community meetings	Practice
1.2	confidence in capacity to influence political decisions	Attitude
1.2	concern for the problems of the neighborhood	Attitude
1.2	talks to city councilors and other elected politicians	Practice
1.1	ability to negotiate, bargain, build alliances	Skill
1.1	ability to make collective decisions	Skill
1.1	proposes ideas/solutions for community problems	Practice
1.1	respect for the time that processes require	Attitude
1.0	ability to speak in public with clarity	Skill
1.0	ability to understand and interpret official documents	Skill
1.0	seeks out information about political and social issues	Practice
1.0	interest in community participation	Attitude
1.0	feels connected to neighbors	Attitude
1.0	feels connected to community	Attitude
0.9	ability to build an argument, argue, persuade	Skill
0.9	ability to relate to neighbors (social skills)	Skill
0.9	ability to plan and organize meetings	Skill
0.9	knowledge of jurisdictional responsibilities (city, province...)	Knowledge

0.9	awareness of citizen rights and duties	Knowledge
0.9	self-confidence	Attitude
0.9	sense of responsibility for the preservation of the city	Attitude
0.8	ability to engage in teamwork and cooperation	Skill
0.8	ability to resolve conflicts	Skill
0.7	ability to listen carefully to others	Skill
0.7	tolerance and respect for others	Attitude
0.7	trust in politicians	Attitude
0.7	accepts and tolerates conflict	Attitude
0.6	ability to organize group work	Skill
0.6	ability to coordinate groups (leadership skills)	Skill
0.6	helps to keep the city clean and in good repair	Practice
0.5	concern for the common good	Attitude
0.4	willingness to help others (solidarity)	Attitude
0.3	participates in electoral campaigns	Practice
0.1	votes in municipal elections	Practice
0.0	votes in national elections	Practice

The numerical changes in this table summarize the extent of change, but they only reveal the contours of learning and are subject to four caveats. First, the table only reports average increases, but some delegates experienced large increases (from ‘very low’ to ‘very high’, or 1 to 5) while others experienced small increases. Second, similar increases are not homogeneous. For example, two participants may both increase by 2 for a given indicator, but one may increase from very low to medium (1 to 3) while the other may increase from medium to very high (3 to 5). The amount of increase is the same, but the situations are quite different. Third, the numbers reflect all the advantages and disadvantages of self-attribution – participants know more than anybody else the extent of their own learning and change, but their self-perceptions may also be distorted by a variety of factors. Fourth, the numerical information tells a very limited story without participants’ detailed explanations and personal stories. Due to space constraints, in this paper we only provide a glimpse of the many stories that participants told us.

Knowledge

Through their involvement in the participatory budget, delegates reported substantial increases in their knowledge of other people and communities, politics, and their citizen rights. The most significant changes were that delegates became more familiar with the needs of their own communities and of other communities, and got to know more elected politicians and people from other neighborhoods and groups. Liliana, for example, explained: “At first I heard other delegates say that they wanted more trees in their neighborhood, and I thought that was an important need. But then I was called to a meeting in another neighborhood, and when I got off the bus and walked out onto the street where the meeting was, I saw that there was no street, no grass, no sewer system, no nothing. I’d been in neighborhoods like that before, but it wasn’t until then that I realized that providing these basic services for neighborhoods like that was the real need.”

Participants also acquired a high amount of useful instrumental and technical knowledge about politics and government, especially regarding the inner workings of City Hall and the specific mechanisms and regulations used to allocate public funds. For instance, Silvia reported: “I learned the difference between fixed and discretionary funds, that 56% of the city budget is devoted to wages and another large percentage is set aside for fixed costs like the maintenance of health centers.”

Others became not only more aware of their citizen rights and duties, but also of ways to uphold those rights. As Ricardo noted: “I knew about my rights before, but through the participatory budget I learned

new ways to assert my rights, for example what government offices to contact and how to contact them if certain rights are violated.”

Skills

Among the most mentioned gains in skills were the development of new competencies to monitor governments’ actions, to contact government agencies and officials, to rank priorities, and to develop proposals for local projects. In addition to these instrumental skills, there were references to analytical skills like the ability to understand and interpret official documents, as well as the ability to ‘read’ political dynamics in the city.

Delegates also frequently noted newly gained social and leadership skills (groupwork, interacting with neighbors, coordinating teams, organizing meetings, etc.) and a variety of deliberative skills like listening, speaking in public, negotiating, persuading, making collective decisions, and reaching consensus.

For instance, Monica improved her public speaking by focusing on pronunciation: “Because it kept bothering me when people didn’t pronounce things right, I paid more attention to how I pronounced my words. I learned that what’s important isn’t how pretty the words are, but that people understand you.”

Alicia, in turn, became a more careful and respectful listener: “Before I would always interrupt, but now I say to myself ‘wait’ and let the other person speak. I know that if I disagree later I can say what I want then.”

Other participants, like Gabriela, commented that new conflict resolution skills were useful for addressing issues in different settings: “Now I feel more comfortable resolving problems in the participatory budget and in my personal life too. I can channel conflicts and respond to them better. I can identify what’s caused by conditions in the community and what is personal; this helps explain the roots of problems.”

Attitudes

Participants’ attitudes, values, feelings, and dispositions increased noticeably in a variety of areas. The most significant changes were in their confidence in their potential to influence political decisions, concern for city problems and the common good, care for public property and resources, valuing the importance of citizen participation in local government, respect for the pace of democratic processes, solidarity with marginalized groups, connection to neighbors and to the community, and interest in community participation.

Sometimes an increased confidence in making a difference made participants more willing to address city problems, even if they were not directly affected by them: “Before I thought: why should I care about some traffic light if I knew my thoughts wouldn’t count? Now, because I think my idea will be considered, I’m more motivated to pay attention to problems in the city and see what I can do about them. For example, now if I’m driving alongside a sidewalk in bad repair, I see the sidewalk as a problem to fix.” (Simona)

Several participants expressed a more caring attitude towards public property. As they learned that municipal resources originate mainly from citizens’ contributions, they became more inclined to preserve public infrastructure and reduce the waste of resources. Participants also reported a significant increase in their trust in the municipal government, but less of an increase in their trust in politicians in general.

Practices

As a result of their experiences in participatory budgeting, many delegates reported changes in their everyday activities and behaviors. A great majority reported doing new things that were not part of their

lives before, especially monitoring public budgets regularly, evaluating the quality of public works, attending community meetings, formulating ideas and proposing solutions for community problems, and seeking out information about political and social issues.

Most of these increases were attributed to more self-confident attitudes. Many delegates reported that after participating they became more proactive and assertive, diversified their activities, replaced confrontational or authoritarian behaviors with more democratic ones, exercised leadership, and incorporated more community-oriented actions into their routines:

“I like to paint. Before, I just painted in my house by myself. Now, I go out to take classes, I go to exhibits, and I try to get my paintings displayed. This changed during the participatory budget because when all of us were treated as equals, I learned to assert myself more.” (Silvia)

“Before the participatory budget, I sometimes organized roadblocks and trashed the streets in order to get attention to our cause. Now, when we have serious problems in the community we can usually go through the budget and avoid damaging or disrupting city streets.” (Jose)

The feelings of solidarity and mixing of classes that occur through participatory budgeting allowed people to adopt attitudes that were unthinkable before. As Silvia explained: “You get closer to people and then you can talk with them about whatever issue. I bring my son to play rugby at a sports club in a run-down neighborhood every Tuesday at 7:30. One night, after I dropped him off, I saw a family from the neighborhood walking along the side of the road with a baby and a bunch of bags. It was cold and windy out, so I stopped and asked them if they wanted a ride. They were extremely gracious and piled into the car, and I dropped them off close to where they needed to go. I never would’ve done this before the participatory budget, but now I feel more comfortable and open with different people.”

Interestingly, the behavior that changed the least was voting. This may not be surprising, however, considering that voting is mandatory in Argentina.

Beyond 55: Additional indicators of learning and change

Through these interviews we explored learning and change using 55 original indicators as a guide, but the Rosario delegates also suggested 29 new indicators. For instance, Ana reported gaining technical knowledge of urban planning, design, and engineering issues. Graciela learned about how municipal government and citizen participation work in other cities. Pedro mentioned that now he is able to “map public policies and politics, identifying where decisions are made and resources allocated.” Several delegates reported learning to place greater importance on youth and women’s participation, and one delegate came to value taxpayer money more. A few interviewees noted that after the participatory experience they are more likely to share information with others, and to read newspapers and magazines.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Confirming our previous findings in other cities, Rosario residents who regularly engaged in participatory budgeting experienced significant learning in a wide variety of fields. According to our data, the average delegate considered her or his citizenship knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be modest before getting involved, and high after at least a year of participation. Perhaps more importantly, they have translated those new understandings, abilities, and dispositions into new social practices and behaviors.

As a result of their experiences in participatory budgeting, delegates became more familiar with the needs of different communities, got to know new and different people, and acquired instrumental and technical knowledge about politics and citizenship. This knowledge can allow them to better represent their communities, develop political efficacy, establish networks and partnerships with other groups, and

develop solidarity with people that are worse off. Delegates also developed a variety of instrumental, analytical, leadership, and deliberative skills. Participation nurtured new attitudes, values, and dispositions, especially self-confidence, concern for the common good and public property, tolerance and patience, solidarity, feelings of belonging and connection, and interest in community participation. Finally, delegates changed their daily practices, increasing the level, range, and quality of their civic involvement by becoming more active in the community, diversifying their everyday activities, and adopting more democratic behaviors.

This overview of what participants learned only presents a surface image of the learning that occurs through participatory budgeting. The delegates' stories demonstrated in more detail not only what they learned but also *how* they learned. Their comments also revealed what types of people participate and why they participate. After analyzing the findings, we found that different groups of participants (according to gender, age, schooling, place of residence, and duration of participation) experience different amounts and types of learning. Together with the delegates, we also discovered new capacity-building techniques and pedagogical approaches that could make participation even more educating and transforming. Due to space limitations, we will report on these issues in another paper.

Returning to Mansbridge's question, our data suggests that participatory democracy indeed makes better citizens, if we consider more knowledgeable, skilled, democratic, engaged, and caring citizens to be better citizens. The findings confirm that participatory budgeting provides a powerful learning experience, and help us better understand what people learn through participation. Neighborhood and district assemblies, training and information sessions for budget delegates, regular work meetings of delegates and community members, consultations between delegates and city staff, and neighborhood tours all function as educative spaces. The extensive learning and changes expressed by the delegates who participated in these activities in Rosario not only validate participatory budgeting's status as a "school of citizenship," but also indicate what participants learn and how they change through this school. By further illuminating the learning dimension of participatory democracy, we hope that this study can promote and improve participatory democratic processes, raise new questions and debates about democratic and citizenship learning, and move us closer to a political culture based on democracy, solidarity, inclusion and social justice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berry, Jeffrey, Kent Portney, and Ken Thomson (1993). *The Rebirth of Urban Democracy*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

Hahn, Carole (1998). *Becoming political: Comparative perspectives on citizenship education*. State University of New York Press, Albany.

Heater, Derek (1999). *What is Citizenship?* Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Livingstone, D.W. (2003). "Hidden Dimensions of Work and Learning: The Significance of Unpaid Work and Informal Learning in Global Capitalism." WALL Working Paper No. 3, Centre for the Study of Education and Work, University of Toronto.

Mansbridge, Jane (1995). "Does Participation Make Better Citizens?" *The Good Society*, Vol.5, No.2, September.

Merrifield, Juliet (2002). "Learning citizenship." Institute of Development Studies. Working Paper 158. <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop/wp/wp158.pdf>

Moll, Jaqueline and Nilton Bueno Fischer (2000). "Pedagogias nos tempos do orçamento participativo em Porto Alegre: possíveis implicações educativas na ampliação da esfera pública." Unpublished manuscript.

Parker, W. et al (2000). "Making It Work: Implementing Multidimensional Citizenship," in Kogan and Derricot (eds.), *Citizenship for the 21st Century: An International Perspective on Education*. London: Kogan Kane.

Pateman, Carole (1970). *Participation & Democratic Theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Regents, Susana (1999). "Descentralización participativa: construyendo la utopía o el hijo no deseado?" in Jose Luis Rebellato and Pilar Ubilla (eds.). *Democracia, ciudadanía y poder*. Montevideo: Editorial Nordan Comunidad.