**Civic Maturity: Musings About a Metaphor**

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Stringer (1996, p. 17) describes iterated cycles of "look-act-think" as constituting action research. This paper should be seen as part of the third phase of one of those cycles. It functions as an invitation to think about issues rather than a report of victories achieved or lessons learned, consists of questions and commitments more than declarative propositions, and ends in fantasy and wonder.

I started thinking about the term "civic maturity" when participants in the Cupertino Community Project (Pearce & Pearce, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Spano, 2001) said, on several occasions, that the community was doing things that would not have been possible earlier. What had changed, I wondered, and just what was being done that was previously impossible? The pursuit of these questions led me to consider basic worldviews, concepts of democracy, types of "knowledge," and strategic choices about where to put one's efforts.

**About the Project**

The "Cupertino Community Project" is distinctive in that it focuses on the quality of public communication. In 1996, an inquiry into residents' perceptions of how issues were being dealt with discovered what one resident called a "powder keg, waiting to explode": the consequences of rapidly changing ethnic demographics in the city and concerns about community safety. Our goal was to create a "public dialogue" process in which the community could find ways of moving forward together about these issues. A first step was to help the community bring the topic into productive forms of communication; a second was to "normalize" these "better" patterns of communication so that they became the "default options" for sensitive and controversial issues.

In 1998, three controversial ethnically-inflected issues were hotly debated in the city. In October, the city sponsored a "Diversity Forum" (described in Spano, 2001, pp. 168-182) in which these issues were used as "case studies." Working together to identify what had been done

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well and could have been done better; the 100+ participants constructed a "Blueprint for Public Communication" (http://www.cupertino.org/update/cultural/forum.html) for handling difficult topics. The Blueprint was published in the local newspaper, presented to the City Council, and added to the city's website. At the conclusion of the Forum, the Mayor told me, "We could not have done this before." In October 2000, over 150 community leaders came together for a day and a half "Community Congress" that identified issues that the community would deal with during the next decade and explored the meaning of "community" in the 21st century. After this meeting, a community leader remarked on the difference between this and earlier meetings. She noted that the participants were diverse in age, gender, position, and ethnicity, and they were able to start working together immediately in dialogic communication. She recalled that a similar meeting in spring 1997 was not so diverse and had spent a full day just getting the group to the point where such conversations could take place.

## Meanings of Civic Maturity

The term "civic maturity" is a metaphor, of course, but none the worse for that. An internet search for "civic maturity" showed that the term is used primarily to describe a government that adheres to its own processes even when inconvenient to those in power. With few exceptions, the term was used negatively, as descriptions of what a particularly government lacked or should develop. A search for the more general term "maturity" found four clusters of usages: (a) *economic*: a mature bond pays no more interest, (b) *a euphemism for age*: references to *Modern Maturity* magazine, (c) *individual*: a mature person develops a certain set of characteristics, and (d) *software*: a mature program has certain characteristics.

### Individual Maturity

The Counseling Services of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (http://www.uwec.edu/admin/counsel/pubs/defnMaturity.html) says "The adult with a capacity for true maturity is one who has grown out of childhood experiences without losing childhood's best traits. He has retained the basic emotional strengths of infancy, the stubborn autonomy of 'toddlerhood', the capacity for wonder and pleasure and playfulness of the preschool years, the capacity for affiliation and intellectual curiosity of the school years, and the idealism and passion of adolescence. He has incorporated these into a new pattern of simplicity dominated by adult stability, wisdom, knowledge, sensitivity to other people, responsibility, strength, and purposefulness."

*Representative and Participatory Democracy*

Is it realistic to apply this definition of individual maturity to cities or nations? This question takes us to the "civic" side of the metaphor. The issue hinges on whether one aspires to representative or participatory democracy.

According to Spano (2001, p. 24), representative democracy is characterized by: (a) voting and competitive elections among predetermined choices; (b) a procedural system of checks and balances designed to control private interests; (c) solutions developed by government officials and technical experts; (d) the use of persuasion, debate, and advocacy to win consent; and (e) limited citizen involvement. Participatory democracy, on the other hand, is characterized by: (a) cooperative activities to determine what the choices are; (b) an inclusive system of opportunities for pursuing the public's interests and the common good; (c) solutions developed by citizens in collaboration with government and technical experts; (d) the use of dialogue, deliberation, and discussion to achieve an action-oriented consensus; and (e) active citizen involvement.

Many well-informed people deny the possibility of participatory democracy. For example, Mueller (1999, p. 16) declared it "hopeless" and said "the quest itself can inspire cynicism when citizens are continually asked by reformers to compare grim democratic realities with its idealized image." A more realistic view is that "democracy . . . works because it is characterized not by political equality, active participation by the citizenry, and something resembling majority rule and consensus, but by political inequality and substantial apathy–effectively, by minority rule and majority acquiescence" (p. 15). Mueller believes that democracy is "fundamentally sound—in harmony with human nature—in the sense that it does not routinely require much more from the human spirit than apathy, selfishness, common sense and arithmetic" (p. 163).

If we take Mueller's view, then "civic maturity" means something like what I found in my internet search: the willingness of those in power to submit to "the frantic and chaotic interweavings and contestings of isolated, self-serving, and often tiny special interest groups and their political and bureaucratic allies" (Mueller, 1999, p. 161). But even so, the "language-game" of democracy is still a contest to see who wins and who loses; the "civically mature" representative will, when bested, submit to the process in hopes of rising, like Richard Nixon perhaps, to win again. It generates what Tannen (1999) called "the argument culture."

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This is a very different language-game from the ideal of participatory democracy, in which the goal is for everyone to win and collaboration rather than competition is the primary activity. The differences can most sharply be seen in the differing patterns of communication that occur in them (and "make" them). In representative democracy, debate is valorized, while participatory democracy is constituted by deliberation and dialogue. From the perspective of representative democracy, these forms of communication appear weak (that is, losing strategies), fragile, and—to push the point a bit—dangerous. As Yankelovich (1991) notes, the minority elite has always thought that dialogue and deliberation among themselves is a good thing, but don't believe that the masses need them or can profit from them. In fact, an effective public dialogue process would be considered counterproductive because it threatens the apathy and acquiescence of the majority. Of course, minorities in power might applaud an inauthentic dialogue process because it gives the appearance of including the public in framing issues and making decisions, but–from the perspective of participatory democracy–this is morally outrageous.

***Underlying Worldviews***

As Mueller (1999) puts it in his title, representative democracy is "pretty good." But it is "good enough" only in the framework of a particular set of assumptions that I want to call into question. This generally unarticulated worldview may be described as:

1. Focusing on individuals and aggregates (for example, public opinion polls showing the percentage who agree or disagree with a policy choice);

2. Relying on what Rorty (1979) called "spectator knowledge" of the world, in which public ability to participate productively in democratic processes is equated with the extent of their knowledge about policies and issues;

3. Valorizing expert knowledge and a single rationality in a problem-solution framework; and,

4. Treating communication as a colorless, odorless, tasteless tool for doing other things.

Within this mindset, it makes sense to claim that citizens can't be sufficiently expert to make policy decisions, to deprecate the fickleness and shallowness of public opinion, to spend as much time shaping public opinion as measuring it, and to prefer government by a cadre of individuals whose interests, rationality, knowledge and judgment are "better" than all these others. We might call this a "disillusioned modernist" worldview.

By calling this a worldview or mindset, I've already exposed it as one among many. I want to go farther and indicate an alternative that we might call a "systemic/social constructionist" perspective that sustains those of us who hope for participatory democracy:

1. Focusing on systemic processes, social relationships, and patterns of interaction (perhaps by using concepts of "social representations" [Moscovici, 2000], "sociological consensus" [Scheff, 1975], or "systems thinking" [Sprull, Kenney, & Kaplan, 2001]);
2. Relying on "participant" knowledge—from "within" a process as an actor rather than from "outside" as a spectator (Shotter, 1993);
3. Committed to an "engaged, fallibilistic determinism" (Bernstein, 1992, p. 336); and,
4. Treating communication as the process by which we collectively make our social worlds (Pearce, 1994; Penman, 2000).

From this worldview, we would not look for civic maturity to be something possessed only by the leaders but, instead, to the processes that are institutionalized in the community: the rules that are followed for how things get done . . . in short, to the software. I believe that the "software" of civic organizations are the rules we follow for how, when, where, and in what manner to communicate with each other. And here we find that even software has various levels of maturity.

### *Software Maturity*

The "Capability Maturity Model" for software development describes stages from "ad hoc, chaotic processes to mature, disciplined software processes" (http://www.sei.cmu.edu/cmm/cmm.html):

1. **Initial.** The software process is characterized as ad hoc, and occasionally even chaotic. Few processes are defined, and success depends on individual effort and heroics.
2. **Repeatable.** Basic project management processes are established to track cost, schedule, and functionality. The necessary process discipline is in place to repeat earlier successes on projects with similar applications.
3. **Defined.** The software process for both management and engineering activities is documented, standardized, and integrated into a standard software process for the organization. All projects use an approved, tailored version of the organization's standard software process for developing and maintaining software.

4. **Managed.** Detailed measures of the software process and product quality are collected. Both the software process and products are quantitatively understood and controlled.
5. **Optimizing.** Continuous process improvement is enabled by quantitative feedback from the process and from piloting innovative ideas and technologies.

If we take Cupertino's "Blueprint for Public Communication" as the software for a community, at which level would this fall on the software maturity model? What would be the next steps to increase the maturity of this software? What other "blueprints" are there for the kinds of communication that constitute participatory democracy? I have the hunch that we know what kind of communication is more productive and "better" in all respects, but we don't know how to break the existing patterns. We believe, with some justification, that attempts to transform the existing patterns of debate, diatribe, and distractions will be acted on as (singularly naïve and weak) moves in those games, and thus we don't make them. And when we do, others make the prophecy come true by taking advantage of our vulnerability rather than joining us in making a better pattern.

How closely should the software for participatory democracy "fit" the Capability Maturity Model? Although I found these steps surprisingly productive as a metaphor for community processes, I became a bit nervous at stage three. We are all too familiar with the limitations of any "cookie cutter" or "one-size fits all" approach to social situations. The admonishment to "track cost, schedule, and functionality" and "to document, standardize, and integrate" sounds warning bells. Perhaps a way to retain the power of the Capability Maturity Model without oversimplification can be found in the distinction Senge (1990, p. 71) made between "detail complexity" and "dynamic complexity." What would levels 3, 4, and 5 look like if they were described in "dynamic complexity"?

Perhaps we need not only rules but also the wisdom to apply them. The following are selected from a much longer list of "proverbs" for software maturity (Paulk, 1997).

1. **The Process Management Principle**: The quality of a product is largely governed by the quality of the process used to build it.
2. **The Crisis Principle**: A mature organization does not abandon its process in a crisis.
3. **The Process Improvement Principle**: Any process can be improved; continuous improvement is necessary to remain competitive.
4. **Competence**: The competence of the people who do the work is crucial to project performance and organizational success.

5. **The Process Un-Supremacy Corollary**: A mature process cannot overcome incompetent people or inadequate tools.
6. **The Scar-Tissue Proverb**: Maturity is a function of scar tissue.
7. **Trade-offs**: Pick any two goals from better, faster, cheaper.

These proverbs aren't bad for the process of civic maturity, but I wonder what other proverbs, more specific to the civic context, could be generated. Just for the sake of discussion, here are some principles that the Public Dialogue Consortium has developed:

1. We view the community as a system comprised of a complex tapestry of interconnected conversations.
2. We view the community as a "multiverse" containing many social worlds.
3. We involve the public in the project from the beginning.
4. We believe there should be support from the top for initiatives from the bottom.
5. We treat language as "fateful" and recognize that the way issues are framed and discussed affect the "outcomes" as well as the level of trust and respect among the various stakeholders.
6. We see the entire community process as a series of dialogic conversations.
7. We recognize our own role in the "system."

Are these useful guidelines for creating a mature civic process? How "mature" are they? How might they be moved toward increased "maturity?"

### Some Conclusions, More Questions, and Outrageous Fantasies

How should we think about Spano's (2001, p. 22) observation that participatory democracy is an unrealized dream; that it "has never been a major social or political force . . . and its impact has actually diminished throughout most of the 20th century"? One response is to accept "pretty good" as "good enough;" another is to dream more boldly.

So what would happen if we looked at the prospects for participatory democracy not so much as how knowledgeable citizens are, or how willing they are to become dedicated policy wonks, but in terms of the maturity of the "software" for dealing with controversial issues that characterizes a political system? What if we focused more on the quality of patterns of communication in which citizens participate rather than the knowledge, will or skill of individuals to make decisions? What would it look like if we could assess the "maturity" of the processes that various cities and nations have institutionalized to guide their public communication? What proverbs, maxims, or other forms of "wisdom" might we develop to guide our application of such civic software? Spano (2001, p 30) says that public dialogue

involves an emphasis on listening as much as speaking, the free and honest expression of views and opinions, the ability to openly consider other peoples' views and opinions, no matter how different they might be from one's own, and a focus on mutual understanding and coordination, not winning and losing. The practice of public dialogue, Spano continues, involves staying in the tension between standing one's own ground (or holding one's own position) and being open to the other, using descriptions and nonverbal behaviors that express trust and respect, and showing the other that he or she has been understood.

How can such communication become the norm in our communities? What if we tested the assumption that we are already in a situation of pluralistic ignorance, in which many/most people already know that collaboration is more productive than confrontation, but believe that they are an impotent minority? One idea is to create civic-sponsored events in which dialogic communication occurs and see who rallies to them.

What if we were to focus our educational efforts on the construction of a social representation that distinguished dialogue, debate, and discussion? For example, political commentators might include an analysis of the form of communication in which an issue was dealt and treat this as important as the positions taken by various people on that issue.

What if we were to deliberately "normalize" dialogue as the way in which a community deals with public issues? What if we were to treat the form of communication as important as the amount of knowledge citizens have about public affairs? Perhaps there could be an equivalent to the "freedom of information act" that enables us to engage in dialogue about the public's business. What other ways might we find to make deliberation and public dialogue the processes that citizens expect to use in framing issues and choosing among options?

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