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Summary of Research Agenda

My research is inter- and transdisciplinary, applying concepts and methods typically associated with the learning sciences (CHAT) to investigate planning contexts and to inform and expand related practice and theory. I bring the human development focus of educational/cultural psychology—central to the learning sciences—to planning contexts where individual and collective identity development take place. This approach requires researchers and practitioners to view planning contexts as malleable, with the potential to inhibit or expand the identity development of individuals and communities. My research explores this malleability by focusing on how language usage and tools, modes of participation, and the inclusion of new participants impact one another and affect process and policy outcomes. Moreover, my analytical approach helps practitioners address and resolve contradictions and tensions they face when participants with a range of power relations are present in decision-making processes.

I came to CHAT by accident. It was a couple of slides in a guest lecture by Dr. Susan Goldman, where CHAT was introduced as one of the three main frameworks of learning (behavioral and cognitive being the others). The 15 minutes she spent on CHAT were transformative. As a first year Ph.D. student I was desperate for a theoretical framework that could be useful in studying adult learning in community settings. Nothing up to that point had made sense. Once this clicked, I was on a mission to self-educate and find these “triangle people”, wherever they may live. I then came across ISCAR and applied to present a poster at the 2011 Congress in Rome. That experience changed my world, I made new friends that would become future colleagues. I went back to the University of Illinois, Chicago and proceeded to develop a [reading group](#). Now, I am one of the editors of the forthcoming Bloomsbury Handbook on CHAT and have just recently been appointed to the Editorial Board of *Mind, Culture and Activity*.

Translating Across Disciplines

Advancing Mass Timber

The Regional Engine for Sustainable and Resilient Architecture, Engineering, and Construction in Mass Timber (RE-ACT) National Science Foundation project aims to support stakeholder engagement across the U.S. Pacific Northwest Region to create a 10-year strategic plan. Mass Timber in buildings holds the promise to reduce carbon footprint, since it can be a viable alternative to steel and concrete in some building projects. RE-ACT proposed to implement a changed lab formative intervention to identify key multi-system breakdowns as manifested thru tensions and contradiction in work practices of the mass timber supply chain. The RE-ACT project planned for four topical Change Labs to be run at the same time, with 20 participants per topical Change Lab (10 participants each U.S. state of the Pacific Northwest: Oregon and Washington). Only the first three steps of the Change Lab process were implemented. This methodological adjusted sequence to the Change Lab process was due to the number of stakeholders involved in the Change Lab and the amount of data was collected and analyzed in between sessions. Ultimately, the Change Labs will facilitate an inclusive co-production of the mapping of the current mass timber ecosystem and help identify multi-system solutions. Like fourth generation Activity Theory, the unit of analysis of the mass timber ecosystem is the sharedness of the multiple systems that are multi-dependent on one another for their growth or contraction. We hypothesize that this project is the most complex, multi-variant activity systems context on which the formative intervention Change Lab process has been attempted on.

Participatory Budgeting

My work focusing on translating across disciplines in publications, emerged from my dissertation research on Latino immigrants' engagement in participatory budgeting (PB). These publications describe how discourse analysis can and should be used to identify power dynamics in participants' social interactions. In [Planning Theory & Practice](#), I co-authored a peer-reviewed commentary on the differences between traditional social theories of learning in planning and sociocultural theories from the learning sciences, which are framed as tools for emphasizing the role of language/communication and for defining and evaluating learning more effectively. My co-authored publications in the [Journal of Civil Society](#) and [City & Community](#) (C&C) focused on the identification of civic capacities—linguistic skills (artifacts) needed to engage—and how these capacities are used in practice. In the C&C article, we showed that civic capacities are key to moving individuals' ideas into collaboration with others in participatory processes and investigated the role of claims-making for predominantly Spanish-speaking immigrants in civic engagement.

These two contributions are significant since they identify 17 unique capacities that align with civic skills for decision making, many of which are necessary for engaging in complex forms of civic engagement. Additionally, my analysis of discourse that occurred during PB demonstrated that making claims—a foundation for democratic participation—can be linguistically different for predominantly Spanish-speaking Latino/a/x immigrants. It is critical that practitioners and others who design community engagement processes possess knowledge of discrete civic capacities and how claims-making can vary. Indeed, a consistent theme across all my publications is the construct of design decisions, “the choices resulting in the production of different environments” that can support or hinder different forms of engagement.

Regarding my published research in the learning sciences, it has differentiated various aspects of expansive learning, including evidence that expansive learning includes changes in practice that can help participants develop new tools and language for fostering transformative agency during participation. Yet, as I argued in the [Journal of the Learning Sciences](#), expansive learning can occur at two levels—the collective and the systemic. I found that collective learning occurred when groups of participants exhibited qualitative changes in their agency to engage in practices associated with a particular activity (e.g., PB). I also found evidence of system-level learning, highlighted by changes in practice mediated through the creation of new artifacts, modes of participation (activity structures), and participants themselves. Collectively (e.g., in a committee, demographic group, etc.), participants can learn with the potential to transform that system through iterations (i.e., system-level learning). For example, in my PB research, predominantly Spanish-speaking immigrants learned what projects were eligible for funding and the rules for engagement, resulting ultimately in the creation of a Spanish-Language Committee and a change in how projects were allocated to different committees. Yet, system-level learning may not always be

possible, even if collective-level learning takes place. This differentiation highlights the need to apply an analytical lens to data that may reveal connections between collective changes by groups and transformative system-level practice—a prerequisite for achieving more equitable policy outcomes. In April 2023, the American Education Association's Cultural-Historical Research Special Interest Group recognized the promising contributions of my research with its Early Career Award.

Decision-Making Bodies

In the [Administrative Theory & Praxis](#) article, I connected a planning phenomenon to the learning sciences and education, using a funds-of-knowledge approach to analyze participant transcripts—the first time such a framework was applied in a public administration/planning context. Implicitly, this approach to decision-making bodies questions whether immigrants are better off taking up the funds of knowledge valued in western societies (which typically favor rational modes of expression) or whether, by learning new language and norms, they should push to engage authentically in ways valued by underrepresented groups such as immigrants (e.g., storytelling). My research provides evidence that spaces where multiple funds of knowledge can be activated by immigrants, it impacts their perceived level of influence over policymaking. The research presents new insights on the importance of designing inclusive participatory spaces in increasingly diverse communities by accounting for various forms of knowledge expression. This article, which was co-written with a former graduate student Alex Renirie, won the 2023 outstanding article award winner from the journal's editorial board.

Subsequently, the study described in a paper included in the [2023 ICLS Proceedings](#) identified three distinct types of learning when serving on these bodies: professional development, government, and dispositional. Regarding professional development, participants reported learning how to collaborate, manage processes and differences, and “see the big picture.” Government learning related to the acquisition of new knowledge about the processes of government institutions, including resource allocation, budgeting, policy development, and government structure. When analyzing how board service had changed participants' dispositions, three outcomes emerged: increased self-esteem, increased agency, and enhanced self-efficacy. The research showed that engagement in decision-making bodies offered opportunities for immigrant participants to learn about not only government and the content focus of each body (e.g., transportation, budgeting, etc.), but also—and just as critical—the social identities validated in practice that extend beyond typically White rational modes of participation. These findings support the link between participants' identity development and their ability to express those identities meaningfully in deliberative democratic spaces. Importantly, all publications from this research strand foreground the factors that positively influence immigrant participants in decision-making bodies when their perspectives are centered.

Teaching

In the [eJournal of Public Affairs](#), I presented my research-based approach to pedagogy—praxial education—outlining a framework for interdisciplinary and integrative learning that encourages students to be agents of change. The article introduces Activity Theory and systems to Public Affairs disciplines and how the theory and concepts can be useful tools for designing sound, challenging, and forward-thinking curriculum and pedagogy.

Additionally, in the classes I teach, I introduce students in the Public Affairs disciplines to readings in human development and Cultural Historical Activity Theory. For students with no prior knowledge on these subjects, their exposure to related concepts and ideas expands their mind and imaginaries on what is possible in their future work with cities or states, and the power they hold in shaping communities and developing the civic identities of residents/citizens.