



## University and Everyday Culture of Cities; Aesthetic Interaction and Voluntary Services of Planning Departments

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### Extended Abstract

In recent decades universities are pushed to provide services to commercial or governmental stakeholders rather than the civil society. In Iran, even, the commercial services have not developed satisfactorily. In this situation a strategy for promoting the position of universities is to provide voluntary social services within the educational and research activities. This article is part of an attempt to introduce such services to the urban planning postgraduate programs of two schools in Tehran. Although, this attempt was successful in some aspects, it could not satisfy the participating professors. To find the reasons, the pragmatic foundation of academic services has been reviewed and the review showed that provision of civil services necessitates holistic cultural communication with people. An interdisciplinary workshop was held for examining the quality of the cultural communication of the faculty; and some interviews were conducted with some of the attended lecturers and professors. A narrative analysis of speeches, interviews and communications was then conducted by using a framework devised for the assessment of universities' public communication on the basis of Habermas' theory of communicative rationality. It identified that the organizational culture of the faculty has paid little attention to the aesthetic aspects of communication; also while the school has critical attitudes, theoretically, it is practically confined to formal structures and has little competence in critical action. The article suggests a framework for a substitute organizational narrative that may promote the aesthetic interaction, and suggests that other disciplines evaluate their social relations aesthetically, too.

**Keywords:** service, pragmatism, cultural communication, aesthetic communication, organizational narrative

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## INTRODUCTION

Habermas believes that political and economic systems are colonizing cultural organizations like universities (Miley, 2006, 85-88). Some universities of industrial countries try to preserve their social position and liberal identities (Milley, 2004) by introducing direct and democratic services to communities (Fisher, Fabricant & Simons, 2004). The so-called developing countries have also been Raising a specific generation of universities which has local and social agenda (Farasatkah, 1396/ 2017). Civil engagement is going to be acknowledged as a new branch of the study of global higher education (Watson et al. 2011, 14). A main method for rearranging enquiries for this democratic target is *action research*, but this method has not yet been accepted extensively by universities (Levin & Greenwood, 2008, 2011).

Iranian modern universities have been established by governments and appropriately have mostly been expected to provide developmental and infrastructural services to government and economy, rather than being democratic. But universities could not even do their expected commercial role satisfactorily due to problems which mostly originate from out of universities. While it seems necessary for Iranian universities to promote civil engagement, some studies (Mozafari, 1390/ 2012; Pardakhtchi, Bazargan, Arasteh, Mozafari, 2012) have shown that serving the civil stakeholders is not a priority for Iranian academicians. On the other hand, the academic administration in Iran is very centralized and altering the current formal structure is very hard. Then it seems that the provision of civil services is better to be pursued in informal milieu of universities.

## PURPOSE

This article is a part of a more holistic attempt to establish public services in two urban planning departments in Iran. This aim has been perused at the level of the studio courses, within the current structure of two universities. Although the attempt was successful in setting the students to pursue voluntary services and in harmonizing with one external granting office, it could not satisfy the collaborating professors of both schools. The purpose of this round of research was to understand the reason for this resistance within the educational system of universities, and to find solutions for it. According to the research's standpoint, it focuses on the informal culture of the department and the faculty's stance on public communication.

## METHODOLOGY

The mentioned investigation into the academic culture was done via narrative analysis. The content necessary for the analysis was obtained through a one-day

workshop which was held to examine different aspects of the problem. A number of collaborating faculty members and experts in the field (planners and non-planners) in addition to some of the postgraduate students and researchers with similar interests and experiences were invited to take part in the debate. Furthermore, some private interviews conducted with some of the attendees.

Because the related arguments was scattered across the speeches, we collect the related ante-narratives from them (Boje, 2001). Then those were thematically analyzed and the themes were identified through open and axial coding. These codes then were placed within a spectrum which allocates them to three aspects of communication devised by Habermas and customized for the analysis of academic communication (Milley, 2006, 2004). The resulting spectrum may reflect the characteristics of the academic culture regarding communication with the society.

### RESULT

Milley (2004), on the basis of Habermas' formulation of cultural rationality, introduces a list of three categories of competences needed for academicians to communicate democratically with the society. The themes which our study identified as representatives of communicative culture of urban planning faculty are mostly concerned about scientific and moral-practical abilities and have paid much less attention to aesthetic-expressive competences. This quality is incompatible with many post-structural theories of urban planning that encourage planners to make aesthetic and affective ties with the community.

### CONCLUSION

The table one concludes the results, by depicting a relation between the main themes which seemed to construct the informal communicative culture of the faculty and the weaknesses. This implies that while academics of the faculty are theoretically critical of the structure, they are not enthusiastic in actively practicing for this aim. The lack of attention to the aesthetic-expressive aspects seems to have a prevailing effect in this regard. Categorical themes like "physical action", "synergy" and "language of art" are mostly reported by non-planner narrators rather than planners.

Our solution for promoting the civil service within the current structure of the urban planning faculty includes three strategies based on the strength of the identified organizational culture:

- 1) Using the identified interest of the organizational culture in "multi-disciplinary collaboration" we suggest making new ties with public and civil



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practitioners to compensate the aesthetic weakness of the academic organization with their expertise in this regard.

2) The faculty may initiate its civil services by cultural tools, as its organizational culture seems to be more robust in “learning from experience” and “public education of planning”. This cultural strategy includes making concepts from social actions.

3) Regarding the interest in the “critique of economic-political system” the cultural strategy may act effectively against the widespread *Lacanian Planning* (Gunder & Hilier, 2009): giving wrong (but charming) names to the projects undertaken for private interests: Mega Mall, Multi-Story High Ways and even Tourism.

Table 1. Points of strength and weakness in the organizational narrative identified within the faculty under the study

	Themes related to structural function	Themes related to critical and active interaction
Strength	Moral- practical: multi-disciplinary collaboration, democratic participation, urban planning public education Scientific: rationality in planning	Scientific: critique of economic-political system Aesthetic-expressive: learning from experience
Weakness	Moral- practical: norm-ethics (organizational)	Moral- practical: anti-systemic institutional agency, physical action, synergy, language of art, anarchism Moral-practical: norm-ethics (private)

These strategies may be perused within social networks and media; and strategies like this may be made and followed within other disciplines.

## NOVELTY

Novelty of this article can be regarded as these points:

1) Examining the informal organizational culture of a faculty (in this case a school of urban planning) regarding the issue of public engagement.

2) Showing the importance of aesthetics, affections and sensation in establishing democratic ties between people and universities, and even in disseminating the science.

3) Suggesting an institutional network which may promote the social responsibility of Iranian universities.



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