Early steps for students / teachers toward a participatory design mentality
A recent goal of my teaching is to introduce students to aspects of participatory design.

In my design research class this past semester we talked a great deal about how the efficacy of design in creating social change is often subservient to American cultural norms that elevate independence and individuality.

Students quickly gathered that a communal sense is critical to making social change.

Designers belong to communities—religious, familial, geographic, political—beyond the professional.

(Um ... who’s our community?)
Some students don't even cross the river!

Activists meet at the town hall every Thursday night!

Many students take the highway home
This was excellent, because I could meet people and tell them about the class … coincidently I saw many neighbors and familiar faces … the Clean Water Action people offered to distribute any communique my students wished to frame to everyone on their mailing list.

The students took on the challenge of framing their interests for an email.

I primed the pump a bit with a viewing of “Transition 1.0”
We are interested in:

- Village green spaces
- Reducing carbon footprint
- B.S. detecting / greenwashing

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**Hello All,**

I'm writing on behalf of the students in my Design Research course here at SUNY New Paltz. Our topic this semester is what graphic designers can do to help spur people to mitigate and/or cope with the consequences of climate change. One realization the class has had is that in order to tackle the big problems you need to start with community. So our goal has grown to include working with community collaborators and community-building as a part of this project. And that's why I'm writing to you.

Students have divided themselves into three working groups:

1. **Community Gardening and Green Spaces**
   
   Here's the group's statement:
   
   We consider the New Paltz Gardens for Nutrition a place that upholds community, sustainability, health, and education. We would like to use our communicative, problem-solving, and artistic skills as graphic designers to help promote and renew the gardens. Most of all, we would like to hear from community members about what the garden needs most and where our skills would help most.

2. **Educating about and Creating Incentives Around Reducing One's Carbon Footprint**
   
   Here are some principles this group supports:
   
   Reducing one's carbon footprint should be fun, manageable, accessible, experiential and incremental; on a spectrum of individual to community actions; encouraging DIY and local resources.

3. **What we've been calling B.S. detecting (revealing myths and deceptions about climate change— and even community, for that matter).**
   
   Here are some issues of concern for this group:
   
   Getting people to question their choices as opposed to just accepting conventional practices; offering criteria so that people are empowered to make environmentally friendly choices; educating people to follow through all phases of a green lifestyle: so you're using a "green" lightbulb, but how do you dispose of it once its spent? Understand the reasoning, don't just go for green advertising hype.

I know from talking with people at the recent Transition 1.0 screening on campus and members of the Climate Action Coalition that these concerns and interests are shared. My students and I wanted to propose meeting with interested community members during our class session on Tuesday March 6. We meet from 3:05-5:45. If you would like to visit that day to meet and talk with us about any of these topics, and could let me know (galperia@newpaltz.edu) by Thursday March 1, we would be delighted. I will confirm a meeting space once we know how many people are joining us. And if you're interested but can't make it, please let me know that, too.

The students and I look forward to starting a dialogue with you ...  

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best,  
Anne
A dozen local residents joined our first meeting.

The agenda:
- welcome visitors / food and drink
- introductions and description of structure
- three student groups shared interests briefly (pecha-kucha)
- we broke into small groups so community members and students could talk together
- folks presented back to the group
- we agreed to meet again

This was an especially meaningful event because it presented an opportunity for students and older people to share their interests. For their part older residents have little contact with college students even though they coexist in our neighborhood. Everyone found the meeting productive and engaging.
Presentations in lab

New Paltz Gardens group and students

Tongwen, Darryl, Kimiko (works for the EPA), Emily

Syl, Mike, Melissa, John

Rosalyn: anti-fracking activist

Ann: naturalist

Dan 2: poli sci prof
And then we had to get busy.

Moving forward, students and community members could meet together as they wished. I coached by continuing to introduce research methods on an as-needed basis:

- mapping the village (before 1st meeting)
- secondary research
- interviews
- surveys
- conversation
- photo ethnography / day in the life

&

endless crits

A second formal meeting was held two weeks out with community members.
An event was held at the end of the semester to show the prototypes. Along with our community members—and this term moving forward includes the students—came another guest: the village mayor, Jason West. Final projects clustered in the original three areas; our community’s shared interests were apparent.

**Lower-impact living:**

*Sylvester* print materials educating men about more healthful body product options


*Monica* web and print materials educating people about homemade, green cleaning housecleaning solutions [http://monicamarkiewicz.com/artwork/2726334_Poster_Series_for_Alternative_Cleaning.html](http://monicamarkiewicz.com/artwork/2726334_Poster_Series_for_Alternative_Cleaning.html)
BS detection and “re-information”

John print materials educating college age students about the environmental impacts of hydrofracking

Melissa poster series questioning eco-style

Mike + Emily informational web and print materials educating college age students about gmo food plants
Green spaces

Rachel + Sara + Barbara  lawn signage, handouts, seed packets for the Food, Not Lawns initiative

Claire + Ashley  a redesign of existing informational materials and garden iconography for the New Paltz Community gardens

Anna + Jesse  visualization of tree density around the village to help shade tree commission planning

Anna + Jesse’s  project raised the most interesting questions about co-design processes.
What additional expertise might be needed at the table and when?
How might designers and co-designers question their assumptions?
**Post-class analysis**

+ Students began to problemmatize the relationship between designers and users through the idea of community.

Students became more aware of the complexities of design practice.

Some projects could be further developed and have real benefit through workshops and community-based interventions.

The mayor, community groups and designers are staying in touch with each other; I am available to advise.

A local print shop will donate printing for local initiatives.

- Some projects, while socially proactive, veered away from community needs and/or implementation and were examples of more abstracted problem-solving. At the same time they reflected a community ethos.

Our community members were already self-selected experts / amateurs: what would other New Paltz residents have contributed?

Sometimes the community members most involved might not have been realistic in their goals; in retrospect we recognize the benefit of involving people with other bodies of knowledge.
King, Stanley.  

Papanek, Victor.  
(The entire text sans images is at playpen.icomtek.csir.co.za/....)

Williamson, Jack.  
*Community Design Management.* Michigan: Design Michigan, 1995

Community Based Social Marketing  
http://www.cbsm.com/pages/guide/preface/  
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The Psychology of Climate Change Information  
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Visualizing Information for Advocacy:  
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http://backspace.com/notes/2008/02/an-introduction-to-information-design.php