

Scene Reporting Guidance

This Section discusses why and how we might think about projects as a series of scenes, and provides guidance for writing up rich and useful project scenes.

The purpose of using “Scenes” as an organizing metaphor for your work is to encourage you to think hard about the nature of social interaction and what moves people, and to encourage you to be creative and communicate about some of the human complexity and challenges you experience. We provide a template of sorts for writing up scenes – adapt it to best serve these ends.

Scenes – A useful metaphor for project thinking and reporting?

In Athens, vehicles of public transportation are called metaphorai. So when people travel to work or come home on busses or trains, they take a “metaphor”. As you prepare to travel to Cape Town, we’re asking you, too, to take a metaphor. In this instance the metaphor is to see your work as a series of improvised scenes, with you and your team joining with other “social actors” to respond to the challenge posed by your project. Why are we asking you to do this, and in what ways can this notion help you bring to your work energy, imagination, and courage so that you can better understand how to move between analysis and action?

This metaphor of scenes can help you anticipate the many roles you will to play in project work. In one day, for example, you can act as a consultant with your sponsor, providing him or her with richly detailed data of current conditions in the field. A few hours later, you might act as a facilitator in a small group discussion in Langrug or Maitland Garden Village, or wield a hammer or a paint brush more as a student volunteer, or act as a catalyst to keep the project’s momentum going, or become in turns a patient listener, an observer, a storyteller, a confidante to someone with whom you have established a friendship. Your sponsors, co-researchers and community members---and your advisors!--- are social actors too and will bring to our work of co-inquiry their own dynamic repertoires, motivations, and emotions. This metaphor of scenes, is filled with the energy and strivings of social actors; it suggests our work is a conversation, an extended dialogue, a creative endeavor, in which you and others can be leading actors as well as members of the ensemble. The metaphor of improvised scenes, we believe, can also make you more nimble on the ground. Let’s not confine a “scene” to what takes place under the bright lights in a theater. Any action you undertake with community residents and local stakeholders can be marked off or framed as a scene ---participating at a community meeting, conducting a one on one interview, presenting to your sponsor, writing and sharing an action plan, shooting a game of pool in a shebeen (illegal tavern), etc. Any given scene has a history and an emerging present that you help bring about in part through improvisation. By “improvisation” we mean that in addition to a disciplined and well-planned research approach to discovery and understanding, your work will involve skills such as flexibility, intuition, spontaneity and creativity. Like student teams before you, you’ll have to make good with the materials at hand to improvise such things a competent data collection when interviewees might want to stonewall you or refuse to speak to you, or when a community meeting becomes a freewheeling, unpredictable exchange, or when the tables are turned and you’re asked insightful questions about your motives that require you to think on your feet. This model of reporting will help you think about and improve your interactions with community residents and other stakeholders. It will help you tack between the most concrete of local details (*e.g.*, the poor condition of toilets in Langrug) and the global forces (*e.g.*, neoliberal economic policies) that hinder or open up opportunities for change. We’ll ask you to consider what circumstances helped

create the scene? What relationships do the scene enable or constrain? What effect does it have on your project?

The metaphor of scene applies to the way you engage stakeholders in Cape Town. Many writers have argued that daily life bears a dramatic structure, that each of us is an “actor” who plays certain “parts” in front of “audience” of family, friends, acquaintances, and others. In cross cultural settings playing a part can be more demanding. You know little about the other actors. They know little about you. How can you communicate meaningfully to persons you do not know? It is the parallel problem actors face when they come on stage and try to move strangers to believe that they are about to run away from a messy situation or die of a dreaded disease. The actor enacts a problem you’re going to face: how to be a credible speaker to people you do not know, how to communicate not only information, but something that has some sort of rhetorical force so that what you have to say becomes believable, moving, and leads to action.

Reporting on “Scenes” – Some overall thoughts

- While “authorship” of an improvised scene is shared by all the participating actors, when it comes to reporting on those scenes, you are the author, and you have creative license to tell the scene as you think best “advances the plot” of your project. That doesn’t mean you won’t need to respond thoughtfully to advice and critique from teammates, advisors, and sponsors – you will, and the following guidance is a start to this process. Think carefully about the kind of thinking and writing we are encouraging. Review carefully the generic guidance provided in each section – on connecting, planning, acting, etc. -- and then adapt as appropriate to your own creative impulses. Any given scene will contain more or less of one element or another, and your scene can be told in any order you wish. These headings need not be used – in fact, titles relevant to your scene are much more likely to communicate your major ideas than the following generic headings. And the guidance provided under one heading, such as “Observation”, for example, can be used anywhere in the scene you think best – the important thing is that you do observe carefully and report on what you saw, heard, measured, etc.
- Link to subsidiary documents wherever appropriate. For example, if you conduct interviews, you will likely want a scene devoted entirely to that process that summarizes the essentials but has links to subsidiary documents (e.g., your interview plan, summaries of each interview, perhaps a spreadsheet of resulting data, etc.). Link then to the interview scene when you later write your weekly summary scene.
- Integrate well-chosen photos or video clips as appropriate.

1) Backstory

Your scene has a “backstory”. The term usually refers to a narrative or history created for a fictional character or event that occurs before the main action of the play. But we can apply this to our reporting. For example, if you want to report on a meeting let’s say about community based actions to reduce stormwater flows in Langrug, it would be useful to provide your readers (advisors, sponsor, co-researchers) with the scene’s context, its backstory. You could note in a sentence or two how the scene is connected to previous initiatives, how the past has influenced who’s involved, how the issue is framed, and the opportunities for collective action.

2) Cast of Characters

Use this section to summarize key issues related to connecting with other people and organizations, the process of networking through which the project will ultimately be realized. Begin by identifying the “Cast of Characters” who play a role in the scene and tell us the important contribution(s) they make to it. Characters can be individuals or groups, and will often include team members and others such as sponsors, stakeholders, community members, even authors whose contribution was through your reading of their work. Group characters logically in ways that advance your story, such as when/where you met them, or their social position or perspective.

3) Setting

In theater, the stage is a shaped space---scenery, costume, lighting, spatial relations---contribute to our intellectual and emotional response to the play, to the action of characters, to the meaning of what we’re experiencing as audience members. Similarly, the setting in which you conduct interviews, or collaborate with local residents, will influence who participates and what is said. In this section describe the physical and social setting of the scene in a paragraph and how it may have influenced what was (or was not) communicated. Use photographs to supplement your discussion.

4) Scene

a) Connecting: When we try to represent the activities of a small segment of society, whether it’s a group of residents in an informal settlements, a collection of beekeepers in the Cape Flats, or a fledgling community organization in the Maitland Garden Village, we can’t focus on the groups directly involved. Every activity consists of people acting together so we want to represent the variety of people engaged in that activity. That means we want to look at the group and their connections to other groups and organizations. For example, if we want to understand housing issues in the informal settlements, we can’t just observe and talk to the persons who sell galvanized tin and wood supports, the materials from which shacks are made. To understand the issues, we should also talk to spatial planners who upgrade informal settlements, contractors who construct new houses in informal settlements with state funds, legal aid workers who address land tenure issues, members of the local street committee who decide if and where new residents can build in the informal settlements, and, of course, the residents themselves. And then having heard all those accounts, we want to sure that each group is adequately represented. And here we run into a problem. A good listen to any social phenomenon brings us many different and competing voices. If we want to incorporate what we’ve heard from all kinds of people, how do we decide how many voices to include or how to choose them. Unfortunately, we don’t have an algorithm to help us decide.

We can learn from the theater. Playwrights solve this problem of representing multiple points of view in various ways. Typically they put characters on stage and let them speak in different voices and at times argue with each other. To help you write or perform your backstory, imagine that every character enters a scene wanting something and what they do in a scene reflects their attempts to get what they want. If the audience (your reader) isn’t aware of what those characters want, your backstory won’t make sense. Other playwrights take a different approach and use many voices, such as a chorus of many voices, to present a rounded and comprehensive view.

Try to capture the multiple voices and arguments of the groups you’ve worked with. In a world where meanings shift depending on who’s talking and on the speaker’s position, there is no way to pick out the voice that speaks the whole truth. So instead of trying to capture one authoritative voice, try to construct a dialogue among the characters (and this could include sponsors, stakeholders, community

members, even authors whose contribution was through your reading of their work). Try to describe as accurately as possible the voices you've listened to, the arguments you've encountered. You can do this in a number of ways. You can, of course, record key interviews, transcribe them, and select the most salient parts of the interview. You can take careful and copious interview notes and, using a matrix or table, identify patterns of agreement and disagreement. Or you can use dramatic forms --- dialogues, or short scenes with a chorus to represent what others know about the issue at hand. Your backstory should conclude with a summary of points of agreement/disagreement, headlines describing the issues driving the scene, questions that you plan to address in the scene, and links to a previous scene for more details.

b) Planning: You might want to organize this section by listing the major questions and/or planning activities that drove the scene. WHAT was the Question/Activity about, WHY was it important, and HOW did you approach it? Identify the big question(s) that drove the scene. What did you want to learn about together? The question(s) may need to be broken down into sub-questions and require some explanation of the assumptions behind the question, the context, and why the question is important. Having identified the question(s), what was your plan to engage with and perhaps even answer the question. What did you need to know to address the question?

c) Action and Observation: Here is where you capture as objectively as possible the action(s) of the scene. One way to approach is to take a typical WPI lab report and stand it on its head. In a lab report, you begin with observations and turn that into notes, the notes become a chart, the chart becomes a statistical analysis and the analysis a conclusion. At each step, the observation becomes more abstract, more removed from the concreteness of its original setting. Here focus on the concreteness of the scene: what happened, who did what, what was said, what was left unsaid, what were the points of conflict, confusion, agreement. In writing up your observations, you soon confront a thorny question. How can you separate what's important from what isn't? When we summarize details we lose information we may need, but knowledge results from weeding out extraneous details, allowing us to see patterns, structures, motivations that are interesting or useful to our projects. Any representation of social reality always and necessarily leave out elements of reality even when we use different formats---a written account, photographs, video recordings. There is no rule to say what should be included or left out when you represent a scene. How much is enough and what elements to represent depend upon the purpose of your project.

5) Reflection and Learning

After you have observed the results of your actions, you need to make sense of what happened. This is arguably the most important part the worksheet. Here is where you explore the meaning of what you observed. This will include questioning your own assumptions, identifying things that unsettled you view of the project, noting how well you captured other viewpoints, particularly "subjugated knowledges" that are often overlooked or marginalized, how you navigated the shifting demands between planning and improvisation, You may want to consider It may result in specific "findings" or more likely it will result in a more nuanced understanding of the tensions within and between different issues and the existing ambiguities. Often reflection leads to a new set of questions or ideas, which in turn leads into another scene. This section should conclude with notes for the next scene.