
A STUDY OF EXPERIENCE SHARING IN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

Community engagement is crucial in building positive relationships within the members of a community. Community gardening can be a means of community engagement through providing opportunities for social interaction and greater community cohesions. Community engagement will take place when the community gardeners contribute something which is beneficial and visible to the communities. In creating successful community engagement, there is a need of experience sharing among community gardeners. Community gardening can be a means of providing opportunities for social interaction, greater community cohesion and community engagement. This paper aims to look into the real practices of experience sharing for community engagement in the context of community gardening in Malaysia. A comparative study was conducted by looking into two types of community. The finding shows the experience sharing helps the community to be engaged. In fact, community engaged more with the advancement of information technology.

Keywords : community engagement, experience sharing, engagement, community, community gardening

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is a planned process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest or affiliation, to address issues affecting their well-being [1]. Community engagement involves interactions between identified groups of people and involves processes that are linked to problem solving or decision making where community input is used to make better decisions [2]. It is believed that community engagement will result in the creation of new community relationships as people learn how to work together [3]. The feeling of being included in decision-making, being listened to, and being informed are key elements in creating community engagement. The trust relationship in the community helps in creating effective community engagement [4].

Community engagement provides the community with an opportunity to have input into the decisions that are made by the community [5]. Effective community engagement will help to utilize disagreement in a positive way by helping those involved better understand each other's point of view [6]. Other related concepts such as community involvement, community participation, community consultation and community collaboration were used interchangeably with community engagement [7]. Engagement in the community improves

communication, builds the trust, and leads to the creation and dissemination of new knowledge [8].

Community engagement reflected through community gardening as community gardening promotes a sense of community by creating a sense of place, identity, inclusion and belonging [9]. Community gardening is a great way of getting people to engage with each other thus creates social integration. Community gardening providing a space for community cohesion and engagement [2]. Community gardening is community-based and community minded [10]. Communities will get along with each other through community gardening which will lead to community cohesion, thus improve community empowerment [2]. It is found that community gardening act as catalyst for improving social interaction, strengthening social ties and facilitating new social connections among gardeners [11].

Engaging communities by participating in gardening can enhance public understanding towards the importance of building social relationship as well as empowering neighborhood ties [12]. Effective community engagement depends on mutual trust, respect and effective communication between communities [13]. Community engagement involves community collaboration for the mutually benefit exchange of knowledge and resources [14]. A wide range of exchanging information and negotiable mutually acceptable decision occurs a lot in the creation of community engagement [6]. The empowerment opportunities and experience sharing

that is fostered through community gardening is fundamental to the sustainability of community engagement [15]. Experience sharing is intrinsic to community gardening [16]. Providing or sharing experiences are necessary as the requirement for the community to engage [15]. Experience sharing is crucial in developing effective community engagement in community gardening [14]. By engaging in community gardening, experience about gardening is being shared, which lead to promote community cohesion and improved community engagement as depicted in Figure 1.

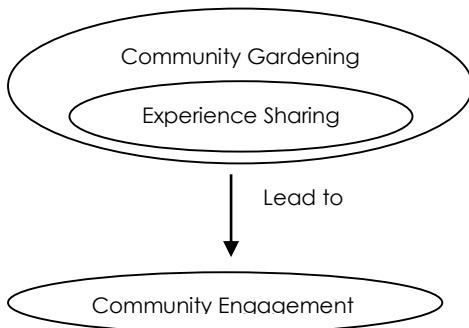


Figure 1 Experience sharing in community gardening lead to community engagement

Currently lack of awareness on importance of community gardening is identified as one of the issues in community gardening. More effort need to be done to increase the awareness level to enable people especially young people appreciate more towards why neglected land should be utilized by gardening activity [17]. Forming partnerships is an important aspect of community gardening as it is essential to ensure the sustainable of the garden, as the more members involved in the community, more likely the community gardening will succeed [1]. Without proper plan towards maintaining the engagement of communities, community gardeners are unlikely to keep motivated in joining the community. There is a need to share knowledge on hazards posed by various contaminants and threshold for safety among community gardeners since understanding the risk inherent soil in soil contamination is very difficult [18]. Lack of detailed information on crops planted is a common omission by many community gardening practitioners [19]. Lack of information about tips and tricks in gardening is also a limiting factor for community gardeners [20]. The community gardeners worry about the successful of community gardening since some of them wonder will they have time to do community gardening since some of them have another jobs to do [21].

Community gardening is viewed as a technology-mediated social participation, which aims to improve the resilience of the community [22]. Technology-mediated social participation focuses on the movement that pursues empowering individuals to

become active in communities in terms of participation, increase contribution, and promote collaboration [23]. Much of the recent attention only focuses on tools and devices designed for farming purposes [24]. Not much research being done on how Information Technology (IT) facilitates in experience sharing among community gardeners. Little has been known about how such IT takes place and what kind of participation or activity can lead to the resilience of a community in community gardening [14]. The role of IT has not received much attention in community engagement [25]. Access to resources and knowledge is one of the characteristics for the community to be engaged [26]. There is a need to have a system for sharing knowledge among community gardeners in order to enable people to get together in community gardening [27]. Community engagement has emerged as a critical concern for researchers to design an interactive system so that experience in community gardening can be spread and accessed easily [28].

Developing IT can alleviate communication breakdowns since community gardeners interested in knowing about other community gardeners in another community area, thus enable experience sharing among them [29]. IT plays vital role in experience sharing [30]. Some community gardeners felt that IT might help new gardeners interact with more experienced gardeners to build relationships amongst them [28]. IT when deployed appropriately can support community engagement due to its capability in augmenting collective action through the power of computation, people, communication, and action [31]. Advances in IT provide a pathway for community to be more engaged [30].

2.0 QUALITATIVE STUDY

In achieving the objectives of the study, qualitative method will be adopted. Qualitative study often relies on personal contact between the researcher and their context over some period of time of the research. This contact makes a partnership which will lead to a deeper insight into the context of the study. Thus, a qualitative approach is very oriented toward breakthrough and procedure, have strength, less generalization and more concerned with a thorough understanding of the research problem in its unique context.

Data are collected through observation and in-depth interviews. The observation and interview was conducted towards two communities; offline community and virtual community. The aim of the observation and interview was to look into the real practices of experience sharing among community gardeners in Malaysia.

Data collected are analyzed based on The Spectrum of Community Engagement as shown in the Figure 2. It is a model of communication strategies for increasing levels of commitment in an engagement process, which developed by The International

Association of Public Participation (IAP2). The five distinct communication intentions are: to inform, to consult, to involve, to collaborate, and to empower. Each strategy might be appropriate in certain situations and has a clearly-stated objective and an implicit promise being made to the community.

The Spectrum of Community Engagement

INCREASING IMPACT ON DECISION-MAKING				
INFORMING	CONSULTING	INVOLVING	COLLABORATING	EMPOWERING
Providing balanced and objective information about new programs or services, and about the reasons for choosing them. Providing updates during implementation.	Inviting feedback on alternatives, analyses, and decisions related to new programs or services. Letting people know how their feedback has influenced program decisions.	Working with community members to ensure that their aspirations and concerns are considered at every stage of planning and decision-making. Letting people know how their involvement has influenced program decisions.	Enabling community members to participate in every aspect of planning and decision-making for new programs or services.	Giving community members sole decision-making authority over new programs or services, and allowing professionals to serve only in consultative and supportive roles.

Figure 2 The Spectrum of Community Engagement

2.1 Offline Community

An observation and interview in community gardens in Shah Alam had been conducted. The observation takes about three months which involves several times of site visits to the garden. The leader for each garden was identified from the visit. The input for the observation was gained not only from the leaders, but also from the community members. The leaders basically take the responsibility as person who leads the activities in the garden and spreading information to all members. The community gardens in Shah Alam basically started since the community believed that farming on neglected, vacant lots can lead to the beautification and greening of neighbourhoods, thus promote stabilize distressed neighborhoods through the conversion of blighted and vacant land into productive spaces. Most of the community members mentioned that they like to spend part of their time growing things as a leisure pursuit, thus participate in community gardening.

Experience sharing occurs among the community gardeners, but in terms of face-to-face interaction only. They feel more socially connected to each other and sense of belongings to the community increased as they are not isolated in their own pace anymore. They responded that experience sharing enhanced their skills and knowledge in gardening. The beginner gardeners can always seek knowledge from the knowledgeable and experienced gardeners. Any problems raised in the garden can be solved easier and quicker as the result from experience sharing.

Community gardening was a motivating factor for their involvement in the community activity. The social ties between the community gardeners improved. In fact, gardeners felt more engaged in their communities as a result of being involved in

community gardening. They commented that sometimes when they have any issues to be raised but then at that time they are not in the garden, so they need to hold the issues first. It is due to the fact that they only can share the issues whenever they are in the garden. This kind of situation makes the sharing process ineffective since they tend to forget about the issues. Besides that, they mentioned that if the issues shared when they are not in the garden, the experience sharing are not feeling like the same as sharing in the garden as they cannot feel the sense to the issues. It is quite difficult for them to imagine what is really happening about the issues. Thus, makes the sharing process ineffective.

Besides that, the types of experiences shared are not varying since they can only share at the community garden. For example, not many community gardeners had the chance to have a live view of another gardener's successful yields due to the fact that not all community gardeners are in the garden at the same time. The impact of seeing the results live is totally not the same as just heard about it. As for now, successful and unsuccessful yields are the types of experiences that always being shared by many of community gardeners. Only few of them shared about the control of insect pest.

2.2 Virtual Community

An observation and interview had been conducted towards a number of virtual communities whereby the community gardeners connect virtually to each other, despite different location. They share experiences in gardening through the virtual platform. Their participant in the community started since they found the existing platform in the social media which have the features for them to share experience about gardening. Members in the community shared the same interest, which is gardening. The platform connects them even though they are not from the same location.

Their motivation level increased whenever they saw each other's success yields through picture. They prefer to ask questions regarding their garden to the community as the community are active and keep responding to each other's issues. The experience shared between them is valuable and can be used as an input to their garden. They can always contact another community gardener which they identified that can solve their matters. The community gardeners feel delighted whenever they can give input to others. They tend to share any issues in their garden as they responded that this kind of experience sharing helps a lot in developing their social ties, as well as improving their knowledge in gardening.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the observation and interviews, it is shown that experience sharing in community gardening helps in the creation of community engagement. By

experience sharing, the community members felt that they more connected to each other and increase social ties between them. Their engagement in the community had renewed their sense of community. Both communities agreed that their skills and knowledge in gardening improved as the result from experience sharing. This improvement enables them to feel the sense of place and belongings. In addition, experience sharing also makes them have adequate access to resources and knowledge, which eventually

increased the engagement between them. Experience sharing involves in the creation of building trust among the community gardeners. They also felt the sense of identity and inclusion as the community gardeners being included in the decision making process. Table 1 below shows the comparison of experience sharing activities in offline community and virtual community which refers to The Spectrum of Community Engagement.

Table 1 Comparison experience sharing in offline community and virtual community with reference to the spectrum of community engagement

Offline Community	Virtual Community
<p>Ineffective experience sharing occurs. Leader play important role in ensuring all community gardeners received any knowledge or experiences. Information spread between community gardeners is not reliable since interaction only face-to-face. Experience sharing only occurs whenever they meet with each other at the community garden. Community gardeners faced difficulty in imagining about the experiences shared if the experiences shared when they are not in the garden.</p>	<p>Community members well informed about any updates or activities with the help of platform. When any experience shared by other community gardeners, the experience automatically can reach to another community gardener even they are not in the same garden. No ad-hoc experience sharing involve since they can always interact with each other at any time and any place. Easy to imagine about the experiences shared with the help of pictures posted in the platform. Community gardeners always responded to the experiences shared by another community gardeners as the experiences shared can be viewed by others. The responds were beneficial to each of them as it acts as an input to their gardens and eventually enhanced the knowledge in gardening. Thus, leads to the creation of sense of identity and inclusion towards community.</p>
<p>Difficult in getting feedback from community gardeners. Less feedback leads to difficulty in analyzing, decision-making and considering alternatives towards any matters.</p>	<p>Easily getting feedback from community gardeners. Feedback is important in analyzing, decision-making and considering alternatives towards particulars experiences shared. The feedback maybe valuable in increasing others knowledge towards certain issues.</p>
<p>Less interactions between community gardeners leads to difficulty in ensuring full involvement of community gardeners in the community gardening activity. Less chances for the beginner gardeners to learn from the experienced gardeners due to the limitation of time and place to communicate. Limited experience sharing limits the types of experience to be spread among the community gardeners. Improvement in the gardening skills enhanced their sense of place and belongings to the community.</p>	<p>Active interaction between community gardeners leads to high involvement of the members in the community. Despite different location and background, the community gardeners still actively interact with each other, they are connected by their passion in the gardening. , increase the level of trust among them despite from different background at different location. Experience sharing via the platform enables community gardeners from different location feel the sense of place of belongings to the community. This is due to the help of experiences shared in the form of images in the platform. Images help the community gardeners to imagine what is happening in the particular experiences shared.</p>
<p>Less involvement in the community gardening leads to the difficulty in getting every community gardeners to participate in every aspect of planning and decision-making towards any issue. The community gardeners will be motivated every time their yields producing well. But then the motivation eventually will be less when their yields are not producing well or maybe attacked by insect pest. Lack of experiences shared limits the knowledge and skills in the gardening.</p>	<p>High collaboration between community gardeners as the result of active interaction between them. The collaboration between them makes the planning and decision-making can be done easily. Various types of experiences shared enable the community gardeners to improve their knowledge and sharpened their skills in gardening. This leads to improve their motivation to keep going in the gardening.</p>
<p>Unable to give community members sole decision-making authority over new alternatives or solution as the result of not having full collaboration in the community gardening activity.</p>	<p>Full collaboration among community gardeners enable community members has the sole decision-making authority over new alternatives or solutions.</p>

Comparison from the table above shows that community engage more in the virtual community when compared to offline community. Experience sharing occurs actively in the virtual community. This is due to the existence of platform which facilitates the experience sharing process. It is shown that experience sharing plays vital role in creating community engagement. Effective experience sharing leads to the effective community engagement.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Advancement of IT helped the experience sharing to be done effectively. Community engagement will take place when the community gardeners contribute something which is beneficial and visible to the communities. Unequal distribution of experience sharing limits the engagement between the communities. There is indication that IT helps dissemination experience among community gardeners. There is a need of IT which meant to be a dynamic tool that can help communities to share information and resources with each other. This is due to the fact that experience sharing is paramount to the success of community engagement. A IT platform will be helpful to support experience sharing among community gardeners since currently the investigation on IT use in community engagement is still limited especially in terms of experience sharing. Awareness of the link between community and IT is vital to ensure the creation and sustainability of community engagement.

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