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LIB 322: Wicked Problems of Sustainability

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You Know, You Grow
LIB 322: Wicked Problems of Sustainability
Winter 2015

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Mission:

Through community connections and dialogic inquiry we are seeking to identify resident needs related to our local food system.

Abstract:

As we have studied the nature of wicked problems and connected with local case studies, our team has come to the conclusion that in order for communities to grow and develop deeper connections, healthier neighborhoods, and happier residents, there must be inclusive dialogue and participatory action. Addressing a neighborhood's nutritional needs is messy, involving complex social dynamics and disparate stakeholders. Through community connections and dialogic inquiry we have begun to recognize needs related to the local food system. We strive to empower residents to pursue self-directed, neighborhood oriented change. Our team first worked to develop a model of community engagement that can be adapted, copied, and spread to any community setting. The model explained how to conduct inclusive, participatory dialogue that aims to encourage story-telling and camaraderie rather than debate or opposition. Secondly, our team has engaged with several community members over the course of the semester to practice having these dialogic conversations in order to learn, change, and grow as individuals better equipped to understand and progress the dialogue on local food systems. This article synthesizes our findings, describes what we have learned, and offers a model for healthy community conversations that drive locally directed growth.

Introduction

As the world constantly evolves around us, so do the exhaustive issues people face daily. Because nothing in life is permanent and new variables are being constantly introduced, finding solutions to social issues is challenging. Many social scientists are now defining issues like these as “wicked problems”. Wicked problems are those that do not have a final, definite solution, but instead continuously undergo change, generating complications and further issues. Lake and Fauvel, authors of *Tackling Wicked Food Issues*, define wicked problems, writing that, “in contrast to ‘tame’ problems - problems easily defined and solved one-dimensionally - wicked problems, are categorized within the literature as dynamically complex and ill-structured, with no straight-forward causal chains to help us gain a clear and simple picture of the issue” (Lake & Fauvel 2014). Although wicked problems are near impossible to solve, we must pursue them with innovation, cooperation, and diligence if we hope to avoid crises. With the catalyst of wicked problems being multifaceted and often unknown, communities need open communication along with willing and active interaction for the greatest probability of making progress to address the issues involved with the wicked problems.

Our team, You Know, You Grow, decided to address the wicked problem of nutritional needs impacting impoverished neighborhoods. This highly complex issue not only affects communities globally, but also locally. The Grand Rapids area’s struggle with poverty has left many community members unable to meet basic nutritional needs. With a diverse and growing resource bank, our group feels confident in the city’s ability to work hand-in-hand with neighborhoods to improve nutritional life habits.

Being communicative and social students, we have begun to realize the significance of collaboration born through deep and sustained dialogue. As a group, we sought to initiate discussions designed to spark positive growth. The nutritional needs and desires of a community are always changing because of multiple societal and environmental matters. These factors include, but are not limited to, levels of education, socio-economic conditions, varying interests in nutrition, local policy matters, community culture, and unpredictable crop seasons. Differences in our social and environmental landscapes yield fluctuating levels of neighborhood health. It is our goal to pinpoint the most desired basic nutritional needs in the Grand Rapids community. Through open dialogue with community residents, we hope to assess the situation first-hand, and then through integrating our insights, offer possible solutions. Because of the complexity of this issue, we do not expect to find an easy and quick solution. However complex the matter may be, it is extremely important to strive for progress on local wicked problems, before they become a local crisis. As scholars of wicked problems note, “a partial solution to a whole problem is better than whole solutions of each of its parts taken separately” (Alpaslan & Mitroff 2013). Thus, our team moved forward with a plan-of-action committed to re-envisioning the future through open and honest dialogue.

Action Plan

To pursue our mission of igniting community dialogue our team developed a model of effective neighborhood engagement. We focused on developing a service that would be

accessible to individual neighborhoods in Grand Rapids. We planned to serve these neighborhoods by coordinating, structuring, and facilitating dialogue about the local food systems (Figure 1 found in appendix). To do this our team would work to identify key stakeholders in the neighborhood, dialogue with them, and consolidate the information for local policy makers and business leaders with the intention of developing that given neighborhood.

Our first course of action was to connect and organize a group of community leaders, residents, and local business owners. Such a group would help us develop a clear connection to the neighborhood being targeted. The goal is to bring a diverse group of people together from the same place, with that place being the common grounds on which to connect. The idea is to draw, as Valerie Brown writes, “on all our intellectual resources, valuing the contributions of all the academic disciplines as well as other ways in which we construct our knowledge” (4). Since wicked problems require we begin our work by considering a wide-range of perspectives and thereby expand our understanding of the situation, our aim is to facilitate a conversation that engages a diversity of perspectives on the neighborhood (Lake 6).

The second course of action is to facilitate and direct a conversation that is conducive to storytelling and participatory dialogue. Engaging local narratives is necessary since our values are key elements to why we act as we do and why we desire what we desire (Brown and Lambert 2014). As facilitators we hope to focus the dialogue on nutrition and local food systems; however, the main role of these facilitators is to listen openly, without any overly determined, pre-set, or rigid agenda in mind. The purpose of having an open ended conversation is to invite community members to share their own perspective: their imaginative ideals and hopes. Our team believes that this type of dialogue is a powerful tool for developing trust and fostering collaborative networks necessary for co-generative progress to be made. It is in the deep reality of a community that we can begin to connect with one another, agree on more than we disagree on, and make progress with the messy, intricate, wicked problems of that neighborhood. Oakland California is a key illustration of progress made through community engagement. Food First is an organization focused on addressing local food justice issues in Oakland. A member of their board, Rosalinda Guillen, specifically works with underrepresented farmworkers. The group of farmworkers are from Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers of America (UFW) organization and Guillen’s role is to advocate for workers rights on the local, state and national level. She organizes and meets with the team to talk on a regular basis, but their agenda looks very different from traditional organization methods. The group will talk about their wives and kids, their busy weeks and recent events, and typically at some point she might bring up the proposition to discuss strategy. While it may seem such a structure is not conducive to effective action, in truth, this story is a testament to how organizations built on relationships can be more productive than more traditional, structured, and hierarchical attempts to organize. Indeed, Rosalinda’s story exemplifies how relationships can breed solutions; many people that work along side Guillen will say that she gets more done in a few meetings with the UFW in her style than others get done in years of work in traditional organization (Silvestri). When groups are truly good

allies with each other, the visionary and the resident, the designer and the audience, that is when they can create.

From these conversations our final course of action is to synthesize our findings in a creative, unique fashion suitable to serve as a resource for other aspiring businesses or key community development stakeholders. Just as Brown describes with making progress in wicked problems, “In times of change, the roles of the decision maker and the researcher draw close together” (5). We hope to connect the research being conducted in our community conversations with businesses, policy makers, and local residents eager to see a fresh, hopeful local development take place. Grand Rapids is a quickly developing city full of new initiative and people hoping to make their mark in the way Grand Rapids unfolds. The information collected can be utilized in the development of local policy, the formation of place-based businesses, and the educational outreach efforts for neighborhood residents. We hope that it can serve as a tool in the hands of well meaning, local makers and shakers. There are many people in the city that are working to develop socially conscious, community oriented initiatives geared towards local health and place making. You Know, You Grow provides the link between local development ideas and what a healthy community needs.

Process

Our team is focused on the facilitation of quality dialogue that is necessary for community growth. Thus, we developed conversational guidelines that sought to empower the community member to share their own perspective. This allows us to gather demographic information on the person and place while also gaining personal insight from someone who is actively engaged in the community. These types of conversations can foster common ground and direct collaborative growth within community.

We had to seek out people to interview as a first step. Our team decided to write down a list of the people we each personally knew that are active members of the Grand Rapids community as a whole. By starting within our own networks we hoped to both gain initial insights and make swifter progress through warm referrals to other community leaders. This is helpful because it builds upon established relationships instead of cold calling a person which removes an interpersonal challenge. We each chose three candidates to interview and set out to reach them via telephone or email. These conversations included dialogue from emails, phone calls, and face-to-face conversations. We started by greeting our interviewees and asking simple, open-ended questions like “How is your day?” and “How is your work in the community going?” We purposefully ask more “how and why” instead of “yes or no” questions in order to promote open dialogue. This allowed the person being interviewed to guide the conversation to the topics he or she thinks is important.

When actually implementing our conversations we faced a number of challenges. Scheduling conflicts were an initial barrier. A second unaccounted for issue arose when interviews yielded the insight that many community leaders were relatively unaware of the needs

of their community. Some potential interviewees did not see the value in this process and did not prioritize our meetings, emails, phone calls.

Of the interviews that did take place valuable information was found. In asking questions like “what works in communities and promotes them to flourish?” we were answered with advice to start on small, reasonable scales. Any projects undertaken need to be manageable by local residents. It has to be a closed loop where the community itself can control most aspects without outsourcing and accruing additional costs. There should also be absolute transparency of the model being used. Transparency is likely to increase the buy-in and foster ethical practices. We also learned that positivity and productivity are more likely to flourish when leadership is open to feedback, listens, and supports the community.

From here we are able to use our collected data to better understand the systems and needs that already exist around the city. This information could not only benefit businesses but the city as an entity as well. Our process of engaging in open dialogue and collecting data can be applied to any city and can serve as a report of community’s health, current culture, desires, and most importantly their needs. The lessons learned from these interviews can be examined in detail in the appendix.

Results

When working in community collaboration, it is inevitable that conflict and struggles will arise. One of our biggest obstacles as a team was working in the limited amount of time with our project. Having less than 15 weeks in one semester and trying to combine a total of five individuals busy schedules to work on this project has given us a small opportunity to open the door of possibilities on how we could see this model evolve. What we have accomplished so far this semester includes progressing forward with initiating one-on-one conversations and making personal connections with community leaders. Each team member selected three individuals within the Grand Rapids community hoping to understand their thoughts on local food systems what changes could be made to this system. In our decision to converse with community members, we formed a list of individuals from a diverse range of areas in the community (see appendix for details). Some other leaders we considered reaching out to include local religious figures, neighborhood associations, school board members and non-profit organizers.

Supporting the claim that beginning with the relationships already established is an effective first step, one of the only community member who responded to a request for an interview was a close family friend who used to be involved in the Grand Rapids Public School system.¹ With these efforts in mind, it is now clear that community outreach should occur earlier in the semester so there is enough time to plan and prepare for this valuable conversation. These conversations could “ensure that the decision-making process facilitates public scrutiny and

¹ A couple of insights emerged from just this one interview. For instance, even though this interviewee lived in the Kentwood school district, she chose to take her kids to Grand Rapids public schools. This decision indicates there is a commitment to and belief in Grand Rapids. During the conversation, I mentioned issues surrounding healthy food choices and the interviewee said she chose to have her kids bring healthy lunches to school rather than purchasing hot lunches.

encourages effective public participation” (Gibson). These efforts are likely to initiate collaborators and community members to come together.

A total of 15 attempts were made to connect with various community members and leaders. Only a select few responded. Due to the small and qualitative nature of the feedback, we have struggled to consolidate the information in a manner that would be understandable for others. Confounding our ability to analyze the data, we realized some of our interview questions were different. To set the tone of these conversations, the interviews should instead ask the same open-ended question. The different methods of communication also made integrating insights difficult. For instance, some insights were gained through email, others by phone and yet others through in-person dialogue. It is important to reach out to different areas of the community and collaborate because when it comes to collecting this information it increases the chances that a wide variety of stakeholder concerns and interests are addressed (Gibson). Hearing these diverse conversations can guide us in identifying the problems within the community.

Future Consideration

We have reached out to a variety of businesses and residents in the Grand Rapids community to obtain feedback on how to further improve Grand Rapids' food system. Our main struggle was having people get back to us via e-mail and phone within a reasonable time to collect our data before the semester ended. It either took them a while to reply or they did not reply at all. We thus recommend going to local businesses and having one-on-one meetings with employees that work within the Grand Rapids food system. Some interviewees might then be invited to be a part of a committee/project seeking to foster change. Such a process works from the bottom-up, invites participation, and builds networks. Engaging community members in these various roles is likely to provide the greatest knowledge of the inner-workings and shortcomings of the local food system. Reaching out to different local businesses, having a goal, and getting the community involved through local leaders and resident representatives will help establish the needs to be addressed in improving the Grand Rapids food system. Changes that are made collaboratively (with community buy-in) can result in inclusive, systematic positive change.

There needs to be a common starting point when reaching out to different businesses to make sure all the information received is comparable and easier to organize. Future students should consider collecting feedback via e-mail, phone, or face-to-face interview with residents and local businesses. If our team had another semester we discussed focusing on the means in which we engage with community members before connecting them together in conversation. Meeting one-on-one, developing a personal connection and framing the process of dialogue our team is pursuing will give both the interviewee and the interviewer a chance to understand one another and assess if the community team is a good fit. Students can then host community team meetings with the formatted material received from the initial conversations with the intent to inform and eventually improve the way residents perceive Grand Rapids' effectiveness and the current struggles with neighborhood food systems. Included in these committee conversations must be a diverse range of people, with the goal being to represent as many stakeholders in the

local food issues as possible. It is important to make sure the students continue to reflect on what they learned in the conversations and allow the group to come up with the best possible solution to meet the needs of the community. To keep the conversations manageable and to respect the different issues that arise within the local food systems, effective dialogue should consider being held in a variety of individual neighborhoods around Grand Rapids; such a process also recognizes that there are unique communities here that have different cultures, histories, and stories. A smaller geographical region to address may lead to more tangible progress. It was difficult to target such a variety of neighborhoods at once, so starting with a specific neighborhood in Grand Rapids, figuring out their needs through face-to-face interviews with the community members and businesses, and then moving forward with the information received may lead to better and more beneficial results.

With the information granted from these community meetings, the students are then able to pursue their studies of the local, wicked, food system problems in greater depth. Our hope is that the information can then be promoted through various venues so it is made accessible to community stakeholders in Grand Rapids. One suggestion is to publish the community-supported data as a basic model of the current strengths and weaknesses of Grand Rapids' food system. This will make it more accessible for local businesses, policy makers, activists, and residents to access the material needed for improving their part in the local food system that best supports the community.

Such a model can bridge gaps, helping residents and businesses in the area understand the work that can be done to help local the food system build into a stronger structure for the community. We believe this form of community engagement is vital for a more sustainable and inclusive community. We also recognize others across the world have pursued similar models. Addressing food systems is unique to addressing many other community topics, and perhaps there is a more productive format for engagement that works to integrate the literature and dynamics of elements in a food system. Engaging each step in the food system may mean looking outside of one neighborhood and connecting with the people involved in every step: the growing, harvesting, distributing, marketing, and consuming of food. Our team did not have the time to look into how we could more effectively incorporate all these dynamics and creatively model a space for collaboration and dialogue specific to food systems, but see that it could be an important next step.

Conclusion

As we wrap up the semester and our project, we hope the work we have done and thoughts we have organized can be of use to future students or community members looking for the tools to engage communities in their local development projects. From learning the literature on Wicked Problems and developing the plan of action for our Wege Poster, to then modifying and implementing aspects of our plan, it has been a powerful learning experience full of rewards, challenges, and growth. Fifteen weeks proved a challenge to address all the ideas we came up with and work we saw needed to be done, but this work does not end here for many of us and for

future students. Having conversation, listening intently, and moving forward on addressing a community's needs in a manner they can sustain is vital for a city to flourish. We believe our idea holds much value for the Grand Rapids community.

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Appendix

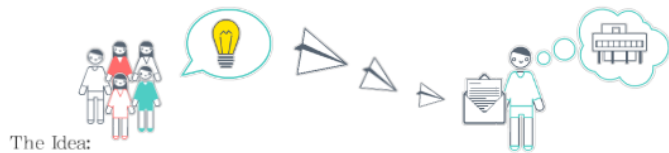
Figure 1: "Action Plan"

You Know, You Grow

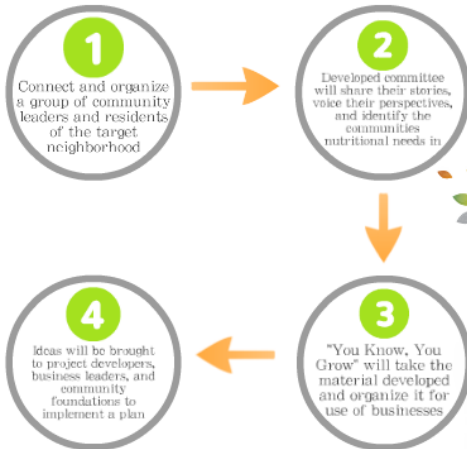


We believe the best community business ideas come from the community members themselves. Honest community engagement feeds healthy neighborhood development; ideas start with the resident's needs and develop into unique plans. Addressing a neighborhood's nutritional needs is messy, involving many stakeholders and social dynamics. Starting a business plan knowing the community's story and perspective can produce businesses the owners and local neighbors feasibly support and maintain in a manner sustainable to both the planet and the people.

Sincerely, your team,
Jen, Maddy, Julia, Hannah, Brent



The Idea:
Building up communities begins with building strong relationships. You Know, You Grow provides the space for unbiased, open ended, and comfortable discussion to be had, and stories to be shared.

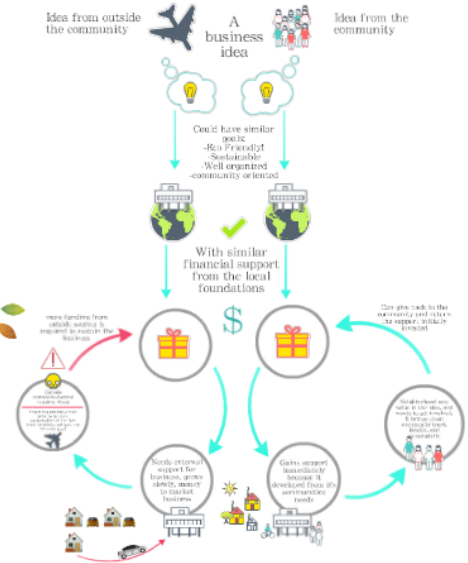


How does effective community engagement make my business more sustainable?

Circular Economy

START HERE

How could a business rooted in the communities needs be a part of the circular economy?



Interview quantitative data

Team Member Name	Number of Contacts			
Brent Warren	2			
Contact Name	Role in Community	Was contact made	By what medium	Place, time, and duration of meeting
Jake Rohde	Financial advisor for Northwestern Mutual	yes	txt and in-person interview	American Seating March 9th 4pm 15minutes
Questions Asked:	Results			
Are you actively engaged with the community? and how so	Sort of. Does volunteer work because of work			
What do you know about food systems in Grand Rapids	nothing			
Where do you currently get your food	meijer			
Have you ever been to the downtown market?	no			

Contact Name	Role in Community	Was contact made	By what medium	Place, time, and duration of meeting
Tyler Kinch	Recent	yes	email	Coffee shop

	Graduate. S.P.O.R.T.S. CEO			
Questions Asked:	Results			
are you actively engaged in the community? and how so	yes, I run and operate S.P.O.R.T.S. A non-profit that holds sports camps for underprivileged kids in various communities around GR			
What do you know about GR's food systems	Not a whole lot. I occasionally get food from the farmers market by the YMCA			
Where do you normally get your food?	Meijer or family fare			
Meeting Summary Please describe how it went, your opinions, the overall all feel, helpfulness, etc... There is no right or wrong answer here.				
Tyler was enthusiastic to talk to me. He is very active in the community but is not educated in food systems of the area				

Team Member Name	Number of Contacts			
Hannah Fernando	2 total (feedback chart 2 of 2)			
Contact Name	Role in Community	Was contact made	By what medium	Place, time, and duration of meeting
Kayem Dunn	Director of the Downtown Market	Yes	Email	The Lantern Café March 13 th , 8:30am hours
Questions Asked:	Results			
What is your role in GR and the market?	Has worked many non-profit boards, career coaching/non-profit start up coaching. Came from DDA (downtown development authority). Director of market, serves on board, not the president though			
What are some struggles the market is experiencing?	Leadership in food systems, just came from board meeting and noticed a real lack in food systems leadership. Struggling to support seasonal, year round farmers via the market. Struggling to work with other food activists and food system leaders in GR			

Contact Name	Role in Community	Was contact made	By what medium	Place, time, and duration of meeting
Crystal LeCoy	Director of Incubator kitchen at Downtown Market	Yes	Email	The Lantern Café March 27 th , 8:00am 12 hours
Questions Asked:	Results			
Why does the market operate on the large scale that it does?	Funders donations lead to expectations for performance and high quality development, we were encouraged to develop a tourist destination			
What are some struggles the market is experiencing?	Leadership in collaboration and teamwork, communication between new ideas to open ourselves up to farmers and the market vendors that want the space to stay theirs. The market vendors want to understand and be aware of how the market is developing, and as of right now it's poor communication			
What can you see being a successful model for a business that is sustainable via community and a good addition to local food systems?	We discussed a model of a 24/7 farmers retail market space held in a small space the size of perhaps a typical coffee shop with an upstairs that has an actual coffee shop/café. Open to public, run by public and the farmers, and affordable for many different people. Development must be small scale and derived from community. (Model in Ann Arbor)			