

Community Engagement

Assessment 2

Help Our Future through Our Past -
From Centuries to Centuries -
Reflection

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Community engagement has become a regularly used term in recent years and in almost all cases it is associated with having a positive effect on the community, however to begin this essay I would like to begin by looking into what exactly makes a community engagement the positive change for many communities. So let us break community engagement down to its components. The general definition of community by the Cambridge dictionary is:

“The people living in one particular area or people who are considered as unit because their common interests, social group, or nationality”

So what, then, is community engagement? Is it as simple as just engaging a certain community in an activity? If so then what could that activity be? Who exactly from the community is being engaged? And most importantly...why?

Neighbourhood Planning Guidance: Note 12 from 2015 defines community engagement as “the active participation of local residents and community groups in the decisions that affect their lives” (NPG, 2015). The same note goes on to explain “the benefits and principles for effective community communication, plus a range of consultation methods that can be used for engagement” (NPG, 2015). The aforementioned definition has not changed all too much for the past twenty years as, all too similarly, in a publication by the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), from 1997 they state that community engagement is:

“...the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people” (CDC, 1997)

The same publication later goes on to describe it as:

“It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioural changes that will improve the health of the community and its members [which] often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices” (CDC, 1997)

Having defined what an effective community engagement is let us look at the decisions we make along the way of improvement. All throughout our lives we make different choices, big

and small, which we choose to follow them to achieve our various goals. As Jordan Peterson puts it nicely in his book “*12 Rules for Life*”:

“Consciousness is a mystery that faces the mystery of potential and transforms it into actuality. We do that with every choice we make. Our choices determine the destiny of the world. By making a choice you alter the structure of reality.” (Peterson, 2018)

I believe that one of the most important choices we can make is to choose to reflect on a past situation. The reason why I believe that, is that reflection is a very simple two steps process (1. Stop for a moment and think about what happened; 2. Based on that think about how you can do better in the future), and yet an incredibly important process as it works as a direct connection between past and future. With a detailed enough reflection, you can minimise future disappointments, problems and even failures.

One of the best options of one such detailed reflection is the Gibbs reflective cycle. The cycle was named after its creator, Graham Gibbs – an Oxford University professor who presented his cycle of reflection in his 1988 book: “*Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Methods*”. In the book Gibbs states:

“The reflective learning cycle presented in the book models how learners can link theory and practice through engaging in a cyclical sequence of activities: describing, feeling, evaluating, analysing, concluding and action planning” (Gibbs, 1988)

For the purposes of this cycle I would be using the two days’ demonstration event that took place at Leytonstone park led by the workshop leaders, who specialize in the various crafts, which was one of the first parts of the project. The Gibbs cyclical model of reflection takes us through six main steps:

1. Description – The project will work alongside three schools in the Leytonstone area as well as a charitable organisation such as KIDS and will consist of producing various works based on traditional and modernized-traditional handcrafts. To achieve this goal all our acts are based on:
 - Consultations – meetings to discuss the project with community and professionals
 - Effective communication – based on good explanation and participation of some of the community members, not only exchange an information

- Collaboration- which means working together rather than alone as it is the better solution
2. Feelings – I have been excited about the project and the idea it represents from its very conception and shaping. One of the reasons for my deep interest in the nature of this project is due to the fact that I, myself, had the opportunity to be involved with a similar project back when I was in elementary school. Going forward through my life, my priorities and wishes changed quite a lot, however when we talked about a similar idea in class I felt a connection with my young self and accept the idea as my project immediately. As an ex-participant in a similar project I strongly believed that I could help shape the project with my personal experiences from my early years in combination with my more mature current self. My only big worry was whether or not the children will take the project to heart as such activities are not common in any of our everyday life. Beyond that worry however was my gratitude for the support of my relatives and friends, who gave me the courage to continue with the project, as they saw the importance and benefits of such an activity for children.
 3. Evaluating – The positive and most important aspect of the two-day event was that it managed to achieve its primal goal – both the children and their parents adopted the idea of creating and participating in the various creative groups and workshops, whose activities were demonstrated at the event. The organized presentations and seminars helped the participants to discover their hidden talents and interests. Some of the families seemed genuinely surprised by the sheer drive with which the children adopted the necessary skillset required for each individual activity. They were provoked to think creatively and present their very interesting ideas for future activities. It did not seem as if any of the children or grownups alike felt that any of the workshops were long-winded or boring. Some of the families even wanted to stay for another activity but there simply was not enough space to accommodate that.

This would not be a proper evaluation if I was not to mention the downsides as well, the main of which was that on the first day the time allotted for the workshops and demonstrations seemed rather insufficient. The turn-around of the families arriving and leaving, the tidying up and preparing for the next workshop appeared to be short as well. Providing also, that children work at different speeds and understand the task at hand at their own speed, unfortunately meant that some of their ideas for creations could not reach its final stage, leaving some kids a little disappointed. Taking the first

day into account, for the second day the children were given the opportunity to express themselves through drawings of finalized ideas, so that the actual end product could be presented more figuratively. The weather was another negative side, as, despite the forecast for a sunny day, second day of the workshops, was windy and it was a challenge to stay at one place for a long time. As we do not possess supernatural abilities, a better way to deal with uncontrollable weather has not been invented yet.

4. Analyzing – This step can be achieved in many different ways, as there is not just one proper way to analyze something. For the purposes of this essay, however I am going to use the well-known four-box strategy analysis known as SWOT. Some of the advantages of the SWOT analysis are that it is “Easy to understand, applicable to many levels in an organization, can be applied at different depths and is highly visual, consequently easy to communicate to other stakeholders”. In Volume 12 of Strategic management Tanya Sammut-Bonnici describes the purpose of the SWOT analysis. In the aforementioned journal, it is stated that:

“A SWOT analysis evaluates the internal strengths and weaknesses, and the external opportunities and threats in an organization's environment. The internal analysis identifies resources, capabilities, core competencies and competitive advantages, using a functional approach to review finance, management, infrastructure, procurement, production, distribution, marketing, reputational factors and innovation.” (Sammut-Bonnici, 2015)

With that in mind, here is my analysis of the project in question:

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
1. There are many volunteers – parents, grand-parents who believed in and took the idea to solve the big gap between generations with teaching and explaining the forgotten technics 2. A lot of community members take part of the project 3. Relatives involved in the activities 4. The project is supported from private organizations	1. Unable to finance to rent our own space to combine all different activities in one place. 2. There are difficulties in fulfilling the wishes of some of the children to participate in several of the proposed activities due to the coincidence of the time for their implementation
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
1. Our opportunities are to involve more children at different ages to take part. 2. Including more schools from different areas so we can exchange experience 3. Lifting the project to a national or even global level aiming to spread the initiative	1. Travelling to and from the activities –kids have to be accompanied by adults who have a busy schedule 2. Dependence on weather conditions for events and some of the workshops 3. The ongoing struggle with technology addiction even during the seminar

5. Concluding – As the conclusion for the Gibbs cycle overlaps heavily with the conclusion to this work I chose to present them as an amalgamation further below
6. Action Plan – This plan consists of the steps you take with yourself for any further encounter with a similar situation. In our case the steps are a few yet crucial:

- a) Next time when I have to make similar activities, we will work harder to set deadlines in advance. Those deadlines have to be clear for all participants in the project.
- b) Time management needs to be improved for such next events. More time should be allowed between the workshops for an easier turnaround.
- c) We must take into account the different dietary needs of people when organizing places to provide food and drink. Especially in current days with allergies and intolerances being more prevalent in peoples diet we should strive to provide more options of the vegan and gluten free kind.

Having utilized the reflective cycle, I can now see the full process as a whole – where to improve and what we did well. All that remains is the conclusion.

I will begin my conclusion with an article from the Pennstate College of Agricultural Sciences, which sums up my thoughts rather well:

“Community engagement can be complex and labor-intensive and require dedicated resources such as time, funding, and people with the necessary skills... Building and implementing effective strategies requires a solid grounding in the best tools, techniques, and information available.” (Pennstate, 2018)

Working with people and children in particular is a big challenge. Not all aspects of the whole process of communication and interaction can be foreseen. You can never account for how people are going to take something. And precisely because we are all people, with different understandings, attitudes, and perceptions, we are so colourful and we can create the new and different world, which would be the full picture created by the small jigsaw puzzle pieces, that each of us carries. The most important conclusion is that it is normal to make mistakes and inaccuracies, but they make us move forward and look for ways to overcome them every time.

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