

2018

Master's Project: Strengths, Engagement and Voices: A Story of Community

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Recommended Citation

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STRENGTHS, ENGAGEMENT AND VOICES: A STORY OF COMMUNITY

A Project Thesis Presented

by

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to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science Specializing in
Leadership for Sustainability
January, 2018

Defense Date: November 2, 2017

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Abstract

“The understanding of community is extremely important today, not only for our emotional and spiritual well-being, but for the future of our children and, in fact, for the survival of humanity.”

~Fritjof Capra (2009, p.1)

This project focused on the rural town of Cambridge, VT and the perceptions, ideas, and efforts of some of its members to create a sustainable and thriving environment for the entire community. The project built on previous community engagement efforts and utilized community engagement practices that centered on relationships and focused on community conversations by sharing stories, identifying community strengths and needs, and creating a social network to support positive change. The project also included my participation in a local government appointed Community Engagement Team. Over the course of a year, these efforts yielded insights about community engagement processes and practices while supporting Cambridge community members to identify a variety of challenges and opportunities to create a more vibrant and sustainable community.

Keywords: Sustainable communities; community; relationship; ecosystem, storytelling

Project Overview

“The telling and hearing of stories is a bonding ritual that breaks through illusions of separateness and activates a deep sense of our collective interdependence.” ~Annette Simmons (2006, n.p.)

Approximately 20 years ago, newly married, and searching for a place to settle down, my husband and I accidentally stumbled upon Vermont. We were living out of a 12', 1968 travel trailer, and if not for a mechanical failure with our Bronco, would have likely rolled on through. The unintended pause created a moment for us to slow down and soak in our surroundings. We immediately fell in love with the beauty of the Vermont landscape and decided to stay for awhile. We found an apartment in the small rural town of Cambridge, and although we did not have the money necessary to move in, the owner let us. He invited us to dinner and shared his story of his relationship to this place and his desire to encourage young families to move in to the area. We have since moved from that apartment building, but have remained in the same community these past 20 years. Because of the connections we've made and relationships we've built, we have made it our home.

Cambridge is located in the Lamoille River Valley and according to the 2010 Census, has approximately 3,600 residences spread out over 63 square miles. The land has been inhabited for the last 10,000 years by the Abenaki People. Since the late 1700s, Cambridge has been colonized and settled by Europeans who practiced sheep farming and more recently dairy farming. The highest peak in Vermont, Mount Mansfield, is located within the boundaries of Cambridge, as well as the Lamoille River, a major watershed of Lake Champlain. Cambridge is also home to an internationally known ski resort, Smuggler's Notch Resort.

In 2016, I was feeling overwhelmed and disenfranchised by the negativity in social media, the lack of civility in public discourse, and the polarized political climate. At this same time, I learned of a study conducted by researchers at Brigham Young University that reported societal isolation and loneliness as presenting health risks comparable to smoking and increased risk of heart disease (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Conversely, the study reported that strong relationships correlated to positive

health effects. According to Dr. Dhruv Khullar (2016) of Harvard Medical School, this research, combined with survey data that reports the number of people who say they are lonely doubling from 20% to 40% in the past 30 years, is creating an epidemic of social isolation. Dr. Dhruv Khullar (2016, p.1) writes in his article:

A great paradox of our hyper-connected digital age is that we seem to be drifting apart. Increasingly, however, research confirms our deepest intuition: human connection lies at the heart of human well-being. It's up to all of us – doctors, patients, neighborhoods and communities – to maintain bonds where they're fading, and create ones where they haven't existed.

In their seminal book *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*, Peter Block and John McKnight (2010) argue that societal isolation is a consequence of our current consumer society which facilitates a disconnect from our neighbors and isolation from our communities. They infer that local connections are what create abundant and competent communities and suggest that gifts, associations, and hospitality are the three central characteristics necessary for a competent community which they define as: “the place where I can be myself. Neighbors exist to encourage this. For each of us, reclaiming the personal is about aliveness and vitality. Who I am” (2010, p. 55).

In thinking about the impact of loneliness and loss of connection within our communities, I was led to look closer to home for ways to catalyze positive change and explore how my own community could benefit from increased engagement and attention to relationships. I developed this project to explore human connection. I was eager to discover ways members of Cambridge are actively engaging with each other, as well as potentially identify new ways to bring people together to create positive change and give back to this community. The questions at the heart of my project included:

- Is this community providing for all of its members in an open, honest and accessible way? Is there something I can do to help facilitate that if it's not?
- What community engagement practices might help recenter relationship as Cambridge continues to change?

With these questions in mind, the main goals for this project were to:

1. Create connections and build relationships among community members;
2. Engage community members in conversations about community strengths, how we can be of service to each other, and how we can create conditions for all community members to thrive;
3. Share the stories of community members and showcase daily efforts in creating positive change;
4. Identify challenges and potential opportunities for the community to become a more vibrant place for all its members.

Strategies/Methods

Charles Vogle writes in his book *The Art of Community: Seven Principles for Belonging*, “Stories are the most powerful way humans learn. Every community, like every person, is full of stories. Sharing certain stories deepens a community’s connections” (2016, p. 75). Through stories, we learn about the values and identities of community members, and through the sharing of stories we begin to build relationships. When a community has a strong identity and network of relationships, it can abandon the concept of being saved by the perfect leader or the perfect program, and instead look inside itself to recognize that what it needs to thrive is already there (Wheatley, 2011). With this idea in mind, I set out to identify a series of strategies, practices and methods that would highlight the strengths of the Cambridge community, enhance relationships, and make space for stories. Because Cambridge is a complex place and system, the methods and strategies that I utilized changed as I

continued to do my best to align with these goals. The section below provides an overview of these different methods and practices.

Intentioned Conversations

As I began this project, I wanted to better understand Cambridge community strengths. To do this, I reached out to community members and invited them to participate in intended conversations that included some elements of semi-structured interviews (Rand, 2009). These conversations were open-ended and included several framing questions (see Appendix A). The conversations also invited participants to share stories that would provide a diverse set of perspectives about the nature of the Cambridge community. Participants for these conversations were identified in several different ways. I began by identifying two active community members on our local community online neighborhood network, Front Porch Forum (FPF). After these initial two conversations, I utilized an informal process akin to snowball sampling methodology (Rand, 2009); asking these two original interviewees for suggestions of people in the community they thought would be interested and willing to participate in the project. Five additional participants were selected using this process. At the conclusion of these conversations, I noticed an over representation of a single, networked group. Most of this first round of conversations targeted people who were active in the community. As a result, I attempted to expand my reach by making an announcement and invitation on FPF to the community (see Appendix A). I received 6 replies from interested community members, and from these I hosted conversations with three additional community members. At this point I conducted a demographic review of the participants to date, and then specifically invited four additional community members in an effort to include some additional diversity in age, race, level of community engagement, and gender. These conversations were mainly one-on-one, with the exception of two instances where couples were interviewed together. All conversations were recorded so that I could engage more in the discussion

than focus on taking notes. In total I sat down with 14 members of the community with the conversations ranging in time between 20 and 90 minutes.

Participant Observation and Artifact Review

In addition to the heavy focus on conversations and storytelling, I also relied on participant observation (Trueman, 2015) and artifact review to help identify challenges and potential opportunities as well as to look for ways to create connection and build relationship. Specific sources of information have included:

- Front Porch Forum (an online neighborhood network and forum);
- The News & Citizen (the local newspaper);
- Local government meetings and reviewing meeting minutes including:
 - Community Engagement Team (CET), Selectboard, Conservation Commission, Cambridge Economic Development Advisory Committee; Recreation Board; Development Review Board; Cambridge Community Task Forces;
- The Cambridge Elementary School
 - weekly newsletter, monthly assemblies, sporting events;
- Reports and data from past focus groups and meetings held in the Cambridge community with the intent of boosting engagement, recreational opportunities and economic development;
- Reports from other similarly characterized communities;
- Time outside on the land in the community, immersing myself in the natural place taking pictures utilizing creative exploration through photography.

Over the course of the past year I spent approximately 70-80 hours conducting participant observation and artifact review.

Survey

I created and distributed a community wide engagement survey in partnership with the CET. The survey's intent was to identify specific issues related to each community member's participation in local government decision making, as well as identifying some challenges within the community. The survey was made available for several weeks on FPF. In addition, a handful of elderly residents known to not have internet access were surveyed in person, a link was included on the official Town website and the local paper, and a flyer with the survey information was distributed to several businesses and bulletin boards around the community.

Results

Through the intentioned conversations described above, I have developed a deep sense of connection and relationship with the people I met and the community in which we live. This in itself is a critically important result of a relationship-based community engagement process. In analyzing and reflecting on the data collected above, I realized that this outcome was shared by many of the participants in this process. Upon completion of the data collection described above, I reviewed the information with my core questions in mind to identify patterns in participant responses and specific ideas that might also be pertinent to thinking about community engagement practices for the town of Cambridge. Based on this data analysis there were a variety of key learnings.

Many participants commented on the nature of community and its importance. As one participant responded, "Community to me is like an ecosystem, it's being supportive of individuals, supportive of group efforts, of not being judgmental of things I don't agree with a sort of live and let live philosophy because community is supposed to work for everyone." It also became apparent from these conversations that there is a deep-rooted connection between the people and the natural physical place, through beauty, recreation, tourism and history.

When asked about the community's strengths, many respondents mentioned the physical beauty of the area. One person said, "The incredible beauty, the environment, because of its ruggedness it draws a certain element of people. People who are strong, they're hardy, they live close to the land, they persevere, and they utilize what is in our own backyard."

The importance of relationships (between individuals and organizations) was also apparent from these conversations between the people of the community. There were multiple indications of community-based organizations that played a critical role in connecting community members including the Cambridge Arts Council, the Varnum Memorial Library, the Elementary School, the churches and clubs (Eagles, Rotary, 55+, Boy Scouts) and local businesses. Although many of the participants didn't know each other, their stories of the community and how they live within it, overlapped and intertwined in many ways.

From my time spent in the community and the conversations, I have created a website (<https://spark.adobe.com/page/3LqzoiDcMVCFv/>) and video that highlights these core ideas and some participant stories. This video is intended to be part of how I am sharing my learning with the community and will be viewed on January 28, 2018 as part of the Cambridge community wide Annual Winterfest Celebration.

From post-interview conversations, I have become aware of a few unintended, but positive outcomes that have occurred as a direct result of these conversations and connections. One community member is conducting an after-school focus group with elementary aged children around what it means to be in community and exploring ways youth can be involved in creating change in the community. Another member started a community focused Facebook page that they had been meaning to do for years but our conversation sparked them into action. I have also been asked by another member if I would share my project and story with her service-learning class at Johnson State College.

Another emergent outcome of this project was an invitation I received to participate on a Community Engagement Team (see CET mission in Appendix B). I accepted this offer as an opportunity to share my learnings with this group and participate in a community-based process intended to support community engagement. I have attended ten meetings since the team was created after the March 2017 Town Meeting. Minutes from several CET meetings are also included in Appendix B. A significant part of the CET work has consisted of creating, administering and analyzing the survey described above. While the survey questions did not align exactly with my own project questions, there was enough overlap that an additional survey would have seemed redundant and this offered the opportunity for a collaborative process.

Participation in the survey was approximately 11% of the registered voting population in Cambridge, which is similar to the percentage of voters that, in recent history, have attended Town Meeting. Some key results from the survey included:

- 60% of respondents were above the age of 45;
- 60% of respondents were female;
- 75% of respondents have lived in the community for more than 10 years;
- 25% of respondents work in Cambridge;
- 62% of respondents listed the scheduling of town meetings as the biggest barrier to attending.
- 50% of respondents listed voting for town officials via Australian Ballot as the biggest issue for the CET to address.

The results clearly show that the Town Meeting is currently not perceived by all members as an effective mechanism to actively participate in town affairs. The survey also included a question about important issues that CET should address. The three most common topics that appeared were: 1) better communication, 2) better education and understanding of how the town operates and Town Meeting; and 3) people's inability to vote due to not being able to attend Town Meeting. The survey

responses were analyzed by CET members and led to the creation of work groups focusing on *Communication, Warning Items and Procedure, and Childcare/Environment*. A report of the CETs findings and recommendations was completed and presented to the Selectboard in November.

My review of historical efforts in the community and comparison of similar communities has turned up documents such as:

- *Cambridge Crossroads – Forum Idea Mine: Land/Education/People Where our Community Connects* – (Shanley, 2008)
- *Cambridge Community Visit – Report and Action Plan* (VCRD, 2015)
- *Stowe Town Meeting Task Force Findings Report* – (TMTF, 2016)
- *Middlesex Operator’s Manual – a citizen’s guide to everything you ever wanted to know about your town* – (MTMSC, 2008).

Information gleaned from these documents revealed an actively engaged citizenry with a passion for their community as a key ingredient to seeing any tangible change in the community. Each of these efforts produced outcomes that community members identified as areas of need in their communities, however the two Cambridge events listed above lacked longevity. The Stowe Town Meeting Task Force offers a possible solution to this challenge. After their initial work and recommendations to their Selectboard were completed, they converted into a non-profit called Stowe Vibrancy, whose mission is “to increase the vibrancy of the Town of Stowe through the enhancement of social, recreational, cultural, economic, and physical characteristics of the village” (Stowe Vibrancy, 2017). These reports will likely continue to be evaluated as the CET moves past our initial recommendations to the Selectboard and determines its mission moving forward.

Evaluation/Assessment/Learnings

Assessment of this project was critical to ensure that my methods were reflective of my core principles and are not creating unintended impacts. My assessment process consisted of personal

critical reflection as well as more structured feedback from community member participants. More specifically the assessment of my project included:

1. Participant Assessment Questionnaire – I sent out a questionnaire to all fourteen participants and received six responses back (Appendix D).
 - Results of this questionnaire revealed that participants felt as if their time was valued and that the conversations were meaningful. All but one of the respondents agreed that our conversation created an opportunity for additional dialogue with others about community engagement.
2. Two Formative Assessment Meetings with Committee
 - These meetings provided an opportunity to hone my methods and provided feedback about the ongoing changes to the community engagement process.
3. Direct feedback solicited from a Selectboard member who is also on the CET about my participation. (Appendix E)
 - This feedback reflected the importance of relationship making and my willingness to show up even though I wasn't a voting member of the CET.

In addition to the insights gleaned through external feedback structures described above, I kept a process journal to highlight my own learnings and critical reflection. Key insights from this process included:

- My project changed throughout the process to be more inclusive of local government as well as the general citizenry. I believe my initial focus was more geared toward trying to find areas in the community that needed to be “fixed”, whereas what came out of the project highlighted more of the strengths of the community and how people are working everyday within the community to create positive change.
- Upon reflection and feedback, my biggest challenge was time, as I realized that authentic relationships cannot be formed on a timeline. However, living in this community for the

past 20 years gave me shared sense of experience with many of the people I interviewed and through our conversations I felt like I was weaving myself into the community in a way that felt real.

- It was challenging to find members of the community that had any negative viewpoints. Everyone I interviewed, and all documents reviewed had very positive comments. The survey responses revealed some challenges members see in the community, so it might have been that the anonymity let people express their feelings a little more honestly. The fact that they were being recorded during our interviews may have skewed people's responses to be more positive.
- My relationship with the non-human aspect of the community was as integral to this project as the interviews. Sitting in the physical place, whether along the Lamoille River, on the top of Mount Mansfield, or on Main Street – I practiced deep listening in an effort to ask for permission to explore the place and take photographs.
- I realized through this project that listening is hard and takes a lot of practice. Learning to lean into that silent space between words is the place where I really begin to learn and understand. Giving people the chance to find their own voice and listening without forming an opinion was transformational for practicing conscious communication. If I allow that space I begin to understand my authentic self by truly becoming open to another's story.

Next Steps/Conclusion

The completion of this project is, in reality, just the beginning of engaging with my community in an effort to bring members together to create a space for sharing stories and strengthening our resilience. This first step of building relationship with the human and non-human members of the community has heightened my responsibility to contribute to creating a thriving and sustainable place.

I plan to continue work with CET to foster their goal of increasing community wide participation in local decision making, as well as share my website and video, and facilitate a discussion of interested community members regarding these findings. I have volunteered to work with the Town Clerk to provide advice and feedback on the revamping of our town website, and I plan on working with interested members on evaluating the development of a non-profit organization, similar to Stowe Vibrancy, for Cambridge that provides a platform to enhance the social, recreational, cultural, economic and physical characteristics of the community.

This project, although relatively small in scale, has created a huge impact on my personal views of and relationship to my community. While a major goal of the project was to look for ways to increase community engagement and participation, I was reminded of all the engagement and service work that is already happening and am looking forward to highlighting and helping to bring forth these efforts. I am hopeful my proposed efforts to continue working with the community will create additional space for engagement in a way that moves Cambridge closer to serving members in all they ways they are hungry to experience.

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