

Gardening as a Platform for Learning and Community Building

Alan P. Diduck¹, Lisa Gate-Villa², Robert L.J. Moquin³, Laura Cotton²,
Jeff Rasmussen², Jeanette Sivilay¹

¹Environmental Studies and Sciences, The University of Winnipeg,

²Kenora Association for Community Living, ³Natural Resources Institute, University of Manitoba

Introduction

This study is part of a 5-year, community-based project called the "Common Ground Research Forum: A Cross-Cultural Learning Platform for Resource Sharing". The study was designed in collaboration with the Kenora Association for Community Living (KACL), a non-profit organization creating opportunities for people with special needs to live meaningful and satisfying lives as equals in their communities. KACL has, for several years, operated a community garden in south central Kenora. In 2012, it expanded the size of the garden, made it more accessible for people facing mobility challenges, and enhanced its garden education workshops and community outreach events. The literature suggests that such initiatives can help build social capital and provide promising learning opportunities.



"The Hub-Group", a collaborative painting created in the Art Partners program at KACL's Community Arts Hub.

Objectives

This ongoing research looks at whether the accessible garden helps build relationships, learning opportunities, and respect for the contributions of diverse community members. The objectives are:

1. Describe what participants in the project learned about gardening, themselves, and their communities;
2. Assess whether participants developed a sense of ownership of the garden, and an enhanced sense of community; and,

3. Assess whether they developed an appreciation for people from different cultures or with different abilities.

Research Strategy

1. A longitudinal (2012-14), qualitative design;
2. Semi-directed interviews with garden project participants;
3. Observation of gardening, outreach and education activities;
4. Written surveys of project participants;
5. Reflective journals kept by KACL staff who are co-researchers on the project; and,
6. Coding, thematic sorting and model building with NVivo.

Results

These are preliminary results, focusing solely on the 2012 garden season. The results draw from observations, journal reflections, qualitative surveys of 7 attendees at a harvest potluck, and 8 interviews with 10 garden project participants (KACL staff, consumers and partners, and community members).

Workshops and Community Events	Attendance
Planning a traditional garden, Mohawk teachings	30
Planning the accessible garden x 2	15
Seedling planting, seed and bulb trading x 2	13
Pre-construction celebration, Anishinaabe teachings	30
Medicine trail walk, Mohawk teachings x 2	33
Planting and replanting days x 3	10
Celebration and potluck	87
Pickling	7
Harvest potluck x 2	53
Crabapple juice canning x 2	9
Seed saving and preserving	6

Details of the 2012 accessible garden workshops and community events



Celebration and potluck, Community Arts Hub, July 19, 2012

Learning Outcomes: We found considerable evidence of instrumental, moderate evidence of communicative, and few clear examples of transformative outcomes – although several participants described experiences we classified as potentially transformative.

Primary domains of learning	Examples of outcome types	Selected self-reported evidence
<u>Instrumental</u> : improving performance and learning effective means to reach desired ends	Scientific, technical and ecological knowledge	<u>Wynton</u> : “Now I realize that really if you are going to do seed saving that is something you can do all summer long once you have picked your best plants.”
<u>Communicative</u> : getting better at construing meaning and deducing intentions through communication in social interactions	Social engagement and organization	<u>Billie</u> : “I guess I’ve learned that the economic model isn’t the one that drives community. Community comes together to support each other in the most basic ways of providing the things for life, like food and social relationships and all that.”
<u>Transformative</u> : more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, and flexible assumptions and expectations	Cross-cultural understandings	<u>Miles</u> : “I learned quite a bit from Jan Longboat...about a totally different worldview on the natural world and how that also applies to gardening. So, personally, that would be the biggest one for me. It is kind of difficult to describe. It’s kind of my own journey, I guess.”

Primary domains, examples of types, and selected self-reported evidence of learning outcomes

Modes of Learning: Peer support and mentoring — Learning by doing; embodied learning — Self-organization and reflection — Novel cross-cultural experiences — Learning to learn; cultivating a mindset for learning

Miles: "Everybody was really, like, how would we describe: "cracked wide open", and just ready to be themselves. Everyone was just being authentic and open to everybody."



Tending to the garden: learning by doing



Peer support: learning together

Social Capital: We found considerable evidence of bridging, moderate evidence of bonding, and one clear example of linking capital.

Primary types of social capital	Selected self-reported evidence
Bridging: trustworthy and inclusive relationships that are built between diverse individuals or community groups	<u>Sarah</u> : "When we attended the feasts and the workshops, I liked the mixture of people I saw – people with different abilities, different cultures and ideas coming together in such a friendly, warm and welcoming atmosphere."
Bonding: relationships of solidarity between individuals who share strong social ties like common culture, kinship and socioeconomic status	<u>Ella</u> : "I told [a neighbour] about the [KACL] container garden. And I'm sure she's probably come to take a look. And I went to her to have tea one day, and here she had her cucumbers growing out in the balcony. And she says, "Come and see my cucumbers" (laughs). So, it spreads. You know, the news spreads."
Linking: relationships that connect individuals and/or groups with local and/or regional institutions that occupy positions of power, relative to these individuals or groups	<u>Nina</u> : "Perseverance and dedication and the assistance of Trillium [a project funder] resulted in a lovely addition to the community."

Primary types and selected self-reported evidence of social capital

Discussion and Conclusions

The preliminary results are consistent with the literature showing gardening's potential for providing rich learning opportunities. KACL's 2012 program enabled various modes of learning, resulting in diverse instrumental, communicative, and transformative outcomes. A noteworthy mode was novel cross-cultural experiences, an under-explored topic in transformative learning research. The results are also consistent with studies showing the value of gardening for building social capital, particularly bridging capital. The 2012 program helped build an enhanced sense of community, including greater appreciation for people from different cultures and with different abilities. The lack of evidence regarding bonding

and linking capital can be explained by our focused sampling frame and interview questions. Bonding and linking capital will thus receive greater attention in the next phases of the research, as will changes in learning outcomes and social capital.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (file no. 833-2008-1007), and the time, enthusiasm, and ideas of the research participants.

References

- Diduck, A. P., Sinclair, A. J., Hostetler, G., & Fitzpatrick, P. (2012). Transformative learning theory, public involvement, and natural resource and environmental management. Journal of Environmental Planning and Management, 55(10), 1311-1330.
- Glover, T. D. (2004) Social capital in the lived experiences of community gardeners. Leisure Sciences, 26(2):143-162.
- Mezirow, J. (2009). An overview on transformative learning. In K. Illeris (Ed.), Contemporary Theories of Learning (90-105). New York: Routledge.
- Woolcock, M. (2001) The place of social capital in understanding social and economic outcomes. Canadian Journal of Policy Research, 2(1):11-17.