

The page features a decorative graphic consisting of three overlapping circles in shades of blue, arranged in a descending diagonal line from the top right towards the center. Two thin, light blue lines intersect at the top left and extend diagonally across the page, framing the circles. A large, partially visible version of the same graphic is located in the bottom right corner.

**PROJECT MANAGEMENT REPORT:**  
**BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL**  
**ACROSS COMMUNITY GARDENS:**  
**AN EXPERIMENT**

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## **Overview**

This project has long-term and short-term goals.

Long term goals:

1. Measure changes in social capital resulting from an introduction of basic systems thinking.
2. Evolve a community of practice among a group of community gardens.

Short term goals:

1. Gain and exercise participant observer research skills.
2. Gain and exercise social media and website skills.
3. Assemble elements of a model to illustrate the use of systems thinking to strengthen a community and build capacity for resilience.

These goals address my interest in developing resources for sustainability within communities. I want to gain a clearer understanding of how to develop, utilize and sustain collaborative social capital as a force for change. My thesis is that introducing systems thinking to a community increases social capital as it changes mental models. Systems thinking looks at relationships and patterns among parts. The sum is greater than the parts. Social capital is similar: it is the 'collective genius' of a group. Social capital is a naturally-occurring resource in communities. It can strengthen capacity for resilience and sustainability. Communities are systems, but may not recognize themselves as such nor recognize their connections with other systems.

A basic tenet of systems thinking is that systems are interconnected and nested. I intend to introduce systems thinking by creating conditions for a network. The network is in the form of a community of practice. Ideally not only will individual groups increase their social capital, but joint social capital will increase as it becomes a self-organizing system with emergent properties.

The ultimate goal is to increase resilience in the larger community. In other words, the system will wake up, realize it's a system, and start acting like one - to the benefit of all.

In order to explore this thesis I needed to acquire specific skills. These are expressed as short-term goals. Skills in website management and social media literacy were needed to establish the web-based community of practice. Skills in participant observer research were needed to develop an objective needs assessment and template for the website from focus group input. Participation gives a community of practice its value. Participation is improved with a sense of ownership. Ownership occurs when end users are included in design and decision making, as in the focus group. The focus group was also used to gather baseline data on existing social capital. A participant observer's objectivity is also an asset for better communication.

### **Strategy and Implementation**

The thesis remained constant while the project evolved through several iterations in its definition phase. Initially the idea was to contribute to the body of knowledge on social capital. Strategy was broad-based research. The research showed that my thesis had not been directly addressed in the fields of humanities, business and community organization. This indicated a need for applied academic research outside the time frame. The next project idea was to establish a model or guidelines for general community use. The strategy was focused research and analysis, including the extensive background theory of three separate concepts: systems thinking, social capital and community. I sought to define each concept and identify its core components. As I formed a basis of understanding I recorded points of intersection and overlap between and among the concepts. These intersections are potential leverage points where exerting influence on one will impact the others. One common element is a network-based structure. Addressing this leverage point became a core strategy. Additional knowledge about the dynamics of each

type of system informed the synthesis and evolution of the practicum project. To find patterns for a model I also researched communities and groups that exemplified systems thinking and its effects on social capital or sustainability.

During the course of my research, it became apparent that a "proof of concept" was needed for a model to be viable beyond its theoretical potential. A model is a simplification of a process into its parts. To see if and how a model would work, I needed to be actively engaged in a live, messy process. At this point, the project moved from definition to planning phase. Strategy shifted from conceptual research to applied research, inquiry and concrete project planning.

The next step was to identify elements for an experiment. Criteria included control, boundaries, availability of data, relevant indicators, and social purpose. The variables and construction had to be controlled to ensure accuracy of the results and retain academic rigor. It had to be within my sphere of influence to exert a level of control and direction. I had to be actively engaged to observe and analyze indicators. I sought to identify an existing network-based system that could be manipulated. I interviewed community leaders and sustainability professionals and explored community groups whose structured initiatives could serve as an experiment, using these opportunities to practice skills. Through the assigned project management tools and conversation with my advisor it became apparent that the project needs did not fit existing models. I identified an existing community that filled all requirements: local community gardens. Community gardens are a fundamental tool for paradigm change to a more sustainable world. Networking them together will not only increase their individual and communal resilience, but illustrate systems thinking to a much larger community. I gathered key players to vision a model that would serve a need while demonstrating proof of concept. I

solicited local organizations as partners. Strategy here included analysis, integration, networking, focusing on strengths, using appropriate tools, applying skills and asking for help.

The next strategy was to identify core competencies needed for project management and identify those competencies with which I would need help. I used several tools to help identify needs and project flow, such as a logic model. I invited people with strategic competencies to join the project. A key finding was that the community in the experiment needed to be involved from the beginning to have ownership. I planned and implemented a focus group with help from project partners. The focus group required that I acquire participant observer skills and evaluating the results required skills in action research. The project now moved from a planning phase to execution where additional strategic needs and skill sets were identified. The careful planning phase made execution relatively smooth, if time-consuming. Competencies in marketing and communications have been used. Strategy included objective assessment, skill acquisition and exercise, participatory engagement, shared norms, integration, and relationship building. Strategy has included adaptability throughout the practicum process.

### **Outcomes**

All project phases informed my knowledge base. I shared what I learned with others and several became project partners or serve on my personal board of directors. Diverse course material from the MBA entered into the synthesis, planning and organization of the project. Organizational Dynamics and Self as Leader provided methodology for effective groups. Earth Systems, Human Ecology and Complex Systems provided a basis for systems thinking and resilience modeling throughout the defining, planning, design and execution phases. Accounting was helpful in writing grant proposals to fund the project. Knowledge Management informed the design of a sustainable community of practice, while Ecological Economics provided

background and indicators for social capital; both will continue to inform the project. Research Methods and Practicum proved invaluable in conducting focus group activities, data analysis and project planning. As the experiment continues and emergent properties arise, my studies will influence how I use the results. Outcome: core of partners and supporters; increase in and application of knowledge.

The final expression of the project is a web-based networking platform for a community of practice. It is an experiment but also a community asset. It introduces systems thinking concepts (interconnectivity and nested systems) to existing communities. The Seacoast Community Garden Network will allow over 300 community gardeners to communicate directly with each other, sharing information and best practices. I wrote a grant to fund the website. In keeping with the strategy of inclusion, the process began by crafting mission, vision and values with key players and supporters. The vision was shared with a focus group. The purpose of the focus group was twofold: determine community needs and establish a baseline measure of social capital. The focus group yielded rich data on both fronts. It also established a core group of advocates. The data was coded and common themes analyzed for meaning. I have a baseline for social capital and will be able to measure changes via website activity. In this phase of the project, I had to conduct a competency assessment, then learn and exercise new skills as a participant observer. Outcomes: mission, vision and values statement; grant funds; group events; data summaries and analyses; application of data to the website design; a core group; new skills.

The focus group provided a needs assessment and identified a target audience for the network. From this and informed by my studies I created and implemented a website template. The conceptual design is based on principles of systems theory and guidelines for vibrant communities of practice. The network is a loose container for a self-organizing system with

emergent properties. It may produce its own pattern of behaviors. As part of the experiment the networked community is expected to change and evolve, and that data will be recorded. To build and promote the website additional skills were needed. These included open-source website construction, social media literacy, and concise communication. I also created and implemented a marketing and publicity strategy. Outcomes: a website that fulfills the needs expressed by the community; a Facebook page; a marketing campaign; skill sets and competencies, community recognition.

Although the project has not launched there is already evidence of emergent properties and an increase of social capital. These may be considered indirect outcomes. Among these are six start up community gardens, volunteer involvement in the website, municipal interest, a number of speaking engagements, book collaboration, requests to serve on local initiatives. The focus group had 15 invitees; 22 showed up and my contact list has gone from 30 to nearly 200. Timberland, Stoneyfield, Starbucks and the United Way have asked how they can help with service. I have received many requests for information from the region and beyond. The 'buzz' is evidenced in the number of Facebook fans and media coverage.

If the experiment proves the thesis I can proceed with constructing a model for general application. The MBA has provided the background. Earth Systems and Ecological Economics included the study of models and quantifying subjective data. All classes focused on methodologies for encouraging organizational sustainability and building it into culture. Outcome: beginning structure of a model and guidelines for additional uses.

### **Implementation Challenges**

The first challenge was the slipperiness of applying the thesis to a project. The research question narrowed in focus as the need for more specific application became apparent. It was

challenging to move from one concept to the next, to let go of the idea. It was challenging to accept that the project did not have an endpoint within the Antioch timeframe. Ultimately, the evolution was beneficial in that each development built on the previous one and the final project design may serve to inform the previous ones: they are a nested system. I overcame this challenge by being adaptable and carrying the research question to each new methodology, and by changing my Gantt chart to reflect reality.

With the final idea of a web-based network as proof of concept there were multiple challenges. Several competency gaps had been identified years previously, but it was not until the needs of the project were assessed that the gaps became issues to be addressed with urgency. Several of these stand out as major challenges, including improving communications skills, mastering social media, becoming a participant. To address these personal challenges I sought advice, training, assistance and experience in other venues.

There were also operational challenges for the final project. Websites cost money, so I wrote and received a grant. I recognized that an early personal goal of learning how to build a website was not possible. The needs expressed by the community could not be filled with existing templates. I sought volunteers from within the community to form a design and build team, and input from others as it was constructed. I used my expanded network to publicize the Network, asking them to share with their contact lists, and was able to get significant penetration and word of mouth activity.

### **Success Highlights**

- Acquired skills as a participant observer: a vital requirement for my future success in working with people who may not share my level of engagement and passion. To be able to step back and hear the "song behind the words" will enable me to be a more effective

communicator. To be able to direct my passion to fuel an effort rather than devour it in flames will achieve better and broader long-term results.

- Acquired skills in data coding and interpretation: very useful in recognizing reality. To be able to see what is there, rather than what I wish were there enables me to come from an informed rather than an opinionated perspective. It also will help me to target and celebrate incremental improvement, rather than striving for large-scale change.
- Developing concise and clear communications skills: as a divergent thinker I am still working on this, but I'm getting better at delivering one message at a time. I am learning to let the underlying message speak for itself. I claim improved communication skills as a success highlight because in the course of the project I have been able to communicate clearly to a broad and diverse audience. Immersion in social media communications has taught me to limit and choose words carefully. Whether I move forward to additional academic studies or to create and market a model, this success highlight is one of the most significant.
- Expanded my personal and professional network: an unintended consequence, but one that will prove advantageous to my future career, the future of the Network, and the communities it serves.
- Created something that may be useful to my community: the ultimate success highlight. To have been of service in potentially bringing a new level of communication, understanding, knowledge and functionality to the communities of the Seacoast rewards me deeply. If it serves to deepen sustainability and resilience here, so much the better.
- Envisioned and created a brand-new model: breaking new ground is commonplace in the field of sustainability, but still nice.

## **Next Steps**

The next steps are the seminal steps for the experiment. It is unfortunate that the timing is off because I would like to have more definitive results to share. The Network website is due to launch May 1. Once it goes "live", the community of practice will take over and emergent properties, including increases in social capital, will be recorded and analyzed for volume and meaning. I have baseline measures and will be monitoring those, as well as tracking any new developments. There will be continual monitoring. We may add features or adapt existing ones as needed. After 3 months, we will do a complete evaluation of what is working and what needs adjustment and ask the community to participate in decision making. This process will be repeated in 6-9 months at a focus group.

On May 3, we are holding a public Launch Party. The website will have a show-and-tell demonstration, but center stage will be Open Space Technology affinity group discussions. Attendees will move through two groups sharing ideas, stories, challenges and solutions. This will help gardeners and community leaders form bonds on the essential human side of a community of practice, bonds which can be reinforced on-line or in person. The interactions will be recorded on a similar template used for the focus group and the data will be coded and analyzed. The Launch Party will also have a seed swap to further build relationships based on commonality. A big next step for me at the Launch Party is launching – letting go.

An online platform alone cannot catalyze change. Other interpersonal meetings are planned, including a summer harvest celebration and a fall/winter focus group. Several community garden leaders have suggested opportunities such as visiting other gardens, joint pot lucks, sharing speakers or public education workshops, and joining in support of municipal ordinances regarding school and community gardens. If these kinds of events happen, it will be an indication

of increasing social capital. If they impact the larger community or if new community gardens are formed through the network, it will be a clear indication of increased systems thinking and resilience in the larger community.

If the Network website as proof of concept successfully proves the thesis, I will have the elements of a model for other applications in a municipality or small business. Next steps could include crafting a model for wider use, and marketing that model as a business venture. I have also realized that this may be life's work, and the next life steps are emergent properties, too.

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