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Research Paper Title:

Community Gardening: Integrating Social Responsibility and Sustainability in a Higher Education Setting – A Case Study from Australia



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Research Rationale & Study Motivation

- This case study discusses community gardening (CG) in a private higher education (HE) setting in Brisbane, Australia. The study was motivated by a desire to better understand some of the success factors involved in integrating social responsibility and sustainability within this context, including how to mobilise diverse stakeholder participation.
- The paper charts progress made to date, highlights hurdles that have had to be overcome, distils relevant lessons learned, and extrapolates success factors for future similar projects. Experiences and lessons gathered in this paper will be useful for education stakeholders who are interested to use CG to promote community, social responsibility, and sustainability.

CHC Higher Education (Brisbane, Australia)

Recent large-scale installations of solar panels have enabled progress towards carbon neutrality. It is hoped that **Community Gardening** (CG) may further heighten awareness of the institution's social and environmental responsibility.



Community Gardening — Understandings

 The American Community Gardening Association has defined a community garden as "any plot of land that is gardened by a group of people" (cited in Kitzman-Ulrich et al. 2013, n.p.).

"A community garden is any piece of land gardened by a group of people, utilizing either individual or shared plots on private or public land. The land may produce fruit, vegetables, and/or ornamentals. Community gardens may be found in neighborhoods, schools, connected to institutions such as hospitals, and on residential housing grounds." (University of California [UoC], 2018; para. 1)

Community Gardening (CG) — **Benefits**

 The benefits of CG are broad and diverse and may include considerations of self-sufficiency (Candlin 2011), health-related benefits (Harris 2009; Zick et al. 2013), greening urban environments (Calverley 2017; Hodges Snyder et al. 2016), spatial area maximisation via vertical gardening (Fell 2011), innovation and business growth (Fisk 2010), biopsychosocial benefits (George 2013), individual, community, and environmental resilience (Okvat and Zautra 2011), "reductions in ethnocentrism" (Hoffman et al. 2010, p. 171), and sustainable business (Fetzer and Aaron 2010), among others (Draper and Freedman 2010; Kitzman-Ulrich et al. 2013).

Community Gardening (CG) — Synthesis

- Finally, at a time where democracy is conceived to be in retreat (Kurlantzick 2013), CG has also been described as having the potential for "cultivating deep democracy" (McIvor and Hale 2016, pp. 179-188).
- In synthesis, Kitzman-Ulrich et al. (2013) posit that "[c]ommunity gardens have been in existence since World War II but have gained recent popularity as a community-based strategy to improve access to food and to build healthier communities." (n.p.).

Community Gardening (CG) — Education

• Set within education settings, CG additionally offers a range of benefits, including pedagogical (Guitart et al. 2014). Kraft and Kielsmeier (1995) have highlighted the manifold benefits of experiential learning, which include notions of "land-asteacher" (Raffan 1995, p. 129), "learning to live more lightly on the earth" (B. Johnson 1995, p. 123), and creating "affective bonds to place" (Raffan 1995, p. 129). Further, the literature identifies significant benefits associated with outdoor and environmental education (Hammerman and Hammerman 1973; McRae 1990), including opportunities for 'pedagogy of place' in outdoor education (Wattchow and Brown 2011).

Community Gardening (CG) — **Ownership**

- Finally, there are also obvious connections to the formation of 'community', 'ownership' and 'education' (ABC 2007, Bloom 2006, pp. 137-138, Aplin 1998, pp. 101-104).
- This perceived need for 'ownership' in resource management situations has been notably digested via the concept the 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin 1968). Resources that are owned by everyone (i.e., 'the commons') are in heightened danger of becoming degraded, despoiled and depleted by the unrestrained utilitarian self-interest of individual stakeholders (Hardin 1968). Thus, "[s]ome kind of regulation or self-imposed restraint often becomes necessary and, indeed, is frequently a feature of common-ownership regimes." (Aplin 1998, p. 103). This situation consequentially establishes a definitive nexus between CG and fostering social capital and social responsibility (Alaimo et al. 2010; Hoffman et al. 2010; Rodale 2006; The Garden Project 2018; cf. Henriques 2010).

Research Gaps in the Literature

- This case study highlights some of the challenges facing growing initiatives in private HE settings. These challenges have not been given sufficient attention in the literature. Because of the general bias in the literature against reporting 'failed' growing initiatives, there is opportunity for new knowledge to be generated and documented that focusses on preventing failure.
- This is one of the three key literature gaps identified by Laycock Pedersen and Robinson (2018) who report that "[f]ailure of CG projects is under-explored." (p. 664) Hence this case study contributes to the literature by digesting some of the diverse challenges encountered during this CG initiative.

Study Contribution to the Literature

 This case study culminates in some tentative hypotheses and offers a shortlist of recommendations for different stakeholders. In this sense, the study seeks to contribute to the field inductively through theory generation. Experiences and lessons gathered in this paper will be useful for education stakeholders interested in incentivising and promoting community, social responsibility, and sustainability.

Case Study — Methodological Design Features

- Case study methodological designs offer important benefits for research into fields of investigation characterised by complex multidisciplinary and multicausal interrelationships (Bryman 2016, pp. 60-69; R. B. Johnson and Christensen 2017, pp. 433-441; Punch 2014, p. 124). The case study research design is therefore well-suited to explore CG implementation.
- This study used an 'exploratory design' paradigm (Creswell 2013, 2014), in the sense that the overall approach was weighted heavily on qualitative data analysis. It may also be generally situated "in a philosophical position which is broadly 'interpretivist' in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted." (Mason 2002, p. 3)

Community Garden — Inception

- The study commenced on **7 February 2017** with the inception of the community garden idea. Given the CG project is ongoing, this case study reflects a snapshot of activities and critical assessments conducted over a 16-month period until **7 June 2018**.
- Data analyses occurred iteratively throughout this time period. The case study was then prepared for peer review and publication during the months March to June 2018 after a level of "theoretical saturation" had been attained, meaning that "new data no longer suggest new theoretical insights or no longer suggest new dimensions of theoretical categories." (Bryman 2016, p. 412).

Community Garden Idea and Inception

The annual staff retreat on 7 February 2017 identified the community garden as one of several strategies to "build community" and strengthen "staffstudent connections".



Community Garden — **Timing Matters**

 Having missed the implementation opportunity in March 2017 ultimately resulted in the community garden project becoming increasingly encumbered by the busyness and competing demands and constraints of mid-semester commitments. Hence implementation had to be temporarily suspended until teaching commitments eased towards the end of 2017. This implied a minimum delay of 7-8 months.

Community Garden — Building Momentum

- In November 2017 the CG project was reinvigorated on the back of concomitant developments:
- (1) On 16 November 2017 one of the authors of this case study proposed presenting a research paper on the community garden project at the **World Symposium on Social Responsibility and Sustainability** in Edinburgh, United Kingdom (27-29 June 2018), thus raising research generation and reportable publication output as a potential abetting factor for the reanimation and hoped-for implementation of the CG initiative.
- (2) On 7 December 2017 this idea was successful in securing some research grant funding via the institution's Research Committee.
- (3) The renewed momentum and funding support stimulated unexpected synergies. For instance, a colleague from the School of Education promptly applied for a \$5,000 grant through the Queensland Government.

Community Garden — Getting Creative

 The authors of this paper (who were at this stage the principal leaders of the CG project) coordinated and strategised. They agreed that to send an unsolicited conventional 'catch-all' email to all staff of the entire institution would be unlikely to receive much notice. Hence a strategy of 'covert seeding' was devised, both in a metaphorical and literal sense.

Seeding the Community Garden

Concocting a 'covert' distribution strategy, the community garden facilitators used conventional seed packs to unconventionally 'seed' the garden idea among institutional stakeholders.



Building support for the Garden

Covertly coordinating with the security contractor in charge of locking up all building facilities at night, garden facilitators aimed to heighten stakeholder suspense, imagination, discussion and momentum.



Community Garden — Scheming...

• Hence using building maps, each office was allocated to one of two rounds of 'covert seed-sowing'. The first-round targeted professionals deemed particularly 'vocal' and took place on 7 December 2017. The second round targeted all remaining staff and took place on **13 December 2017**. In this way, all staff received at least one pack of seeds. In short, the plan proved highly successful in creating institution-wide 'buzz'. It generated some rather 'wild' and 'wide-eyed' speculations in corridor conversations as to who might be behind the activity, and why.

Seeding the Community Garden

The plan was hatched and implemented to attach small packets of seeds (outside business hours) to the computer screens of all institution staff, who then unsuspectingly found these the next morning.



Community Garden — Party

• A second round of 'covert' distribution was arranged with the help of the institution's security contractor, who secretly distributed individualised invitation letters to all staff (once more by attaching them to their computer screens) during the weekend 20 and 21 January 2018. Once again, the 'secretive' distribution of invitation letters proved suspenseful and successful and resulted in a majority of staff attending a short morning (community) garden party on 24 January 2018, which also benefited from snacks and morning tea being provided by staff of the School of Social Sciences. Of course, the garden party also (finally) revealed the identities of the heretofore covertly scheming organisers and 'seed sowers'.

Designing the Invitation Letter

A community garden party invitation letter was creatively designed by the young children of this paper's first author, which was later photocopied and prepared for institution-wide distribution.



Inviting Unsuspecting "Conscripts"

The 'covertly' distributed party invitation letter was attached to the computer screens of all staff during the weekend 20-21 January 2018. Arriving back to work Monday, staff found personalised invitations with 'seeds' attached.



Hosting the CG Party

The 'covert' invitation idea proved quite successful and resulted in a majority of staff attending the short morning 'garden party', which benefited from catering provided by the School of Social Sciences.



Putting a Stake in the Ground

The 'garden party' also resulted in 22 volunteers stepping forward to catalyse the implementation of the community garden. A further aim of the party was to 'stake out' a tentative location for the garden.



Discussion — Yet Another Delay

• Even so, despite hopes running high to promptly establish the community garden within two weeks of the party, the actual in situ implementation was yet again delayed by institutional inertia, including the need to satisfy political processes, perform due diligence checks required by certain stakeholders, ensure building code and grounds compliance metrics, and so forth. This implied that three additional milestones had to be passed: (1) submission of additional site proposal documentation offering five possible community garden sites for consideration (21 February 2018); (2) an executive meeting officially recorded the decision for the preferred site (27 March 2018); (3) a final map was requested and submitted (18 April 2018) detailing the final proposed location of the community garden drawn to scale and in context. Relatedly and importantly, the opportunity to implement the garden in time before the commencement of the first semester 2018 was yet again missed. As had previously occurred in 2017, delays implied that (once again) the project became encumbered by the busyness and competing demands and constraints of mid-semester academic commitments.

Laying the Foundation (Finally!)

To date, the progress made to the establishment of the community garden is modest, if viewed in terms of outputs (e.g., garden beds laid, seeds sown and/or crops harvested).



Selected Learnings & Findings

• Beyond the key players, other staff (who the authors did not initially perceive as key stakeholders) became involved. This was also a surprise to the facilitators. Not that the authors did not expect to find interest, however some of the staff who ultimately supported the project were not those individuals that the facilitators had anticipated. Relatedly, the strategic transformation literature is rife with examples stressing the significance of **building winning coalitions** (Tattersall 2010). While these are typically conceived as leadership-led 'guiding' coalitions (Kotter 2012), in this case they came from 'alternative' leaders (Hensmans et al. 2012).

Conclusion

• A key lesson learned is the realisation that seizing opportunities (and successfully implementing novel HE projects) hinges on 'timing'. Hence capitalising on 'right timing' emerges as a critical success factor for incentivising, progressing and implementing CG projects in HE contexts. Seeing that for two consecutive years the community garden could not be implemented prior to the commencement of Semester 1 (2017 and 2018), and in view of the very short time window between Semesters 1 and 2, ultimately implied delays that were caused by academic calendar rhythms and arising competing mid-semester commitments.

Shortlisted Recommendations

Finally, distinctive success factors for the community garden may be expressed as a shortlist of recommendations for different stakeholders:

- (1) soliciting input from alternative leaders;
- (2) building supportive interdepartmental coalitions;
- (3) building a broader stakeholder base from within and without the campus; and
- (4) building momentum and support through unconventional means and creative and sustained resourcefulness.

Thank you!





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Backup — Educational Benefits

"[...] discuss with your children the possibility of starting a community garden for growing vegetables. You can investigate the best conditions for growing vegetables, then proceed to preparing the garden and growing vegetables. [...] From the inception, your students can determine what is required, the costs, the sources of materials, [...] Taking such an approach not only captures children's imaginations and curiosity, but also provides them with a sense of ownership that is embedded in a meaningful and relevant context. Throughout our teaching, we need to constantly focus on (1) Stimulating and supporting curiosity; (2) Embedding all teaching activities in meaningful and relevant contexts; (3) Providing opportunities for children to take on a sense of ownership and control over the content, direction, and functioning of inquiry projects [...]" (Bloom 2006, pp. 137-138)