THE PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION AUDIT AS A CAPACITY BUILDING TOOL

By

Jessica Elaine Tess

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Critical Studies in Literacy and Pedagogy- Master of Arts

2014

ABSTRACT

THE PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION AUDIT AS A CAPACITY BUILDING TOOL

By

Jessica Elaine Tess

As with other empirical methodologies, communication audits have been criticized for ignoring the needs of some stakeholders. Some have called for audits of a more participatory nature, in order to empower and respect community organization practitioners and build their capacity as managers of their own complex systems of communication. With its own history of participatory activist research, Writing and Rhetoric is well placed to address this call; therefore, I am seeking to answer: what would a communication audit look like following a participatory research strategy? I do this by reimagining the communication audit while working with the Oakland County Permaculture Meetup (OCPM),), a grassroots community organization focused on providing a support network of knowledge and resources local food system topics in their local area of Oakland County, Michigan. I partnered with them to evaluate their communication systems since its formation over a 1.5 year period in a collaborative and participatory approach. The Meetup group did not express any specific "problem" that they sought for us to address in our evaluation, but to holistically determine what worked well within the group and what did not. In doing so, I contribute to the developing management of OCPM communication systems, as well as provide one viable model of a participatory communication audit to others.

Key Works: Communication audit, participatory, methodology, community partners, capacity building, activism.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

THESIS

The communication audit is an evaluative activity with a principle focus on the quality and value of elements involved in the exchange of information. Communication audits have been consistently applied within organizations with the intention of improving the exchange of meaningful information through various channels to specific audiences. Some common examples of this dealing with external audiences might be a school district seeking outside recommendations about their public relation practices, a newly formed nonprofit doing self reflection on their image, or a hospital ensuring access to public healthcare information. Besides external audiences, a communication audit might also be used to address the internal quality of communication as information exchange, such as between departments in a corporation or members of a team. Although specific reasons for employing a communication audit vary, foundationally, most organization leaders realize the importance of communication for successful management by revealing and minimizing instances of damaging miscommunication, where an exchange of information did not yield intended results, as well as identifying and reinforcing positive communicative processes and outcomes (Hargie and Tourish, 2000; Tourish and Hargie, 2004; Hogard, & Ellis, 2006). Communication audits have been applied outside of organizations to more nuanced community environments as well with similar intentions, though less commonly, which I will mention in more detail later on.

Despite a general approval of the communication audit as a valid, reliable, and feasible method for improving on communication systems (Hargie and Tourish, 2000; Tourish and Hargie, 2004; Hogard, & Ellis, 2006), the communication audit has also undergone recent criticism for lacking a holistic and interpretive methodology behind these methods. To be specific, the communication audit has carried a reputation of coming in the form of a narrow,

1

even single-minded, package of fixing a problem with, "the auditor as an outside expert, a diagnostician of communication problems, and an enforcer of best practice standards" (Jones, 2002). In contrast, Jones (2002) calls for auditors with who will play a role as skilled listeners and collaborators with these community organizations instead of outside experts bent on diagnosing problems and enforcing interventions. These "participatory" auditors would be positioned to empower and respect community organization practitioners and build their capacity as managers of their own complex systems of communication, rather than simply sweeping in to save the day and leave again with their secrets of communication success.

As an opportunity to address this call, I partnered with the Oakland County Permaculture Meetup, a grassroots community organization, in early 2014 in order to facilitate a self-reflective assessment of primarily internal communication channels amongst group members and with group leadership. I will ultimately provide one viable model of a participatory communication audit to others through my work with them. Before explaining the methods of this project, I will first provide a basic description of the Oakland County Permaculture Meetup and their desire to work in a participatory manner, review common models of communication audits relevant to the purpose and context of my community partners (as well as specific and commonly used methods of communication audits) and provide the basis for what I consider participatory research from scholars in the field of Writing and Rhetoric.

Research Site: OCPM

The Oakland County Permaculture Meetup was founded on July 23rd of 2012 where it was and continues to be based out of the city of Clarkston in Oakland County, Michigan. As of February 2014, it has hosted 32 community events, which are open to the public but announced primarily through Meetup.com, an online social networking portal that facilitates offline group

meetings based on mutual interests. According to their Meetup page, "The Oakland County Permaculture Meetup (OCPM) is an open network dedicated to connecting like-minded individuals interested in permaculture design and the practices of sustainability. Through fostering collaboration and cooperation the OCPM serves as a resource hub for sharing ideas, information, experiences, tools, and more." All of this happens primarily via consistent monthly meetings and other randomly organized events throughout the year based on the desire of its members around sustainability and permaculture topics.

According to the OCPM, permaculture is, "a whole-systems design protocol modeled on the observation and study of natural systems. Permaculturists use the principles of interconnection, diversity, resiliency, and conservation to design homes, landscapes, gardens, organizations, farms, and more." Put more simply, permaculture is an alternative model for building human communities to work in harmony with the natural environment. Some of their interests include:

- edible landscaping

- organic gardening and orcharding

- local food

- farming and homesteading

- livestock

- natural building

- craft/DIY/fiber arts

- foraging and wildcrafting

- herbalism

- cooking and food preservation

- renewable and alternative energy

- composting and waste systems

- water and rainwater harvesting

- nature awareness

- primitive skills

- holistic health and living

- ecology

- community

- conservation

In summary, by developing and spreading the practices of permaculture, permaculturists hope to one day make their philosophy mainstream, adapted to local environments.

The OCPM can be said to be part of a larger national trend known as the local food movement, a grassroots response to the growing perception of hegemony in US farming and agriculture. As the movement has gained momentum over the last decade, experts debate if it is simply a sign of new policy and market shifts, or something more akin to a social movement where food choices have become recognizably political (Starr, 2010;Anderson, 2009, Jun 28; Hinrichs, 2003; Davis, M. C). "The '*cosmology*' of the local food movement is food as community (instead of commodity). The movement aims to build 'local food systems,' based on ecological analyses such as watersheds, sustainable farming, seasonality, heritage of biodiversity, and cultural preferences" (Starr, 2010). The movement lacks centralization due to their value on local initiatives and doesn't always agree but also has a strong collaborative network. The OCPM is one example of a small local piece of this national movement. Though it is fairly recent, it participated in the first Michigan Permaculture Convergence in 2013.

In all circumstances, the OCPM leaders and members work in an activist and participatory manner amongst themselves and with others, due to their desire to work as a community to improve the community. All of their presentations, workshops, and events are hosted by the community for the purpose of helping the community in some manner. For example, in the fall of 2013, one member of the group asked for assistance replacing some of her lawn with a new perennial garden bed. Other members interested in learning various bed preparation techniques, including tilling/sod removal, establishing pathways, and sheet mulching with compost and leaves, volunteered to help in the labor. To support the nature of their work, we sought that our partnership would exhibit these attributes as well. This required a reimagining of typical communication audits, which I will now describe in more depth.

Models of Communication Audits

I have briefly mentioned the goals of communication audits in my introduction. To meet these goals, according to Hogard and Ellis (2006) the practice of a communication audit often includes, "The description of the major topics, sources, and channels of communication; consideration of the quality and utility of information; and the identification of the positive and negative experiences of users with a view to effecting improvement" (p. 178) see also Tourish and Hargie (2004). For this purposes of this project, which has been collaborated within the partnership between the OCPM and I, it is worth noting some distinctions of communication audits intended for organizational environments, which encompasses a majority of how communication audits have been and are utilized, as compared to those intended for unofficial community contexts. Neither of these types of audits are inherently participatory.

In communication audits of formal organizations, the sought after outcomes are recommendations to increase the overall effectiveness of communication practices and the three

most common communication audit tools or methods, especially for formal organizations but not limited to them, include a survey questionnaire, confidential interviews, and participant observation (Hogard & Ellis, 2006). This triad has been utilized in the past due to the well rounded outcomes when they are arranged complementarily, compared to being limited by the benefits and deficits of each of these individual methods when standing on their own. Thus, while a "communication [survey] questionnaire can be modified to suit the needs of particular organizations being evaluated" (Hogard & Ellis, 2006) and are generally cost effective , the researchers cannot immediately follow up on answers to a question, predict how a question will be interpreted, or discern the level of honesty and comfort by participants. This is of course the case anytime survey instruments are used. Consequently, while a survey might be best in creating a broad understanding of a given communication system, keeping the aforementioned limitations in mind, interviews and instances of participant observation have strong potential to bring depth to the auditors' understanding of particular stakeholder perspectives. Conversely, while interviews and participants observation offer avenues to pursue more detailed evidence about what in a communication system are useful or obstructive and to whom, the auditors are also limited to the number of interviews and situations of participant observation they can logistically partake (Hogard & Ellis, 2006). While other relevant data, such as archived documents or reports, might be gathered using methods outside of the three I have just described, they are typically in addition to these primary three.

Given this, how might a community communication audit differ from that of a formal organization? We might first consider that members of a community generally do not conform to the hierarchies or orders of most organizations. Within formal organizations an individual is typically identified clearly or given the primary role as a manger or supervisor, Human

Resources or IT, treasurer or president, contributing to certain shared ends. However, members of a community, while assumed to have something in common with one another, often carry many roles around with them depending on who they with, where they are, and for what purpose. Put simply, a community assumes a more nuanced set of relationships and connections, background, roles, and goals. Thus, in the context of a communication audit according to Jeffres (2008), "a community communication audit would involve a broader set of channels, including mass and specialized media, interpersonal face-to-face interaction across various roles and contexts, and technologically mediated point-to-point channels." Some additional methods an auditor might choose to reach these channels include meetings with community informants, analyses of public media messages, and inventories of mass media and physical locations.

It is worth emphasizing that the question of whether a group of people are an organization or a community is somewhat circumstantial. While the OCPM is set up as an independent organization in the sense that there is a hierarchical difference between members and leadership, it is largely casual as leaders are those who were simply inspired by the idea originally and have voluntarily devoted their time and energy into coordinating events and initiatives. Further, these individuals were motivated by the concept of creating a supportive community network through their efforts, which group members have continued to sustain and expand upon. Therefore, since the OCPM would not distinctly place themselves solely in either category of "organization" verses "community" or see these in a binary way, I avoided doing so as well. I sought a model of the communication audit which encompasses attributes suited to both a community and an organization.

Later on, I will describe in detail which tools and methods my community partners and I chose to utilize for the purposes of our communication audit. However, this decision process

depended on our desire to imagine a communication audit that was participatory rather than diagnostic. I would like to now discuss these motivations and concepts in greater length.

Participatory Research in Rhetoric and Composition

Previously, I mentioned critiques of the communication audit as a method lacking sufficient collaborative reciprocity between auditors and those organization and/or community members seeking the audit (Jones, 2002). Part of this critique focuses on the problematic role of the auditor as the "expert." Initially, it might seem counterproductive to find fault with this, since we would assume auditors were called in because of their evaluative expertise in the first place. To state this more accurately then, the auditor's role as expert is problematic if they are seen as the *only* expert in these circumstances. While the auditor might be an expert on evaluative communication systems, members of a group are experts on that group's history, its day to day workings, needs, motivations, faults, and so on. In the worst case scenario, the auditor comes in with an entirely preconceived idea of that best way the audit should be conducted, regardless of any specifics of the given auditing environment, and gives a very impersonal and not at all auditee-centered performance. In the best case scenario, the auditor does their best based on the auditor's own previous experience for this unique group and the presented goal, and misses out on important information they could have received if they had viewed group members as fellow experts in the first place. In both situations, the group receives end results but gains little from the process as passive participants.

Many scholars of community work have made convincing arguments for more participatory research relationships generally (Achieving the promise, 2010; Ellison, J., & Eatman, T. E., 2008; Glass, C. R., & Fitzgerald, H. E., 2010); in this specific context, consider the following example of how a conventionally non-participatory approach carries limitations

8

compared to one that is participatory, in which the expertise of organization/community members are immediately recognized. In order to assess the public relations image of a school district, an auditor decides to first arrange interviews with the academic staff about the significant points of contact they have with the public while representing their school throughout the semester. After a week and a half of interviews, one of these faculty happens to mention that some parents have complained consistently about certain inconvenient miscommunications concerning changes in school policy through the years. When the auditor relays this to the school principal, he or she confirms having been aware of this problem from the beginning and hoped it would be addressed at some point during the audit. Over a week has gone by before this problem was even discovered! If the auditor and leaders of the school district had established a reciprocally respectful relationship as fellow experts attempting to perform the audit jointly, the auditor could have been aware of this agenda item in a more direct rather than roundabout way. Further, the principal might have forged a new or more open relationship with his or her superintendents in the process of working together with the auditor. Thus, I would emphasize from this example how while the body of individuals seeking the communication audit most likely will bring forward to the auditor a very specific motivation/s, the way in which the audit is carried out will more likely bring benefits in and beyond the results when a participatory approach is mutually realized.

In order to reimagine a communication audit that is both activist and participatory while working with the OCPM, I turned to previous work done in the discipline of writing and rhetoric, that has accomplished similar community-oriented activities. Blythe (2012) recognized various recent writing and rhetoric scholars who have engaged in participatory activist research (e.g., Cushman, 1996; FalsBorda, 1991; Flower & Heath, 2000; Grabill, 2000; Powell & Takayoshi,

2003; Simmons, 2007; Sullivan & Porter, 1997). Since 'activist' and 'participatory' are huge

terms with all sorts of manifestations, I also turn to Blythe (2012) and these other scholars to

guide my understanding of them for this project. Work done by each of these previously

mentioned scholars were activist in the sense that they strived to improve the community to

which their research partners and participants belonged. Building on this, according to Blythe,

activist research also becomes participatory when, "activist researchers attempt to meet other

outcomes defined by participants—outcomes not necessarily recognized within the rewards

system of higher education" (p. 271). Thus, while I sought to improve the community of the

OCPM by improving their communication systems however possible, I did so in a way defined

by their goals and motivations.

　　Now that I have given a brief description of the OCPM, an overview of typical

communication audits, and my basis for reimaging an activist participatory communication audit

through my partnership with them, I will now continue on to describing my methods.

Methods

　　At the November 2013 OCPM monthly meeting, group organizers decided to deviate

from hosting the usual skillshare presentation, where one member volunteers to give an

introduction to a permaculture-related topic they have experience with to the rest of the group.

Instead, the group organizers decided to engage in some group reflection about what they had

accomplished thus far and contributed toward the community, and what they wanted to do in the

future. Thus, one of the organizers put together a slideshow of pictures from previous OCPM

events and narrated the presentation, which transitioned into a larger discussion about the

OCPM.

　　According to the Meetup page, 40 members attended this meeting and there were at least

five self-announced newcomers who had never attended the OCPM before. During this

discussion, many members responded about things they really liked about the group thus far, but also quite a lot of people mentioned ways they wanted the group to improve, especially in regard to certain OCPM communication channels, such as the Meetup and Facebook pages. After the discussion transitioned into an unstructured social hour, I approached the OCPM communications specialist and one other organizer and made this observation. I offered it might be a good idea to build off this meeting with a more formal assessment of the OCPM. The organizers liked the idea and wanted to know if I would volunteer to do this assessment. I agreed and the communications specialist and I followed up afterward to plan out what this assessment would include. She expressed that the organizers would like to answer the following questions:

- Where do organizers post information? Where do members get most of their information? Is the OCPM posting our information in the places where members are looking?
- What communication practices are working well, meaning members are successfully receiving wanted information, which the group needs to keep doing?
- How do members want to use the group's social media channels? Do they use each channel differently, or are the channels used in much the same way?
- Do members feel they have access to communicating with the organizers? Why or why not?
- What do members want more information about in regard to permaculture and the OCPM?

To begin the audit, after doing an inventory of the different OCPM communication channels, the communication specialist felt it would be useful to create and disseminate a short survey via Meetup.com to OCPM members. Based on the questions we had brainstormed above, I put together a survey draft that would attempt to get at this desired information. After a few iterations of getting her feedback and making revisions, the communication specialist sent out to survey on the OCPM Meetup listserve (see Appendix A). For the survey, there were 27

11

respondents over the course of two and a half weeks in January and February 2014. Of these respondents, 12 reported being members of the OCPM since its inception, eight had been members one year of less, and four had been members six months or less.

To compliment the results of the survey, I suggested incorporating participant observation at some OCPM events and analyses of the OCPM social media pages, as well as some informal interviews with organizers and/or members as needed. Outside of my past participation in the group as a semi regular member, after the November 2013 meeting I was able to engage in participant observation at another meeting in December. Analysis of the OCPM Meetup page included posted information about the OCPM, events, reported attendance of events, and forum discussion. Analysis of the OCPM Facebook page included the content and frequency of all posts and interactions with posts such as comments, likes, and shares.

After we collected results from the survey, I realized I wanted to write about this experience and approached the OCPM organizers with my request to do so. With their approval, I then received IRB approval from my university that would include results of the completed survey and the other data I mentioned above we would collect. Since I conducted informal interviews with the OCPM organizers, they were provided with approved consent forms. As we proceeded, I also took notes about the manner in which my partners and I were collaborating to complete the audit. After synthesizing the survey responses with all other data collected, I reported the results to OCPM organizers in order to discuss next steps. I will elaborate more on this in the next sections. Thus, I will now present results of the audit and provide a discussion of what these results mean for the OCPM, as well as the outcome of this project for scholars interested in executing participatory communication audits.

The OCPM organizers and I were interested in learning the following from the results of the communication audit (in addition to the questions mentioned before): a description of how participants use various communication channels within the group, what communication practices seem to be working well and what could be improved, and what participants would like to learn from the group in the future.

How Communication Channels are Used

I reminded my partners that, as of now, there are two main in-person events at which members frequent and exchange information: monthly skillshare meetings and permablitz events. There are also two main social media networks which are online extensions of the OCPM: the Meetup and Facebook page. The monthly skillshare meetings and Meetup.com page are reported to be utilized the most often and by the most participants. However, all communication channels represented on the survey (Meetp, Facebook, email, word-of-mouth, and events) were reported to be used for various purposes, even if it was a minority, which is illustrated in Table 1 below.

Method of Finding OCPM Communication Channels:	OCPM Communication Channels			
	Meetup	Facebook	Monthly Skillshare	Permablitz
Meetup.com	9		17	17
Facebook.com		2	4	5
E-mail			9	12
Word of Mouth	17	8	8	6
Other Events			5	7
Hadn't Heard		4	2	1

Table 1: How Members Found Communication Channels

I shared with organizers that there is a distinct difference in how members communicate on

the social media pages mentioned, illustrated in Table 2. For information about the OCPM group

and group events, Meetup is the clear favorite, with participants reporting using Meetup 24 out

of 27 times. Meetup.com was also the most popular way members initially found out about the

OCPM as a group, with word of mouth as a close runner up. On the other hand, for other

purposes such as sharing resources, networking, and contacting organizers, the OCPM Facebook

page had a more even spread of usage with Meetup.com. However, four participants reported

being unaware of the Facebook page until taking the survey. At least three members also

expressed being previously unaware of the Facebook page at the December 2013 monthly

meeting. I will address this further on.

Purpose:	OCPM Communication Channels			
	Meetup.com	Facebook Page	Monthly Skillshare	Permablitz
For information about the group and group events	24	12		
To network with other Permies	9	7	19	10
To contact group organizers	6	4		
The share and find resources	11	10	19	10
To learn more about Skillshare/Permablitz topic			22	14

Table 2: How Communication Channels are Used

Something else the results of the audit revealed is a clear in-person community and online

community within the OCPM, with some members clearly belonging to one or the other and

some active in both (not represented in the tables). For example, members who had never heard of the Facebook page reported attending in person events always or most of the time, as well as that they receive their information about the group and network in person more than other communication channels. Expectedly, those who reported having never or rarely attended events were more likely to frequent OCPM social media. Tables 3 and 4 show overall reported online and in-person attendance.

OCPM Social Media:	Frequency of Visits:				
	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Once or Twice	N/A
Meetup.com	0	9	12	5	0
Facebook Page	1	3	6	3	12

Table 3: How Often Members Frequent Social Media-Survey

OCPM In-Person Events:	Frequency of Attendance:				
	All	Most	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Monthly Skillshare	5	7	9	2	2
Permablitz	1	1	9	5	6

Table 4: How Often Members Attend Events

How Members Want to Use Communication Channels

In addition to how these social media pages are being used, participants were asked how they would like to see these pages be used in the future. I informed my partners of unique insights given by participants. For example, one survey respondent, who is also part of other permaculture related groups, stated, "[Post] Anything relevant to permaculture. Outside events, news, projects people have questions on. I'm also a member of AMPY (Ypsi permaculture) and people post a lot more stuff on their facebook. OCPM is dead by comparison." This may be in

part because not all OCPM are aware of the Facebook page, which also only boasts just over half the members (176) as the Meetup (300) as of March 2014.

Another responder stated, "I would use the meet-up page for meeting/event dates and the Facebook page for sharing resources, networking, meeting notes and videos, share documents." This last quote partially reiterates how the OCPM organizers had assumed the pages would be used when the group had initially formed, the Meetup for meeting information and the Facebook as more social (T. Newman, personal communication, December 10, 2013). However, as this audit revealed, while this is a popular way for members to differentiate their usage of the pages, my partners were made aware that some participants do not the communication channels in this manner.

At the December 2013 monthly meeting, a few members have expressed a desire to start special topics groups within the OCPM. Organizers had prompted this idea at the group's inception but the idea seemed premature at the time (D. Discoll, personal communication, January 8, 2014). However, roughly a year and a half later, the idea has resurfaced. My partners and I found that one survey respondent followed up on the meeting discussion about starting to facilitate specialization within the group, "I think it may be a useful exercise for us to have a sign-in sheet which provides a space for people to list some of their skill sets that could be used for the benefit of the individual and group." At the meeting, members debated facilitating special interest groups on Meetup verses other mediums.

Strengths of OCPM

My partners and I were pleased to find there is consistent high satisfaction with the OCPM, concerning content of the in-person events and group communication as a whole, especially for members local enough to frequently attend events. The OCPM has hosted a total of 33 events

with an average of 22 members attending each event, the lowest being five and the highest being 46. Participants had positive feelings about all permaculture topics discussed previously, with plenty of requests for future meetings. Fourteen members praised the group generally in their survey responses with similar comments to the following, "OCPM is a most valuable resource for Oakland County residents. I applaud Mark, Trevor and Dana for starting this unique important educational, fun, and forward-thinking project." A majority of participants felt they could easily contact the group organizers and one another. There is also consistent satisfaction with the Meetup page as its most popular communication channel, be it for group information, networking, or sharing resources.

Improvement Areas of OCPM

While there was high satisfaction with the OCPM from participants, my partners and I also discussed areas of improvement made apparent through the audit. There are some gaps outside of Meetup.com due to inconsistent posting from organizers. For example, permablitz events are always posted on Meetup but not always in other places. Members who frequent Facebook were sometimes unaware of Permablitz events. Whereas monthly meetings are always posted on both Meetup and Facebook. These events are usually sent via e-mail, unless members have turned off email notifications by the social media pages. One exception to the satisfaction with Meetup.com was that two survey respondents felt they could not easily find organizer contact information.

With Facebook, my partners and I realized gaps in how members seek to use this page and how organizers perceive the page is used should be addressed. Currently, there is an average of 10 original posts per month, which are seen by an average of 75 other members with regular likes, comments, and shares. However, the survey and participant observation in monthly

meetings show there is a wish by OCPM online community members to have more content shared from in person meetings, which they cannot attend, on Facebook and Meetup.

Finally, I reported to my partners there were many permaculture topics that survey participants in particular expressed wanting to learn more about through skillshares at monthly meetings and/or permablitz events. These topics included:

- Regulatory requirements for producing and selling food

- Beverages, and personal care products from small scale farms/homesteads

- Rotation principles for crops and vegetable gardens

- Companion planting

- Homemade control methods for garden pests

- Compost heating and rocket mass heaters

- Hydroponics

- Permaculture design

- Edible forest gardens

- Fermentation other than beer and wine (kombucha, kefir, vegetables)

- Growing fungi

- Beekeeping

- Preserving food

- Natural medicinals,

- Issues affecting state and national food rights.

In the past, all skill related presentations have been scheduled seasonally and on a volunteer basis. If any of these topics is not part of any specific OCPM member expertise, then organizers will decide on new ways to address them.

Discussion

In this section, I will share the recommendations I made to the OCPM organizers, steps that have been made in the OCPM around those recommendations, and a broader discussion of participatory communication audits for other scholars.

Recommendations

In light of these findings from the communication audit, I had two short term and two long term recommendations for the OCPM organizers that I will describe below. After, I will share what progress has been made by organizers to take action on them.

Short Term

- Posting messages consistently throughout all the OCPM communication channels

- Document practices of skillshares, permablitzes and other in-person events online

Long Term

- Consider level of commitment to an online OCPM community

- Plan a long-term strategy for supporting special interest groups

This audit has shown that OCPM members use different communication channels for a variety of reasons and that there exists distinct in person and online communities. Thus, in the short term, I recommended that with more consistent posting and messaging across all OCPM communication channels, there will be less chance that OCPM members will miss information they want to know about events or other things related to the group. Better documentation practices, such as video recording, note taking, etc., will better serve OCPM members who are either regular members on the online community only, as well as regular in person community members who must miss certain meetings. This will also contribute to the sustainability of the

group by allowing future members to have access to previously presented permaculture skills and topics and future presenters to build upon previous work.

In the long term, I encouraged OCPM organizers to consider how much they want to commit to supporting and sustaining an online OCPM community. Short term documentation practices will be meant to support current local members primarily. Some online members have expressed interest in more resources to create their own permaculture community groups in there are. Further online involvement and commitment, such as partnering with other online groups or contributing to online forums and project, would be necessary to provide online resources for these online members. Also, as the number of permaculture groups grows in Michigan and the Midwest more broadly so does the online permaculture network. OCPM should consider how and if they wish to contribute to this network.

Finally, I recommended if the OCPM wishes to support special interest groups, they should consider the logistics of them in the long term. Who should lead these special interest groups? How will they handle a change in leadership? Where and when should these groups meet with one another? How should special interest groups be announced and posted? What part will they play in the OCPM as a whole? How much should OCPM organizers facilitate verses letting group members facilitate on their own? Addressing these things now will increase the potential sustainability and positive outcomes of these special interest groups.

Although I shared these above recommendations with all four of the OCPM organizers, I was able to have an in-depth discussion about them with their communications specialist. The outcome of this meeting was very productive for their team looking forward since we are able to discuss specific plans of action to address recommendations from the communication audit. The communications specialist agreed with the reasoning behind more consistent posting across all

communication channels and expressed this had always been their intention from the beginning. The audit helped make them aware of the gaps. Secondly, the communication specialist decided to suggest to her fellow organizers that they bring on a volunteer from the group into the leadership, in order to be solely in charge of better documentation practices. She came to this conclusion since each of the organizers already had a lot of responsibility spread between them and really couldn't take on more. They have since started searching for members who might be interested in taking on this responsibility. I am one of the members they have extended this invitation to.

The organizers have not come to any precise plans of action to address the long term recommendations at this time. For now, after the organizers engaged in some initial debate concerning future growth of an online community, thinking it is a good question to consider. All of the organizers seemed in agreement that they wanted to ensure they were serving their local members with their efforts. Any ambitions towards something that would serve a larger audience than this were not realistic for their group at this point. Thus, one result of the audit has been to strengthen their resolve for their local cause. Similarly, organizers plan to return to the topic of special interest groups in the near future.

Future Work: Participatory Communication Audits

With this communication audit, I set out to engage in one example of a participatory communication audit as an answer to the call made by scholars such as Jones (2002). The circumstances of this audit were somewhat unique in that I, a semi-regular member in the group, volunteered to help with the task of the audit when I heard organizers expressing a need to assess their group communication. The speed of our progression was assisted by my semi regular membership in the OCPM, which allowed me to build on a foundation of my relationship to the

organizers and my understanding of the group. Thus, both parties were more quickly able to openly express intentions and goals and gain from the process as well as the results.

Upon reflection, I feel the biggest strength of this participatory communication audit has been how my community partners and I were able to each engage in a capacity building process. For example, on my part I gained valuable experience with one way a participatory communication audit can function within an informal community organization. For my community partners, they were able to begin building a process of regular group assessment by which to evaluate the OCPM as it continues to grow and evolve. Since they participated in the audit from beginning to end, it is something they can more confidently replicate in the future. I do not think these benefits would have been as tangible if I had been brought in as an outsider with the intention of diagnosing problems on the authority of my expertise alone.

For other scholars and/or professionals who also seek to engage in a participatory communication audit, along with Jones (2002) I strongly suggest a shift in thinking about one's role as the communication auditor away from being the "expert." This then begs the question if not an expert, then what? In this participatory communication audit with the OCPM, I found myself inhabiting a comfortable role as a "subject matter consultant." Put simply, the nature of a consultant is less concerned with authority and more concerned with contribution. The shift from expert to consultant, I think does several things but most importantly makes room for the auditor(s) to continue recognizing the expertise of their partners. It also serves as a reminder about who has true ownership among stakeholders in the success of the audit. In large part, this was based on my previous experience as a writing consultant in university writing centers. Although there are many attributes one could list of what makes superior consultants, I would like to point out three.

- Do more listening more than talking with partners to avoid assumptions

- Make decisions about the methods and workflow of the communication audit together

- Use models of communication audits only as a guide for what is possible

Of course, it is entirely possible and even likely that in some circumstances a group or community will want someone to come in as an outside expert and that they will want that person to make all the decisions and perform all the work as an "expert." Powell and Takayoshi (2003) on the topic of authentic reciprocity have addressed this circumstance quite thoroughly. They assert that we should always make sure we are serving our partner's agenda more than our own. In this case, serving our partner's agenda might mean engaging in what looks like a more traditional communication audit if one's partners aren't interested in being involved with decision-making in a fully collaborative manner.

From this experience with the OCPM, my other advice for communication auditors wishing to invite a more participatory methodology would be to make participant observation a priority, if possible. Participant observation has the advantage of being able to listen to many stakeholders at once in a natural setting and experience their circumstances first hand. Ultimately, even more than how to make a communication audit participatory, communication auditors should be asking how they can make such a moment sustainable for their partners. How can their partners maintain the outcomes once the auditor leaves? No doubt, involving community partners in the auditing process will give them a greater chance of increasing their own capacity but that might not be one of their end goals. While every situation will be different, a communication auditor should be ready to put their own agenda aside and aim not for perfection, but progress.

APPENDIX

OCPM Group Reflection and Feedback Survey

1. How did you initially find the Oakland County Permaculture Meetup (OCPM)?
    Meetup.com
    The Facebook Page
    Word of Mouth
    Other:
2. How long have you been a member of the OCPM?
3. How often do you use the Meetup Page?
    Daily
    Weekly
    Monthly
    I've only visited it once or twice without habit
    n/a
4. Please check all the reasons/ways you use the Meetup webpage
    For information about the group and group events
    To network with other permies
    To contact the group organizers
    To share and find resources
    n/a
    Other:
5. How often do you use the FB Page?
    Daily
    Weekly
    Monthly
    I've only visited it once or twice without habit
    n/a
6. How did you find the OCPM Facebook Page?
7. Please check all the reasons/ways you use the Facebook Page
    For information about the group and group events
    To network with other permies
    To contact the group organizers
    To share and find resources
    n/a
    Other:
8. How have you found out about the Permablitz events in the past?
    Meetup.com
    Facebook
    E-mail
    Word of Mouth
    All other OCPM Events

I have not heard about Shillshare events before
Other:

9. How often do you attend Permablitz events?
   I attend all
   I attend most
   I sometimes attend
   I rarely attend
   I never attend

10. Please list all the reasons you attend Permablitz events
    To learn more about a Skillshare topic
    To network and/or spend time with other permies
    To find and share resources

11. What kinds of things do you want us to be posting in the Facebook page or Meetup page?

12. How have you found out about the Permablitz events in the past? Check all that apply
    Meetup.com
    Facebook
    E-mail
    Word of Mouth
    All other OCPM events
    I have not heard about the Permablitz events before
    Other:

13. How often do you attend Permablitz events?
    I attend all
    I attend most
    I sometimes attend
    I rarely attend
    I never attend

14. Please check all the reasons you have attended Permablitz events
    To learn more about a Permablitz topic
    To network/spend time with other Permies
    To find and share resources
    Other:

15. How do you primarily communicate with other OCPM Members? The method you use most?
    Meetup
    Facebook
    E-mail
    Monthly Skillshares events
    Permablitz events
    Other:

16. What are secondary ways you communicate with OCPM members? Check all that apply
    Meetup
    Facebook
    E-mail
    Monthly Skillshares events
    Permablitz events
    Other:
17. Do you feel you can easily contact other members and group organizers? Why or why not?
18. What would you like more information about from the OCPM?
19. Since becoming a member of the OCPM, describe some of the things you have you learned.
20. Are there topics you would like to learn about from the OCPM that you haven't yet? Please describe.
21. Is there a topic you would like to contribute on within the OCPM, whether through a Skillshare, Permablitz, or other venue? Please describe.
22. Do you have any other comments about the OCPM or things you'd like us to know?

REFERENCES

REFERENCES

Achieving the promise of authentic community-higher education partnerships: A community partner summit executive summary. (2007). WA: Community- Campus Partnerships for Health.

Anderson, S. (2009, Jun 28). The fresh revolution: Farmers and retailers joining growing local food movement. *McClatchy - Tribune Business News*.

Blythe, S. (2012). Composing activist research. In Powell & Takayoshi (Eds.), *Practicing research in writing studies: Reflexive and ethically responsible research* (271-287). New York: Hampton Press Inc.

Cushman, E. (1996). The rhetorician as an agent of social change. *College Composition and Communication, 47*(1), 7-28.Fals Borda, O. (1991). Some basic ingredients. In O. Fals Borda (Ed.), *Action and knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action research* (pp. 3-12). New York: Apex.

Davis, M. C. Farmers' engagement with the local food movement: A case study of waterloo, ontario. Order No. AAIMR67458, *Masters Abstracts International,* 0923.

Ellison, J., & Eatman, T. E. (2008). *Scholarship in public: Knowledge creation and tenure policy in the engaged university. A Resource on promotion and tenure in the arts, humanities, and design*. Syracuse, NY: Imagining America

Flower, L., & Heath, S. B. (2000). Drawing on the local: Collaboration and community expertise. *Language and Learning across the Disciplines, 4*, 43-55.

Glass, C. R., & Fitzgerald, H. E. (2010). Engaged scholarship: Historical roots, contemporary challenges. In H. E. Fitzgerald, C. Burack & S. Seifer (eds). *Handbook of engaged scholarship: Contemporary landscapes, future directions. Vol. 1: Institutional change*. (pp. 9-24). East Lansing, MI: MSU Press

Grabill, J. T. (2000). Shaping local HIV/AIDS services policy through activist research: The problem of client involvement. *Technical Communication Quarterly, 12*(3), 29-50.

Hargie, O. & Tourish, D., (2000). *Handbook of communication audits for organizations*. New York: Routledge.

Hinrichs, C. C. (2003). The practice and politics of food system localization. *Journal of Rural Studies, 19*(1), 33-45.

Hogard, E., & Ellis, R. (2006). Evaluation and communication: Using a communication audit to evaluate organizational communication. *Evaluation Review, 30*(2), 171-187.

Jeffres, L. W. (2008). An urban communication audit: Measuring aspects of a 'communicative city'. *The International Communication Gazette, 70*(3), 257.

Jones, D. (2002). The interpretive auditor: Reframing the communication audit. *Management Communication Quarterly,15*(3), 466-471.

Oakland County Permaculture Meetup. (2014, March 27). Webpage. Retrieved at http://www.meetup.com/Oakland-County-Permaculture/

Powell, K., & Takayoshi, P. (2003). Accepting the roles created for us: The ethics of reciprocity. *College Composition and Communication, 54*(3), 394-422.

Starr, A. (2010). Local food: A social movement? *Cultural Studies – Critical Methodologies, 10*(6), 479-490.

Simmons, W. M. (2007). *Participation and power: Civic discourse in environmental policy decisions.*Albany: State University of New York Press.

Sullivan, P., & Porter, J. (1997). Opening spaces: Writing technologies and critical research practices. Greenwich, CT: Ablex.

Tourish, D. & Hargie, O., (2004). Communication audits: Building world class communication systems. In S. Oliver, (ed.) *Handbook of corporate communication and public relations: pure and applied* (131-144). London: Routledge.