

Designing a “Shikake” to Revitalize Local Community: A Case of Miyakejima University Project

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Abstract

Based on a “capacity-focused” approach (e.g., Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993), this paper proposes a conceptual framework to identify various local “resources,” and to convert them into a set of local “assets.” To anchor my discussion, I will refer to an on-going research project in Miyakejima, Tokyo. By focusing on the roles and functions of a “university,” as a metaphor, we are currently designing a series of workshops and learning programs for the “university.”

This Project can be understood as an attempt to design a “shikake,” in that participants attempt to expand their capacities to organize their ideas within given settings. I suggest that such form of learning may promote one’s reflection, as well as communication among participants, through the set of goals, roles, and rules that constructs the organization of the “university.” This “shikake” may contribute to stimulate and revitalize local community members in order to enrich their practices of community development.

Introduction

Based on a “capacity-focused” approach (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993), the present paper attempts to explore the mechanism, ‘shikake,’ to visualize the ‘strengths’ of the local community by understanding various “assets” within the community. It is intended to examine the notion of local “assets.” Whereas the notion of “resources” is closely related to our production of goods and services that are subject to consumptions, the idea of “assets” may capture the nature of both tangible and intangible values that are continuously produced and reproduced within the local community.

The paper aims to evaluate the role of universities in local communities, and to present a conceptual framework

for a social experiment. It also explores the design of ‘shikake’ that leads to the promotion of “civic pride” among community members.

Theoretical Motivation

Local “Assets” As Potential Possibilities

Over the past few years, mainly in the United States and Australia, various practices of Asset-Based Community Development approach (hereinafter referred to as the ABCD approach) seem to be gaining acceptance. The approach aims to understand the nature of local “assets” and to discover their possibilities, rather than to seek for a “problem-solving.” In other words, ABCD approach is an attempt to shift our research emphasis from the “needs-driven” approach to “capacity-focused” approach.

A relatively familiar approach for us would be to identify the problems in the local community, and to explore solutions for them. As shown in the Figure 1, for example, we typically begin with the mapping of the problem situations within the area, then go on to examine the priorities among those problems and possible solutions for them. Further, we estimate necessary costs and make allocation plans. The Figure 1 below, simplified for the purpose of illustration, shows that various problem situations may be classified and mapped in accordance with their scale, urgency, and level of abstraction.

Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) suggest that “needs-driven” approach may serve to create client neighborhoods. That is to say, many urban neighborhoods are becoming “environments of service where behaviors are affected because residents come to believe that their well-being depends upon being a client (p. 2).” Once the “problem” in the local community is identified and shared among community members, actors involved and their expected

roles tend to become fixed. As a result, community members become consumers of service, rather than producers. In addition, when the problems are described and delivered in a fashion aimed to the general public, regardless of them being local issues, community members may begin to understand the problems as somebody else's business.

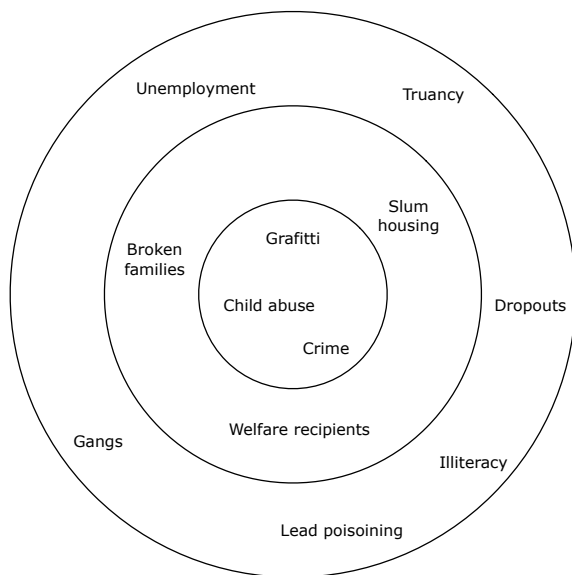


Figure 1. Neighborhood needs map (based on Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

In contrast, ABCD approach provides a mapping based on different idea. As shown in the Figure 2, community “assets” are mapped with regard to gifts of individuals, citizens’ associations, and local institutions. For each of the categories, various local “assets” are identified as strengths of the local community. By doing so, a series of “assets” becomes visible and at hand for our further explorations.

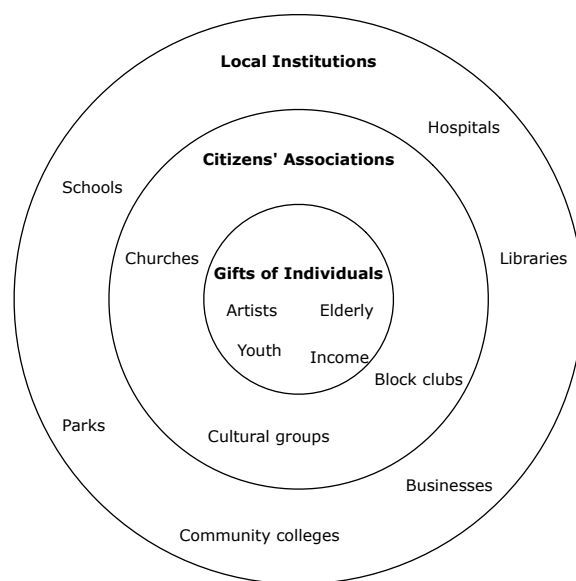


Figure 2. Community assets map (based on Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

As an example of local “assets,” we can appreciate the characteristics of community colleges, one of the local institutions, from the following dimensions.

(1) Personnel: Faculty members and staffs are highly trained and specialized, and thus they may contribute to various activities related to community development. (2) Space and facilities: Community colleges have spaces to be utilized in various kinds of gatherings and meetings. It is not limited to in-door classrooms, so that we can also utilize parking lots, outdoor sports facilities, or the campus landscape, for example. (3) Materials and equipment: Community colleges are equipped with various resources to be utilized. They include: computers, audiovisual equipment, art materials, musical instruments, printing equipment, machine tools, books, and so on. (4) Expertise: Training courses provided at the community college, for example, can be understood as a collection of knowledge and wisdom that can directly help the local community. (5) Economic power: Community colleges may provide jobs and training opportunities for the local community.

ABCD approach begins with the mapping of these local “assets” from different layers of understandings, then goes on to consider about identifying potential partners in the local community, and the possible ways to strengthen ties with the partners. Finally, concrete action plans will be developed.

The Role Of Universities In Local Community

As outlined in the previous section, community colleges can exhibit a variety of values as “assets” within the local

community. Although universities and community colleges are different in terms of their origins and operations, universities may also contribute to (re)vitalize the local community, as both tangible and intangible “assets,” with regard to the following categories: (1) personnel, (2) space and facilities, (3) materials and equipment, (4) expertise, and (5) economic power. Understanding the roles of the universities within the local community may lead to foster community members’ attachment and sense of closeness to the community.

At the same time, in order to enhance the value of universities as local “assets,” it is important to explore the presence of partners within the area, and the possibilities of coordinating with various citizens’ associations and local institutions.

	Closed	Open
Real	[I] University (Membership)	[III] A new “university” (Shikake)
Virtual	[II] Online/E-learning (Time and distance)	[IV] Entertainment (Anonymity)

Table 1. A characterization of learning environment.

Table 1 illustrates the nature of a university within a local community. The column of the table is an axis to characterize the nature of a university in terms of ‘closed-open,’ with which an individual’s membership to the learning environment and his/her accessibility to various resources are examined.

This is a perspective that focuses on an individual’s access to tangible and intangible “assets” of the university, and how they could be accessed. In the table, the row ‘real-virtual’ characterizes the ways in which places for learning is realized, given the recent changes in information and communication technologies. It enables us to characterize the nature of the university’s “assets” with regard to how they can be approached (i.e., via face-to-face communication, or electronically). For the purpose of simplifying the present discussion, I will consider four different types of learning environments developed via these two axes.

First, probably the most familiar setup of universities can be characterized in terms of ‘real-closed’ places. There, students will gain access to various educational opportunities based on their membership. To secure their accessibility, members of the community are required to pay the costs and fees for the lectures, the use of facilities, and so on. Also, most of the activities within the university are realized through sharing time and space simultaneously (categorized as [I] in the Table).

It is now common that many lecture notes and course materials are available over the Internet. Historically, there has been a tradition of a “distance learning” in university programs. By utilizing information technologies, this type of learning environment is designed to overcome time and distance. It can be characterized in terms of ‘virtual-closed’ in that many of the services require logging in to access educational materials ([II]).

Recently, some types of electronic contents are available without charge. In this regard, there is a place for learning that has the characteristics of ‘virtual-open.’ In this place, educational materials are flowing freely, and sometimes (or often) the user’s anonymity is accepted ([IV]).

Whereas we accept the convenience and importance of information and communication technologies, there is no doubt that we still value visual and tactile cues in communicating with others. It is worth exploring the nature of ‘real-open’ places for learning. It may be difficult to manage, because when make it open, anyone can access to the place ([III]).

“University” As A New Place For Learning

Recently, there has been a growing interest in the learning programs to be planned and operated with the designation and metaphor of a “university.” For example, as a pioneering attempt in Japan, “Shibuya University” was launched in 2006 to offer a series of courses in various settings and facilities within the city of Shibuya, Tokyo. Though it is not a ‘real’ university for it is not founded under “The Fundamental Law of Education,” it was designed and operated like a ‘real’ university by a NPO.

This idea and approach struck a chord, and led to produce sister schools in Hokkaido, Kyoto, Aichi, Hiroshima, and Fukuoka. In addition, there are similar attempts such as “Free University,” “Bokuto University” and “Shimokitazawa University.” They all explore the possibilities to utilize shopping streets and other facilities within the local communities as ‘classrooms’ for local residents. Given the discussion above, we began to develop a basic guideline for designing a “shikake” to produce influence upon community members’ life-long learning opportunities.

From Solving Problems To Developing Relationships

First, as I mentioned at the outset, it is important to re-examine the relationships between a university and local community from the standpoint of the ‘capacity-based’ approach. Especially, when we consider enhancing the value of the local “assets” within ‘open’ environment, we need to seek the ways in which we can collaborate with the local community members. We are already familiar with

the cases where universities and local communities conduct joint research. There, universities are expected to have various expertise and techniques to face the problems at hand. In turn, local communities provide with research funds and other forms of financial supports. As mentioned, such ‘needs-driven’ approaches tend to convert community members into ‘clients.’

In contrast, we can produce practices based on mutually beneficial relationships. When stakeholders aim to increase the value of local “assets,” both the university and local communities will be linked in a reciprocal and autonomous fashion. When the expertise of the faculty members and staffs are provided within ‘real-open’ places, it is desirable that the relationships are built upon a voluntary “pro bono” like style, for example.

From Opportunity-To-Learn To Desire-To-Teach

When we attempt to shed light to the strengths of the local community by utilizing a “university” as a mechanism, it is important to have sufficient number of students to enroll. It may be worthless if we cannot attract a number of students when designing ‘open’ places for learning. Most of all, the content and quality of the program must be attractive to bring in many students.

It is important to note that simply learning through lectures offered by the program may not satisfy community members. We can assume that, potentially, there are community members’ desires-to-teach. If we consider the ‘real-open’ places as a site for our communication and creating new ties, the activities are not limited to simply listening to instructors. It is likely that distinction between “professors” and “students” become vague, as they acknowledge that both “professors” and “students” jointly construct the situations of learning on site. Our conventional images about the relationship between teachers and students may disappear, and the idea of “teacher-student with student-teacher (Freire, 1970)” will fit better in the context of ‘real-open’ place for learning.

From the General Public To the Specific Group

At the conventional university, the use of time and space is highly structured by the curriculum. By means of the “timetable,” students and faculty can confirm when and where to get together. Because there is such a schedule adjustment, we can make plans with a certain level of confidence. At the same time, it can be said that without such adjustment, it becomes extremely difficult to coordinate learning opportunities for a large number of students.

In contrast, if the relationship between “teacher” and “student” is somewhat instable, that is to say, both of them are aware of their joint-construction of the situation, it is better to design a place that allows individuals to decide

things on-the-spot. There, adjustments of the schedule, for example, can be made on a case-by-case basis. The important and interesting design issues are to organize a ‘shikake,’ in that learning site is operated on the basis of mutual trust of the community members, while realizing the flexibility and openness at the same time. Presumably, this sort of design is suited for implementation in smaller scale community members, rather than for the general public.

Designing a ‘Shikake’

Based on the design philosophy mentioned above, we are currently trying to operate “Miyakejima University Project,” as a form of ‘shikake,’ to create a series of learning programs for the residents in Miyakejima, Tokyo. Miyakejima is an island (administered by the Tokyo Metropolitan government), located at 180 km south of Tokyo, well known by eruptions of its main volcano. The island was completely evacuated after the eruption in September 2000, until the residents were allowed to return to the island in 2005. Due to the absence of the residents for nearly five years, and because of the damages from the eruption, the island is seeking the approaches to understand the potential capabilities of the local community for its recovery. This “Miyakejima University Project” aims to create experiential learning opportunities within the whole island, guided by the idea of alternative “classrooms.” Using “university” as a metaphor, it is an activity of communication design within the region. The “Miyakejima University Project” is designed to explore the following themes.

Fostering An Individual’s ‘Civic Pride’

First, the project aims to create a ‘real-open’ place for the community members’ life-long learning, by promoting their reflection upon the relationships with the local community, as well as upon themselves. In part, this is an attempt to gain attention and build better images of the island, and at the same time, it is expected that the use of ‘university’ as a metaphor may contribute to foster an individual’s ‘civic pride’ in a long run. It is important to note that a ‘civic pride’ itself cannot be designed directly. What counts is a communication design through which the idea and importance of the ‘civic pride’ is delivered.



Figure 3. Fostering a sense of unity, a sense of solidarity with a university logo item (university flag).



Figure 4. Fostering a sense of unity, a sense of solidarity with a university newsletter.

As part of an effort in our communication design, we considered the importance of producing various artifacts and paraphernalia in order to create and enhance the feel of a ‘university’ (See Figure 3). The university logo items, for example, may promote one’s sense of belonging to this

particular learning community. A participant’s sense of solidarity and togetherness will be fostered, to some extent, through such ‘icon’ as he/she carries such items in his/her day-to-day activities. Similarly, a small-scale publication, such as flyers and newsletters may also contribute to share information and save records of the on-going process of the project (Figure 4).

Nurturing the ‘Repeaters’ For the Community

Not only those who live on the island share a series of ‘assets’ of the community. It is important to acknowledge that it also has the power to attract visitors from the outside. Constant and continuous hospitality of the region is also regarded as ‘assets’ of the community. When we consider the relationships between ‘outsiders’ and local residents, it is important to take in account the ways in which we can increase the numbers of ‘repeaters’ from outside the community. Coupon tickets and customer cards, for example, can be understood as typical ‘shikake’ to attract ‘repeaters’ in the context of our shopping behavior.

Through the ‘shikake’ mechanisms such as timetable and curriculum, the university has been nurturing ‘repeaters’ within the local community. In the present project, when designing a ‘university’ as an instrument for our communication, a variety of artifacts may function as a medium to keep the log of the project.

Returning the Results Back To the Community

The “university” designed in our current project aims to produce repeated engagement to the activities offered. It is designed in a way that one has to have a relationship with the local community more than once as a “repeater,” rather than just listen to the one-off course. It is a mechanism that participants not only consume the experience in the local community, but also return something back to the community. In the context of “university” courses, a student has to work on a ‘graduation project (paper)’ as part of requirements for his/her graduation. Specifically, we require those outcomes to be published within the community. Such outcomes of students can be understood as reflections of their relationships with the community members, gradually developed through the process of learning.

Conclusion

As I have introduced, a “university,” as a metaphor, can be understood as a “media” through which communication within the local community is facilitated. Particularly, when the “university” is designed and implemented as a ‘real-open’ place, it may raise community members’ awareness about commitment to the local community, and to gradually foster their “civic pride.”

Again, from the “capacity-focused” perspective, what stands out is not the idea of marketing. Needless to say, it is always important for us to think about the “readers” of our papers and reports. When we consider the possibilities of social contributions of the research, we should have a clear idea about our audience to whom our research results are delivered. However, it is a time to reconsider whether or not it is appropriate to understand the notion of “market” in a very narrow sense.

When we reflect upon the nature of our social relationships, being with someone or being on-site (at the time of the event) is becoming more and more important. It points to a “design of sharing,” and that is realized through raising our consciousness about our problems at hand. “Miyakejima University Project” is an attempt to promote a sense of belonging to the community, and the nature of human relations in the region.

Whereas the “university” is not ‘real,’ in terms of The Fundamental Law of Education, the metaphor itself is a useful one to talk consistently about how the “university” is designed and implemented.

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