

BACKGROUND

500 Voices: The *Meaning of Community Survey* Process by Paul Born

The Intention

I believe that the longing for an experience of community is a deeply held feeling inside of people. Even when people do not feel or see this longing for communal connection on a daily basis, this desire lies just under the surface waiting to be evoked. Life continues, it goes on and the business with which we fill our daily lives is so pervasive it carries us, or rather hurls us, forward. I often wonder if the fear that confronts people in the media on a daily basis has created a permanent flight or fight response in us. Have we as a society moved from living to surviving? And, even if we have, could we be hard-wired for community regardless of the fear that engulfs us? Do we instinctively know how we might want to live?

Over the past seven years, my colleagues and I at Tamarack have had conversations with countless groups and individuals about community in order to advance a collective understanding of how to foster greater collaboration between business, the voluntary sector, government and every day people in addressing the complex social problems of communities. These conversations have tended to focus on community as an organizing principle: how to reduce poverty in communities, for example. In all of these really interesting conversations, there is one question that has never been asked outright: Why is community important?

Through our work, Tamarack has cultivated a learning community which has grown to now include almost 10,000 people and I was eager to hear from this well-informed learning community about their own experiences of community. My thought was that the most active 2,000 members of Tamarack's learning community would be an ideal group to survey. This was no random group, so it was clear from the outset that their opinions would be similarly shaped by their concern for community.

These were people who thought about community daily, mostly from a professional context, and they have the ability to harvest deep insights from their experiences of making their cities and neighborhoods better places to live. I thought this would be a wonderful pool of wisdom to tap into. I admit that I was curious to know if they really cared about the role of community in their personal lives and I wanted to know if they thought about it with any regularity. I must admit that I was also looking for validation, or perhaps justification, for my own experience and longing. These were my peers and as such I thought they would be people who might feel the same disconnect as was.

And so, the goal of the *Meaning of Community* survey was to seek input from this pool of individuals, gather a lot of information about the meaning of community and then "boil" it down to more easily understood ideas and concepts.

Designing the Survey

With the topic of community being so broad and complex, it was important that the survey reflected the questions I personally had about community. I did not really want to create a scientific experiment or conduct a survey that would quantify ideas or the number of experiences. I did not feel a need for a scientific response. Instead, I wanted to have people share feelings about their sense of community, including their personal definitions and ideas. I wanted the survey to also invite respondents to describe what they would do when a situation of fear arose in their community. I really wanted to evoke their inner wisdom. At the same time, I did want to be able to report these results back, initially to Tamarack's learning community, and ultimately to share their ideas publicly. My hope was to be able to gather and describe this collective wisdom into one place and give it some sort of living form.

The survey technique I chose had been described in [Community Conversations](#), a book that I had written. It outlines a survey method called a Common Meaning Questionnaire. This method uses a Socratic questioning principle – that had questions building from one concept to the next. In this method, respondents are asked to provide the first response that enters their heads and then encouraged to write brief, point-form answers.

The online questionnaire designed for the *Meaning of Community* survey questionnaire is loosely based on Eidetics, a process founded by Henry Evering. Evering is an organizational and systems researcher and the author of *Creating Whole Organization Synergy*. Eidetics' process relies on "Socratic questioning principles" that assume every individual possesses: innate knowledge; a unique way of seeing things' and, the ability to find solutions by cooperating with others for mutual benefit.

The questions posed in this process are intended to help people express their meaning and their perception of words and concepts. A researcher can then examine the responses to show similarities or differences in meaning within the responses. Meaning questions are asked which establish a base of self-understanding for the participants and also to help researchers identify the key systems of meaning of the participants.

When data is compiled it is not expected that the tabulation add up to 100%. Because the answers are quantified by the number of times key words or phrases are mentioned by participants, one participant may mention two or three phrases with each answer. Instead, the responses are tabulated as a percentage of the number of times the phrase, word or concept is mentioned. When the percentage frequency distributions are calculated, the denominator is the sample or the number of respondents. The numerator is the number of times a particular phrase or theme is mentioned. Because the questions are open-ended, respondents can provide more than one answer to a question. For this reason, the sum total of answers to a particular question can be greater than 100%.

A review of the questions that were used in the *Meaning of Community* survey (see below) illustrates another important aspect of the survey design. A new word or concept is introduced in each question, leading to a larger concept. For example, the first three questions of the survey were: "What does 'community' mean to you?" "What does 'benefit' mean to you?" "What does 'the benefit of community' mean to you?" This sequencing allows for a form of Socratic questioning by evoking the participants' thoughts sequentially thereby allowing them to build on previous answers or ideas.

This design helps researchers deconstruct the building blocks of a statement from the participants' answers to specific questions and ultimately enables an exploration of multiple meaning statements with respect to the larger concept that is being examined. Ultimately, this approach allows researchers to explore words and concepts that people hold in common. By having participants explore and write down the meaning behind the words, themes of common understanding emerge from the data. As you will see later we are then able to quantify the number of times participants express a certain feeling or concept.

The Survey Questions

The questions used within the *Meaning of Community* questionnaire became another important consideration. The fact that we would be using an online survey instrument would limit the number of questions we could ask. From previous experience, we knew that we needed to keep the time required to complete the survey to about 15 minutes or people would not finish it. We were aware that people quickly got tired and impatient when filling in online surveys. After much consideration, we therefore agreed on seven areas of inquiry that we would explore with the participants. The seven areas were: the meaning of community; belonging and identity; most profound experience of community; what builds community; and, what breaks down community; fear; and, times when they most feel a sense of community.

The *Meaning of Community* Survey Questions

1. What does community mean to you?
2. What does community as place mean to you?
3. What does "the benefit of community" mean to you?

4. What does "belonging" mean to you?
5. What does "belonging to community" mean to you?
6. What does identity in community mean to you?

7. What does experience mean to you?
8. What does experiencing community mean to you?
9. When do you most profoundly experience community?

10. What does building mean to you?
11. What does community building mean to you?
12. What builds community for you?

13. What does break down mean to you?
14. What does community break down mean to you?
15. What causes community to break down for you?

16. What does fear mean to you?
17. What does community of fear mean to you?
18. What do people do when they experience fear as a community?

19. What does feeling mean to you?
20. What does community feeling mean to you?
21. When do you most feel a sense of community?

As you can see, the questions below are grouped and would be asked in the Socratic sequence described earlier. In this way, a participant would be asked to first think of a general term such as the meaning of belonging and then be asked what “belonging to community” might mean to them. This would be followed by a third question about the meaning of identity in community. In most cases it is the third question in each series we were most interested in. Of course, as most research goes, the responses to each question are fascinating and the collection of responses to the full list of 21 questions also creates a marvelous story.

Collecting the Responses

Initially, there was some debate about the best method for collecting responses to the survey. E-mailing the survey to the subscribers of Tamarack’s on-line publications was considered, but the work of organizing the return e-mail responses seemed challenging. The creation of web based survey tools (we used survey monkey) that assist in formatting and presenting a professional-looking and easy-to-use survey was extremely helpful. Having all the responses collected on-line and in an organized fashion ensured that all the survey responses were in one place and were already organized when we were ready to analyze the results. When the survey closed, all responses were downloaded from Survey Monkey’s website into an Excel spreadsheet with all the answers to each question listed in a separate column.

Before launching the survey, we tested it and solicited feedback from Tamarack staff and a few other key informants. I also piloted a paper version of the questionnaire with a group in Saskatchewan. One of the key comments from people was that the survey took a long time to fill out. One person commented that our statement: “please take a few minutes to complete this survey” made her grumble when, 15 minutes later, she was not yet finished answering the questions. The survey did take long because it required more than simple check-box answers. People had to think and type out their responses. Not everyone had the time, or the inclination, to participate. Based on this feedback, the introductory paragraph of the survey was changed to encourage respondents to: put down the first thing that came to mind; write in point form; and, only spend a short time (if possible) on each question. This helped, but in reality we knew the survey would take about 15 minutes in order to answer all 21 questions.

The survey went on-line in April and a e-mail was sent to 2000 of Tamarack’s e-newsletter subscribers, asking them to take the survey. It included a link directly to the online survey. Amazingly, the results started pouring in. Initially, we had hoped we might get around 100 responses. This number was quickly surpassed and the total number of completed surveys kept growing and growing. In all, we received responses from 491 people! This was a totally overwhelming and gratifying response rate. (I later surveyed 9 people more just to round it up to 500.) The survey response rate spoke to how much interest there is in this topic. Unlike past surveys – which typically averaged a 5% return rate –this survey generated exceptional enthusiasm. People would email me directly, excitedly sharing the ideas that had been generated for them by their completion of the survey and offering the insights that it offered them in their personal lives.

Analysis

The Challenge

Survey monkey is a very helpful statistical analysis tool when the responses are quantitative. It can make graphs, give percentages, and help present numbers in an understandable fashion. The statistical analysis offered, however, was of little use with our survey since we needed to

quantify our qualitative answers. This required the painstaking review of every response – a daunting 300 single-page pages in all.

I recruited Anita Fieguth to assist me as a researcher. Her first task was to create individual excel spreadsheets for the responses to each survey question. She then formatted each spreadsheet and deleted any blank answers. This formatting and adjustment meant that it was no longer possible to compare one individual's answers across the entire survey. This ensured that all the responses remained anonymous and confidential.

Anita then analyzed all the responses, one question at a time, looking for patterns and similar themes. She would check-in with me regularly as we sorted out categories and groupings. Once the themes had been established, each response was categorized by placing a number "1" in the column of whichever themes applied. The "1s" were all added up at the end and converted into percentages to determine the relative weight of each category or theme. The percentages do not add up to 100% however, since one person's response could contain more than one theme and would then be calculated in all the categories that the response fit. The totals and percentages were calculated to determine the general weight of each category or theme.

The process of analysis we chose was somewhat subjective and we recognize the limitations of this method of analysis. Because all of the analysis was done by Anita and me, the "lens" through which the responses were viewed was consistent but limited. The purpose of this analysis was to find ideas and patterns that would inform our understanding of community for the writing of my upcoming book, *Seeking Community in Chaotic Times*. We tried to be very methodical and follow a rigor in our analysis, but the categories we chose to report and the percentages they generated may be slightly different if another person had categorized them. In spite of these limitations, we do feel that the results offer a good overview of people's feelings about the meaning of community. I would welcome any feedback if you are interested in looking over the raw data yourself – which you can access directly through the link in the above paragraph.

An overall result that is interesting to note is that, the responses to the survey generally divided themselves along two lines: emotional (feeling or being); and, tangible (doing or touching). For example, in the first question: "What does community mean to you?", about half the responses included some aspect of belonging/emotional attachment while the other half focused on working together and/or being connected. Of course, there were also several instances where one person would answer in both ways and the response would therefore have been tabulated into both categories. The consistency of this pattern made us wonder whether different personality types answered this survey in different ways. Are people who are "Sensing" on the [Myers Briggs Type Indicator](#) more likely to give a hands-on answer as opposed to "Feeling" people who might be more concerned with belonging and fitting in? This is an interesting area for future research.

There were several questions that got at the issue of community from slightly different angles e.g.: What builds community for you? When do you most feel a sense of community? What does community mean to you? In response to these questions, people pretty much summed up the most important aspects of community. From this summary, it is clear that community is not an entity that you can "have" or "not have". It is more a spectrum of how much or how little you have. The factors that contribute to having more community involve work on the part of the individual. You need to commit time for relationships, you need to commit time to help others, and you need to be present to the possibility of meeting someone new, of starting something new, or of making your surroundings a better, safer, happier place.

Simplifying the reporting

Some questions were not analyzed if they were considered to be solely building blocks to another question. An example of that type of question is: “What does benefit mean to you?” The responses to these building block questions did not provide much useful data since they tended to offer dictionary definitions of the words. We chose not to include them in the analysis. This type of question was necessary, however, to get respondents’ thoughts prepared for the following question: What does “the benefit of community” mean to you?

The six questions that we felt did not provide as rich a source of information but rather helped lead respondents to the following question, and were therefore not analyzed, were:

- Question 2: What does benefit mean to you?
- Question 7: What does experience mean to you?
- Question 10: What does building mean to you?
- Question 13: What does break down mean to you?
- Question 16: What does fear mean to you?
- Question 19: What does feeling mean to you?

Reporting the responses

As we shared earlier, the questions were designed in groups of three. Using the Socratic approach we began by asking people for their definition of community and the benefit they derived from community. Next we ask them to examine the concept of belonging and identity in a community followed by their experience of community and what builds and breakdown community for people. We also wanted people to examine the power of fear and community and asked people to describe communities of fear. The final set of questions ended on a positive note, looking at “sense of community” and asking when people feel a sense of community most profoundly.

Some people began the survey with great enthusiasm and then stopped part-way through (ran out of time, lost interest, got frustrated). The attrition rate from beginning to end was approximately 17% (we began with 491 respondents and ended with 406).

The Survey Results

Over the coming months, we will be releasing our analysis of each of the questions one at a time. Do take the time to read the examples and consider grouping them into categories of your own. I would also welcome any thoughts or insights that are generated for you in reviewing these survey results. You can email me directly at paul@tamarackcommunity.ca.