

An Exploration of Communicating Sustainability Ideas through Technology to Inspire Sustainable Urban Planning Practice

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Introduction

A fundamentally flawed assumption made by many sustainability practitioners is that *any* communication about sustainability is good communication. However, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) guide to communicating sustainability, “. . . badly planned and misplaced communications will, at best, not work (wasting time and money); at worst they can have negative consequences” (Shea and Montillaud-Joyel, 2005, p.11).

Academics who study sustainability know quite a lot about sustainable practices and development; they can continue to research best practices and keep reaching for a more sustainable future. But without adequate communication tools and techniques, their knowledge will be lost on others. If sustainability research and information cannot be efficiently and simply communicated to the public and to those who need it in order to make important decisions, such as urban planners, then all the research will be for naught and all parties will lose. Failed communication is a barrier to the success of sustainability in practice.

Describe the Methods and Interventions

The main goal of the project is to provide an accessible, concise, but comprehensive source of information about sustainable practices to urban planners. The purpose of the project is to bridge the gap between academia and real world planning applications. A website was chosen as the medium because it creates a comprehensive centralized information hub that allows access to various resources through hyperlinks.

All of the communication techniques were derived from the lessons and readings in a course offered through Arizona State University: *SOS 598 Communicating about Sustainability*. The following methods were employed when creating the communication for the website:

- 1) The writing is clear and grammatically correct.
- 2) The writing uses language that is accessible to the planning audience.
- 3) Scientific information is translated in a way that the target audience can understand it.

- 4) The writing appeals to the value system of the intended audience.
- 5) The writing communicates honestly about uncertainty and the limits of scientific knowledge.
- 6) The information is presented in a logical way and is adequately supported with reasons and evidence.

The website content was adopted from a prior research book project. The following methods were used to change the format from book to website:

- 1) The language was translated from sustainability discourse into planning discourse.
- 2) Unnecessary information was removed.
- 3) Bullet points were used to make the information concise and easily absorbed.
- 4) In-text citations were transitioned to hyperlinks.
- 5) Images were only used if they complemented the example presented, or emphasized an action, point, or idea.
- 6) “Implementation strategies” and “Keys to success” sections were added to make the information more useful to planners.
- 7) An avenue for communication response was added to collect input and feedback.

Finally, the website content was derived from the original, unfinished project. The original project team identified problems and chose solutions to address these problems. I had little influence over the selections. The solutions address a wide range of concerns that urban planners commonly face in their practice. There are numerous examples, but the general overarching ideas focused on issues in: transportation, water, economy, agriculture, green space and governance.

Summarize the Project Outcomes/Results

The main outcome of the project is a website for planners that highlight practical examples of sustainable planning (<https://planningsustainable.weebly.com/>).

Identify Possible Next Steps

Engaging with stakeholders is crucial to project success. The next step would be to research and implement a strategy to measure the impact of the website I created. The question I want to answer is: Can I improve the website to make it more useful to urban planners? A survey can be added to the site to measure engagement and collect feedback.

The website can be updated and expanded indefinitely in the future as planners and organizations continue to develop creative solutions to sustainability problems. Other students can work on projects that explore ways to communicate with different fields. We need to know how to package our ideas to appeal to different audiences, and when we do, we can start to fill the communication gaps that exist between academia and professional practice.