Participatory Design of Learning Space
: A Case Study of Baan Pu-Ong-Ka Community.
Tambon Thasao, Saiyok, Kanchanaburi, Thailand.

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Abstract

The research deals with participatory approach related to creating a design process for community learning space. The area of Baan Pu Ong Ka community, which is a village in Thasao sub-district, Saiyok district, Kanchanaburi province in western Thailand. There have been several social problems including those of teenagers: drugs abuse, ethnic minority groups and street motorcycle gang. To reduce these problems, the community should setup a learning space that can help them communicate and learn how to solve existing conflicts and problems. The aim of this research is to find the meaning of the learning space that fits this community. The participatory design method was used to involve group's participation. Three groups were investigated chronologically along a year included the boys, the girls, and the health volunteers respectively. The result shows that uncontrolled factors such as political issues, study condition, the career path and context have an influence on the group forming. The learning community cannot be functioned in the dynamic group. A result drawn from this research was "the collective learning emerges among an appropriate environment, space and opportunity". A learning space for this community in general is not the physical space but also the living one in people's mind.

Key words
Learning Space, Participatory Design, Social Interaction

1. Introduction

Baan Pu Ong Ka community is a village in Thasao sub-district, Saiyok district, Kanchanaburi province in western Thailand, the area located on a borderline between Thailand and Burma. Because of beautiful mountain, forest, waterfalls and good weather, Thasao sub-district turns to be a tourist attraction, then economic becomes an important issue instead of farming agriculture.
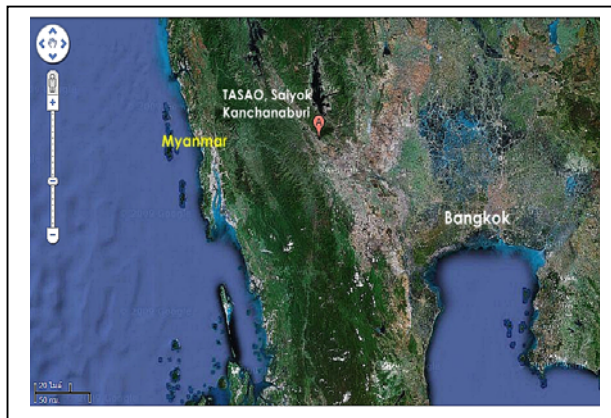

Figure 1: The topography map shows an area of Thasao sub-district area.

As a result, there are an ethnic minority groups and local teenage groups in that area. One of the problems is that the community has encountered the drugs abuse and street motorcycle gang. The problem occurs because of the lack of parenting and much free-time for the teenagers. Another problem is from the local Thai's perception about ethnic minority groups.

Learning space has been defined in many meanings. For example, the virtual space is a place connected to the Net where educational processes acquires a meaning. Places are perceived and felt by individuals, and let them construct their identities. As a result, a space of place riddles many meanings [1].

Many projects illustrate how to use the participatory design to redesign the physical space. The examples can be seen from the project of Building of Cooperation in Revitalization between the Dindaeng Community and Partnership [2], Revitalized Buildings of Dindaeng Housing Apartment [3], Antique Buildings at Banglampu Community Revitalizing Project[4]. Those projects are quite successful to change their communities into learning space.

The aim of this research is to understand the learning space designed by using participatory design.

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Research questions

1. Which type of learning space is suitable for Baan Pu-Ong-Ka community?

2. Who should be key leaders of the learning space?

3. What is the meaning of the learning space for Baan Pu-Ong-Ka community?

2. Method

The method of this research focuses on the focus group and data collecting by using the methods of the field survey, in-depth interview, and small group discussion. The assumption of the research relies on leaders who could lead and link the community activity together. If they cannot be accomplished, another assumption will be made; leaders must be changed. The research was conducted from Aug 2008 to Aug 2009 with the collaboration of Thasao Health Center. Since the outcome of the community building cannot be clearly seen in short time, this research will focus on one existing during the learning process. Outcome mapping techniques will be used in the research to observe the change of behavior of the target group.

The conceptual framework of this research, as defined by researcher and key informants in the area of study, has derived from the basic assumption that "The collective learning emerges among an appropriate environment, space and opportunity". Then this research decided to use Participatory Design as a methodology. The graphic below shows the details of conceptual framework.
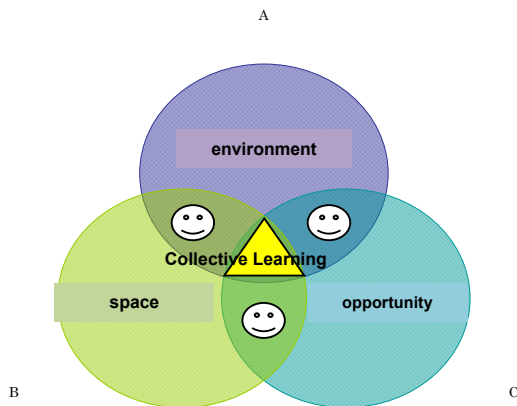

Figure 2 : Shows the assumption of collective Learning

2.1 Tools

To encourage the group discussion, the participatory design process is the tool for generating information.

2.2 Participants and procedures

Phase 1:

Figure 3 : Radio station conducted by male teenagers

The Thasao youth group has members of both female and male teenagers. Before forming a learning space, a group of male teenagers had had an idea to setup a radio station (see Fig. 2). The researcher guided them to use the participatory design to discuss the issues that they can do on the radio station. Most of the idea is about the public concern such as the knowledge transfer from elderly wisdom, the public health care and others.

The subjects were leaded by two groups of male teenagers to setup a radio station in the army's area. The radio station launched its first broadcast in November 2007. The members of the youth group did many jobs such as disc jockying. They felt happy to do the activity until the end of December 2008. Then the building of radio station was demolished by the land owner under the influence of local authority and local politics. After the space disappeared, the male teenager groups were scattered. Many of them went to study in downtown area. Some worked with their parents or went to find other possible opportunities.

Phase 2:

Figure 3 : Female teenagers with their Thai dancing on Mother's Day at community shelter.

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On February 2009, the researcher visited the community for the second time. The target of the study changes to the female teenagers who studied in the neighborhood school. The learning space for this group was the radio station in the school and the community shelter. The researcher found that female teenagers could not be key leaders because they could not link their activities to the community outside the school. Most of the activities were of festivals like Mother's Day (see figure 2). After the activities were finished, it seems that no one was interested to have any further participation.

Phase 3 :

In March 2009, the researchers changed the assumption of key leaders to be the group of health volunteers who could make full contribution and establish the connection within the community. The researcher made a forum and presented a movie clip of the citizen reporter who did the report of the problem and solution of the community before asking the participant these following questions:
"Which place in your community do you consider a learning space?" The results of this answer were the places like community shelter, the school yard, under the Tamarind trees, and the Village bank.

One of the other questions was "What is the meaning of learning space in your opinion?" Most people's answered was the place that all community members involve in the participation process.

3. Result

3.1 Key leader

A good key leader should be able to stay in that community for a long time and be able to link other key partners. The research assumptions were changed three times due to the uncontrolled factors and context in that area. Male teenagers represented the dynamic variables that can be changed according to external factors like context and time. The female teenagers, who failed to establish the community connection, were another representation of different variables. As a result, the most static variable was the health volunteers who can be the key leaders.

3.2 Learning space

The study of the male teenagers suggests that the learning space should not be of fixed places, otherwise the key leader's focus might be deviated from the real value of the community to the place location instead. Learning space can be anywhere with regard to each individual, group's definition and time usage of the space. Although the 'space' in Thai language cannot be exactly defined as 'place', the meaning of 'space' according to the health volunteers was rather meaningful in terms of more spiritual than physical. They encouraged people to focus on their inner values instead of outer ones. This can also be applied for the problem of ethnic minority groups as the space can be functioned for various ethnics and people from different ages who are as well the co-livings in our society.

3.3 Participatory design

The outcome of activities from the participatory design process is the effective result of male teenagers' participation in the radio station producing the connection within the community. The important impact of participatory process is to re-connect the relationship of the participating subjects in the community to work together. Regarding female teenagers, on the contrary, they did not try to connect other partners during their process. This result makes an unsuccessful community foundation. For the health volunteers, they built up the connection of people who can take parts of community development. For example, they can promote the health issue through other key partners like male and female teenagers.

4. References
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