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Structural and Philosophical Features of an Effective Communication Space for Cultivating Sensibility on Rivers and River Management

– A Case Study of *Iikawa and Iikawa-dukuri Workshop* –

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Abstract: In the area of community-based natural resource management, the increasing difficulty of maintaining community groups and for them to keep carrying out their activities is a serious challenge. In order to search for a way to solve this situation, this study aims at describing the key structural and philosophical points of an effective communication space that cultivates a supportive network among the community groups, and amongst the individual members of the groups. The name of the focused communication platform is the *Iikawa and Iikawa-dukuri Workshop*. This is a long lasting annual award selection workshop event where the participants are encouraged through gaining confidence and feeling rewarded for their work caring for their local rivers. Through document analysis and in-field research, this study shows that there is a well-designed spatial forum with an open and creative structure, and a future-oriented philosophy that maintains moral safety in the communication during the workshop.

Keywords: *workshop, river management, community-based natural resource management, communication, network*

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been pointed out that the environment which is the basis for the traditional style of community-based natural resource management in Japan is changing, and that local knowledge is in danger of being lost [1]. This is mainly caused by the ageing and decline of the population in rural areas of Japan. However, the situation that Japan has been facing seems to exist in other countries as well. That is, the difficulty of maintaining community groups that care for their local environment and for them to keep carrying out their activities is a serious challenge that is shared internationally [2].

What is urgently needed is the development of a method that links community groups that are distant from each other, in order to promote the sharing with others of practical knowledge including the challenges and solutions regarding community-based NRM, and further, to subsequently pass this knowledge on to the next generation.

2. PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

In order to discover the features of an effective framework, this study aims to describe the key structural and philosophical points of a communication space that cultivates a supportive network among the community groups and amongst the individual members. The name of

the focused communication space is the *Iikawa and Iikawa-dukuri Workshop*. This is an annual award selection workshop event where the participants are encouraged through gaining confidence and feeling rewarded for their work caring for their local rivers [3].

The research was carried out through document analysis, participatory observation at the workshop events, and interviews with the members of the Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the *Iikawa and Iikawa-dukuri Workshop*.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Conceptual Framework

Iikawa and Iikawa-dukuri Workshop was started with the expectation of being a method for sharing images and visions for the future of river management, both the ideas and ideals, of each participating community group and government official, resulting in better river management, through bringing local practices together in one place.

As for the name of the workshop, *Iikawa* means nice river, and *Iikawa-dukuri* means any kind of activities or projects conducted by community groups, government agencies, or collaborative bodies comprising community groups and government agencies which contribute to achieving nice rivers. The term *likawa* was chosen because the meaning of ‘nice’ will vary with each locality and group—there is no ideal river or activity. *Ii* in

Japanese means ‘nice’ but it does NOT mean ‘absolutely right for everyone’. The intention of this choice is that through discussion from the variety of perspectives of the participants, they will think more deeply about what a nice river is, and about possible future directions for government policy that would support community action for river health.

The total number of participants in the workshop from 1998 to 2017 was 1,123 groups and over 10,000 individuals [4]. The workshop has been managed by the Secretariat of the Executive Committee of this Workshop since 1998. It was originally started as a result of discussion among the members of a not-for-profit organization called the “National Association for Local Water Environment Groups” established in 1993 [5].

3.2 Structural Features

3.2.1 Supporting Bodies for Implementation

The Executive Committee of the *Iikawa and Iikawa-dukuri Workshop* is composed of about 100 individuals from both community and government sectors who are based in different regions across Japan. Besides the Executive Committee, there are volunteers from other supporting organizations such as related not for profit organizations and government agencies, and individuals such as university students. As for the financial aspect, the secretariat of the Executive Committee fundraises for holding the workshop. However, all the staff members in part cover the cost of their own transportation and accommodation.

3.2.2 Openness in Selection Process

The workshop is carried out as a contest and tournament, with each participating group presenting its activities and achievements regarding their local river. During the workshop event, the selection panel, made up of community group members, government officials, and other individuals such as academics, discusses the presentations openly with the presenters and others attending, and decides on awards for groups with particularly important achievements, unique perspectives, or future prospects that contribute to cultivating the concept of “*Iikawa*” and “*Iikawa-dukuri*”.

In this workshop event, the openness of the selection process is the essential factor for keeping the process creative.

The main selection process of this workshop is composed of four parts in tournament style. Firstly, before the first selection stage, all the participating groups present an overview to the selection panel members and the other attendees through a three minutes presentation.

Each participating group makes presentation along the printed abstract which is submitted beforehand, through using any style of expression they choose such as power point slides, skits, or singing.

At the first selection stage, participating groups are grouped according to categorized themes, and each group has a round table discussion with some members of the selection panel and the facilitator to select the candidates for awards. At the second and final stages, the selection panel for each stage chooses the candidates or winners through discussions in the hall with all the participants in attendance.

1) Facilitators

The key that promotes the exchange of ideas and perspectives while generating new thoughts in this open workshop is the skilled facilitators involved in the selection processes. They identify the expressions that are essential to or have the potential for cultivating the concept of “*Iikawa*”, from all the words spoken in the discussion during the selection process. After each selection stage is closed, there is time to sum up and share the findings from the presentations and discussions, with all the attendees, based on the facilitators’ reports or comments.

2) Selection Process for revival

The other key is that, before the second selection stage begins, there is a selection process for choosing groups for revival. This is carried out in the early morning of the second day of the two day workshop. The participating groups which failed in the first selection stage still have the chance to move to the second selection stage, through panel presentations, in the style of face to face dialogue with the selection panel members and others.

With the intention of cultivating the concept of “*Iikawa*” and “*Iikawa-dukuri*”, the panel members are not confined to the listed evaluation points but should be open to the fresh ideas, insights, and sensibilities that participants show [6]. In this regard, this selection process for revival is complementary but important stage where the miss outed value of these fresh things at the first stage are picked up by the other panel members.

3.3 Philosophical Features

3.3.1 Looking at Positive Aspects

In particular, the selection panel members are requested to focus on the positive aspects and potential of the participating groups and the activities that they present at the workshop, rather than pointing out negative aspects. They are requested to find the potential value of the presented activities even if they have not yet had

sufficient outcomes to allow for evaluation, in order to encourage the groups to move forward. Furthermore, it is expected they will use terms familiar to everyone, rather than using technical terms that are difficult to understand.

3.3.2 Beyond Obtaining Awards

It is anticipated that the central purpose for participating in this workshop is not to obtain an award but rather the main aim should be that everyone at the workshop is encouraged through communicating with others. The intention is that everyone should receive warm and fruitful comments and feedback from the selection panel and other attendees to take back home with them.

3.3.3 Cultivating Friendship

At the workshop the participants enjoy communicating with fellow participants, including at the dinner table where they partake of river-related food such as fruits, vegetables, processed goods of fish, etc. which the participants bring with them to share the various stories of the relationship with their local river. It enables them to feel part of this nation-wide network. All the attendees are expected to embrace the opportunity to become friends with other participants which may bring something new that they didn't expect or imagine beforehand. The participants should feel encouraged by the positive comments from others and can access suggestions from others who face similar situations.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that in the case of the *Iikawa and Iikawa-dukuri Workshop*, there is a well-designed spatial forum with an open and creative structure and future-oriented philosophy that maintains moral safety during the communication at the workshop.

This is a case study focusing on river management, however, the described approach of cultivating sensibility regarding rivers and river management through such workshop style communication, has been effective in generating the basis for a shared vision among the related organizations and individuals. The author plans in future research to look at the potential to apply this approach to other places or areas, and is in the process of sharing the findings described here with other countries with a view to developing the framework through discussion with those with whom she is in cooperation.

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NOTE

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