

Planting Oak Trees, Harvesting Acorns and Building towards “Reforestation”

Indiana Center of Activity Report by Ross Peterson-Veatch, Indiana

Two hundred years ago, as much as eighty-five percent of our great state of Indiana was covered with trees. With logging in the 19th century came forest management practices based on replanting trees to replace and replicate the forests so that the basic organic resources around us could sustain our growing population. But just planting more trees ignored the crucial roles that the other layers of the forest played in the system and gave us what we might call “the woods” – trees without dense undergrowth, and dirt covered only by leaves. What we know now about reforestation tells us to attend to the soil, and nurture the shrubs, even as we plant seedlings and saplings that continue to grow into healthy trees that can sustain the forest. This attention to the layers in between might be one of the best metaphors I can think of to describe what we’ve been doing in the two years since our last Center of Activity report in Connections.

When the NSRF National Office asked us to write a report from the field, none of us really knew where to start. So many things have happened in the interim that it was hard to get a handle on all of our activities statewide. We now hail not just from Bloomington, but from Columbus, Indianapolis, and Goshen. The surge in our growth prompted a brief conversation over e-mail about what we should do for the report and who should

do it. Tom Gregory came up with the idea of using a modified online metaphors activity, and I agreed to write that up in the form of this report.

Tom began the metaphors conversation with me on the phone, at which point I used the metaphor of a center of activity’s work being like a board of directors. Tom’s metaphor began to evolve as he wrote this to me the next day.

Your goal (in creating your metaphor) was probably to keep things manageable so that good deliberations could occur. My goal was to have an army so that when one of us faltered another could take her place. We cast a broad net when we started this, probably thinking that a few would fall away. The surprise may be that almost no one has. That’s a really good sign that, despite our sputtering start, enough good stuff is occurring to keep people

engaged—and hopeful for the future.

Over the next few days, I sent out a call to everyone involved in our work. Arriving at a comprehensive list of folks involved in NSRF work through our center was a task in itself, and I found myself recalling the debrief session following a Coaches Institute in the summer of 2005. We had just finished a very successful seminar that we ran at Bloomington’s South High School, and we were sitting around a big table looking at each other with “what next?” on our minds.

Since there were twelve of us there, we had been able to form and maintain small CFG-sized groups of ten participants and two facilitators for practically the entire week. We all found it remarkable that there were enough facilitators in Bloomington for us to pull this off with only one National Facilitator from out of town. Around that

table, we had five National Facilitators working out of the Indiana Center, a sixth from Georgia – and seven interns who had been successfully running CFGs in their own schools in Bloomington for at least a year.

At that point we had enough of a critical mass of people who were obviously passionate about CFGs to begin really considering forming a Center of Activity that was larger than just a few individuals, but we had no concrete plans. So,

in February of 2006, after the Winter Meeting in Denver, we began meeting as a group of facilitators and interns, intent on making something happen.

In the interim we have met monthly for some stretches and “every three or so months” at other points, for multiple purposes: to get to know each other and to choose projects, glean strategies and forge the strong connections with one another we know will serve to propel us into the future.

The initial Bloomington crowd has become a larger statewide group both through opening ourselves to opportunities for great partnerships and by invitations to like-minded colleagues. Colleagues from Indianapolis have begun to join us in delivering coaches’ trainings, not just in organizing them. For last summer’s round of semi-

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nars, we gained five new Bloomington interns, and this year we are gathering interns from both Columbus and Indianapolis. We spent a good deal of time – perhaps four or five months – working out our theory of action and building an inductive “architecture” to use in supporting others. Our theory of action is now informing the practice of dozens of coaches who continue to sustain CFGs in their own buildings and we are using our architecture all over the state to support schools and districts in crafting their own theories.

This year, especially, we have seen educational equity become the focus of all our work. We put equity at the center of our theory of action and have cultivated that seed in all our seminars. Our experiments with small-sized New Coaches seminars have been productive both in giving participants an authentic CFG experience and in helping them uncover their moral purpose as educators. In a five-day New Coaches Institute, for example, we have made it a habit to begin looking at student work on the first afternoon. Making the case for equity and engaging in difficult conversations about it also happen early on. The second morning, we typically begin a conversation about equity that is rooted in personal stories we elicit on the first day and flows from the first night’s reading and journaling assignment. Sustaining the conversation about equity has involved renewing our understanding of how systems work to shape our experience and our decisions. As facilitators we have been working not only to identify and interrupt inequities, but also to provide structures (protocols, practices, and spaces) that support fragile new learning communities as they struggle towards more authentic and more just ways of educating their students.

We have also seen fruit from partnerships strengthened over the last two years with Indiana University’s School of Education, the University of Indianapolis’s Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning (CELL), the Monroe County Community School Corporation, and the Bartholomew Consolidated School Corporation (in Columbus).

This year there have been, or will be, Small Schools Coaching, an open CFG Coaches Seminar funded entirely through participant fees, an Advanced Coaches Institute held in partnership with various school corporations, and a

Leading for Educational Equity Seminar.

So I didn’t know what to expect when I asked for the metaphors over e-mail. While not everyone involved in the center was able to submit a metaphor, the ones that came to my inbox became connected in my mind.

One response was a tree:

“I’m thinking of a young oak tree with deep roots and an emerging canopy in a deciduous forest.”

Another was a wheel:

“I keep coming back to some version of a wheel. We individuals are the spokes. We are each different, have different orientations; but we are also all connected. And working together we can move in any direction we want. We can even move something very heavy that none of us would be able to do anything with on our own. I think of crafting the facilitators’ agendas, running coaches’ seminars – each one of us made contributions that made the whole better. I also think the metaphor is good for one of our major strengths/weaknesses as a group: there is no one in charge any more than anyone else. One spoke can’t really do anything to move the wheel without the rest of us.”

Recalling my own metaphor – that a center’s work was like that of a board of directors – I was already thinking of a management team, a “board,” and in my mind an image of trees, armies of acorns, and lumber for making wagon wheels took root. I began to see us engaged in a grand project of the “reforestation” type. Over the last two years we have done mostly “organic” work that attended to our moral purpose – what we might call the soil of our reforestation. And even as we continued to work that soil, we trained coaches, gathered interns and cultivated partnerships with others to form a healthy understory layer. From that work grew theories, structures, and a new resilience that has helped us take risks and learn from each other. Having attended to the soil and the underbrush, we are ready to concentrate on nurturing the trees we’ve planted to make sure our forest continues to thrive. Through our efforts, we may never cover eighty-five percent of Indiana, but so far, our reforestation project is giving us all great hopes for the future of the Hoosier state. ■

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