Symposium Outcomes: Reconstructing the Network of Progressive Educators

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At the recently concluded, yearlong national symposium, Progressive Education in the Twenty-first Century, hosted by The School in Rose Valley to celebrate its seventy-fifth anniversary, a committee was formed to revive the Network of Progressive Educators, which has been inactive in recent years. This group hopes to inspire progressive educators from across the country to join together, share information and stories, network, and plan gatherings. We hope to 1) create a critical mass of educators who will help articulate progressive practices, 2) meet together to provide support to one another, and 3) create change in the climate of education in this country that is moving away from child-centered, developmental, and experiential educational environments for children.

In the fall of 2004, from all over the United States, educators congregated to participate in the first progressive education conference for the twenty-first century. Some arrived seeking a clearer understanding of the term “progressive education,” and others came searching for inspiration to carry on the progressive vision. Although each of us arrived with different experiences and expectations, we found solace in the passion of the guest speakers and the sheer number of educators ardently vested in progressive education.

During the two-day fall conference, as participants formed various Learning Circles during break-out sessions, it became clear that the educators and the schools in attendance share similar challenges. Over the winter, the Learning Circles continued to share and learn through an online bulletin board. For some this was a wonderful opportunity to meet like-minded educators from around the country.
and focus on a particular area of common interest. For many it was the first opportunity to think about progressive education in the areas beyond our own schools and to share conflicts and solutions with colleagues. The six-month Learning Circle journey culminated with the spring conference. The groups shared their experiences with other groups and vital networking continued to grow.

**Katy Dalgleish Reflects on the Learning Circles**

As I look back at the fall weekend, I realize that it was the personal connections to like-minded educators that were the most engaging aspects of the experience for me. As progressive educators, we know that the student should not only have choices, but must play an active, engaged role in the learning process for it to be meaningful. The School in Rose Valley conference trusted that the participants would participate in many different levels and be able to pick and choose and design a learning process that was meaningful and unique to each person.

The process for finding like-minded educators and joining a Learning Circle was open-ended and variable. It was structured so that over the course of the second morning all participants eventually would have the opportunity to think about topics and areas of interest, interview forming groups and finally choose a group that was interested in pursuing a course of dialogue or study area that was agreeable to all. I tried two gatherings before I finally joined a group that decided to have a discussion around the question, “Why do we educate?”

To be honest, I am not sure how my Learning Circle found each other. We were a group held together only by a desire to have a lively conversation. We were more different than we were alike. We were parents, classroom teachers, administrators, and specialists. We shared the fact that we all wanted to talk about education, about our own experiences, and about our own personal educational philosophies. Over the course of the next five months we formed an electronic bond in cyberspace. We asked questions, argued, confided in each other, and continually looked for written material, research, experiences, and words to answer our questions.
We were not able to definitely answer our question, “Why do we educate?” However, when we got together for dinner the night before the conference reconvened in April, we found that we were friends, we understood each other, and we shared a deep conversation that served as a foundation for our growing connections to each other.

The Spring Session Leads to Action

On the second day of the spring conference, Roland Barth asked us to contemplate the implications surrounding the overarching question, “Where do we go from here?” He challenged each of us to work on a project, a personal challenge, a challenge for our school, or for the larger community beyond our school environments. We separated into groups.

The focus of the spring conference focused on analyzing what we had learned and to answer the question, “Where do we go from here?” Roland closed the symposium with powerful words and thinking and inspired those in attendance to continue their efforts in support of progressive education.

Roland gave us two quotations that are relevant to reviving the national Network of Progressive Educators. From E.B. White: “A person must have something to cling to. Without that we are as a pea vine sprawling in search of a trellis.” He brought another passage to us from Rob Garnston: “Any group that is too busy to reflect, is too busy to improve.”

With those thoughts in our minds, the conference divided into small groups and individuals who challenged themselves to reflect, to create structures and foundations to solve problems, and to think about the future. Six educators from different regions from across the United States joined together to revitalize the dormant national Network of Progressive Educators. Tom Little from Park Day in Oakland and Katy Dalgleish from Peninsula School in Menlo Park represent California and the west. Maureen Cheever and Kate McLellan from Hubbard Woods School in Illinois represent the Midwest. Terry Strand from Green Acres School in Maryland and John Pecore from Galloway School in Atlanta are representatives from the east and the south. While most of the six of us did not
know each other before the conference, and we had not been in the same Learning Circle during the winter months, the authors of this article found each other and we have formed a band of educators dedicated to growing and promoting the progressive educators network.

The excitement generated by the Rose Valley conference prompted individuals from around the country to meet in a focus group to establish a link among progressive schools. Citing the loneliness of working in isolation and recognizing the importance of our work in the field of education, the intrepid seven, representing the East Coast, West Coast and Midwest, decided to work at the local levels to re-establish a national progressive educators network. In some ways our purpose was self-serving. We wanted to establish a group that would promote and publicize the tenets of progressive education. We wanted to provide support and encouragement for progressive educators in the classroom and ideas for teachers, parents, and children. We wanted to establish university connections for teacher training and develop a job networking database. Lastly we wanted to continue a regular meeting time and place for progressive educators.

Terry Strand Reflects on Creating a Network for Educators

Encouraged by Roland Barth and Carlye Nelson-Major, each member of our group went about re-establishing the links with local progressive educators. To date we have our own communication link, and our goal is to use the upcoming year to develop our local groups. Once you have registered on the site, you will receive information about events in your region of the United States.

What is the importance of one school’s initiative in assembling like-minded educators? The School in Rose Valley has inspired educators to act. We have acted because we were inspired when we got together. We want to share the power of networking with other like-minded educators.

While reading about progressive education this summer, I was struck by the power of the individual to invoke change. A few representatives from around the country developed the first Progressive Educators Network as a result of the University of Chicago’s national progressive education conference held in the early 1980s. Regional groups
developed during the next few years and regular conferences took place. Spirits were high and lasting connections and friendships were made. Towards the end of the decade, funding disappeared, and the enthusiasm for the effort died.

**An Invitation**

Our purpose in writing this article is not only to inform you about the national Network of Progressive Educators but to encourage you and other representatives of your school to become a part of the network. Our initial goals are few and straightforward.

We have created an online bulletin board; we hope you will find it easy to use and useful for your practice. We will develop a database using the information that educators provide when they register to use the online communication tool. If a person wants to be informed about our work, but does not wish to participate online or does not have access to the Internet, we will add that person to the database. We hope to publish a few newsletters in the next few years. These will be available both online and by mail. We are hoping to plan and organize three or four regional gatherings to be held in spring of 2006. We are willing to encourage and assist in organizing more regional gatherings in areas beyond the west, Midwest and east. The regional gatherings will lay the groundwork for a second Progressive Education in the Twenty-first Century symposium in California in the spring of 2007.

Especially during this time of narrowed educational discourse and traditional practice, a great need exists to address the isolation that can easily occur among progressive educators scattered around the country. The recent symposium at The School in Rose Valley demonstrated the inspiration and potential that arises when like-minded educators gather to share ideas. We experienced this past year, with the simple use of current technology, that it is possible to sustain a yearlong dialogue about best practices. The virtual Learning Circles, formed at the October conference, allowed for teachers at a small school in Massachusetts to converse with educators from Georgia, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and California. We proved to one another that we are not alone.
If you would like to participate in the Network of Progressive Educators, go online to: Peninsulaschool.org and find the link to the Progressive Educators site: http://www.Peninsulaschool.org/Progressiveeducationnetwork.

If you register, you will have the opportunity to get involved in the online discussions and be added to the database. If you do not have access to the Internet, write Katy Dalgleish, Peninsula School, 920 Peninsula Way, Menlo Park, CA 94025. You will be added to the database; we will notify you of any regional gatherings; we will send you any newsletters that are published.

We hope that by this time next year, the national Network of Progressive Educators is once again up and running, and as educators, we will have a primary source of support and connection.

“We learn from experience if we reflect on our experience.”
—John Dewey

Go online today and treat yourself to reflection and the opportunity to meet like-minded educators from across the country.