

# Presentation for the 2011 Conference of the Association of Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA)

## Network learning, nonprofits, and social diversit(ies): Exploring structures for educational change

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### Educational Change

Connecticut children of all races and income levels are ready for school by age five and are successful learners by age nine.

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### Systems

#### People Say:

- Systems thinking helps us to understand complexity and to distinguish "problem symptoms from root causes" (Stroh, 2009).
- Applying systems thinking to systems means identifying system norms, resources, regulations, operations, and interactions. (Foster-Fishman et al., 2007).
- That there is an "inside" the system and an "outside" the system.

#### What If?:

- Part of the value of formal systems is that they make visible social inequity so that it can be targeted.
- Setting a system boundary and identifying elements of structure also makes visible the possible leverage points and paths for change.
- The conceptual power of boundary identification and labeling people as "inside or outside" is actually that collectively the people needed to construct a system can be identified; and we can understand the dynamics of change across system boundaries.

### Networks

#### People Say:

- When dealing with complex problems, the more efficient a network is in terms of disseminating information, the better the short run performance, but the lower the long run performance (Lazer & Friedman, 2007).
- Understanding issues of power within networks is crucial to increasing the potential of partnerships to lead to change (Moore & Kelly, 2009).
- Networks are made up of nodes and ties and understood through ideas like directionality, exchange and linkage.

#### What If?:

- The performance of networks was rated in terms of knowledge construction and adaptability, not just information flow and exchange.
- The nature of partnerships was understood as creating the power dynamics in networks rather than the inverse.
- Meaning making became the focus that tied networks to system construction through the ideas of identity and shared leadership.

### Diversit(ies)

#### People Say:

- Networks rely upon diversity for innovation, vitality, and knowledge production (Choudry, 2008).
- The value of networks are their potential to increase knowledge sharing and thus access diverse perspectives - e.g. bridge difference. (Searce, 2011).
- Feedback loops are not value neutral in their outcome; some loops serve to support system adaptation to outside forces seeking change whereas other loops contribute to responsiveness to external conditions (Menendian & Watt)

#### What If?:

- We questioned networks and asked what interactions enabled diversity to lead to innovation.
- The ability to achieve deep social and policy change informed by experience was understood as reliant upon practice dialogue -- where people explore together the meaning of inequity in the structures of their daily work.
- We understood network learning space as differentiated and explored change through the dynamics of interaction with these varied spaces.

### Network Learning

Move forward with exploring how information is exchanged AND also try to see how identity is formed through learning.

Move forward with understanding boundaries AND also look into how learning and action occur within and across boundaries.

Move forward with understanding network structures AND also differentiate the variety of structures within networks.

Move forward with discussing learning AND also examine how learning interacts with various structures to create change.



### Methods

Move forward with visualizing nodes and links AND start envisioning movement and change.

Move forward with quantifying linkages AND start asking about the nature of connection.

Move forward with creating typologies AND start asking about purpose and action in relationships.

Move forward with identifying network structures AND explore how people make meaning and thus construct networks for social and policy change.

