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Commodification Processes and Alternatives: Lessons Learned

Engaging with Garden-Raised Bounty (GRuB) this quarter as the Field Trip Program Intern, afforded me a multitude of opportunities to observe and reflect on the culture and communication style of the organization. I connected with the community beyond the roles defined for the internship, assisting on several garden builds for the Victory Garden Project over the course of the season, as well as lent two helping hands on the farm on occasion. Perhaps my most expansive experience was attending The Institute, a three day, in-depth dive into the GRuB School Model and the tools the use there in. In connection to the program SOS: Commodification Processes and Alternatives my main learning over the quarter, that I wish to highlight here, includes communication techniques, community building strategies, outdoor education leadership and how these all tie into Agroecology and the global food movement.

The organization GRuB operates under a shared value system by acknowledging that good food is a human right, that every individual is powerful, that meaningful relationships are key for social change, and that change requires people creating solutions and working from a place of abundance, love, joy and appreciation. With those values at the root of every facet of GRuB they set strategic goals for the years ahead— this year that looks like pollinating the GRuB School and youth work aspects of the organization to the larger community, creating community food solutions through the victory garden project, participating in the “Good Food Movement”, cultivating community and leaders and strengthening the foundational structures of the organization to build up its capacity. With those values and their mission to “inspire positive personal and community change by bringing people together around food and agriculture” the role of an intern like myself goes far beyond the position description to include personal work and community building.

With such a powerful nonprofit platform established, they provide numerous resources for the community to learn and involve themselves in. The foundational framework is outlined in *GRuB Culture Guidelines.* These principles, which I’ve discussed at length in my blog posts throughout the quarter, provide a clear set of tools to guide interactions. As the document states, the staff and board of GRuB “strongly believe that how we do our work is as important as what we do.” They ask volunteers and community members to “try on” these guidelines and other new ideas, to encourage openness and stepping out of your comfort zone, with the full understanding that you may set these things aside when you’re done trying them on. Disagreements are honored, while acknowledging that attacking and blaming self or others is detrimental to personal and community growth. “Both/And” thinking supports each side of potentially opposing view points or ideas, and recognizes values of different perspectives. Asking community members to “notice process and content” and to “be aware of intent and impact” creates an environment of reflection and ultimately growth. I could go on and on about these guidelines and how important they are to the culture as they form the basis for community interaction and create a system of accountability to oneself and each other in a gentile and powerful way.

When a new group of youth comes along, a community contract is created, to support community building. With the highest goals in mind of the organization and the personal goals of the individuals, a contract is written that outlines the expectations held by the group for respectful interactions. This includes things such as confidentiality, one mic and challenge by choice. It is understood that personal stories shared among the group are to be kept within the group, and when one person is speaking, others are expected to listen attentively and not interrupt or have side conversations. Challenge by choice encourages people to push themselves in uncomfortable situations, and allows for them to step out of the activity to take care of themselves as needed. These and other agreements are referenced throughout their experience at GRuB to keep the group and individuals accountable. It is a critical tool used in the organization and the school model as well.

Once the group has learned and developed these frameworks, team building activities are executed to strengthen relationships and learn how valuable the the guidelines and contract truly are. It is an important step in “The Life-Cycle of a Group” which begins with forming the group, as I just outlined and then moves to the storming phase, during which conflict will likely arise. With a leader well versed in these tools and in leading team building activities, the group undergoes a transformation. The challenge presented in a team building activity usually disrupts communication and raises tensions. When, during The Institute, we participated in the activity “Helium Stick”, and attempted to lower a simple stick to the ground with each group member maintaining contact with just a finger or two, it quickly became frustrating to coordinate eight people to move at the same pace and all agree to try a strategy collaboratively. Regardless of the outcome, we were taught that debriefing the exercise is as significant as the activity itself. It allows time for everyone to express what they observed and how they felt, then moves to critical thinking about why the activity was done— what could be learned from it? Lastly, a discussion about the application of these lessons, and how things can be done differently in the future is held. By learning and experiencing this tool, I have gained a greater understanding of why GRuB operates in this way, and how each of the community building tools I’ve just described serve the organization’s mission of inspiring positive personal and community change.

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Similar to the tools of engagement in community organizing are the communication practices and strategies that inform the culture and the guidelines. Although they don’t present their communication as nonviolent, I believe that many of the tools they use are influenced by *Nonviolent Communication* (NVC)*,* written by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D.. The process he outlines in the book involves both listening for, and expressing, four key points: observations, feelings, needs and actionable requests. When GRuB outlines collaborative communication and highlights active listening as a particularly powerful tool, I notice strong similarities in the processes. The reflecting back piece of active listening shares that same purpose in NVC, to restate what you heard the other party express, highlighting the needs that are or aren’t being met, or feelings that are being hurt. In reframing, the message you received is returned to the reader, modified to exclude verbal attacks, blaming or judgements. My reading of NVC this quarter has strengthened my understanding of this and other communication techniques that are prevalent in GRuB culture.

Another tool taught to me, both as a part of my internship training and at The Institute, is called requesting a change in behavior. It is the tool most often used in the high school program to hold the youth accountable to the guidelines and contract they agreed to uphold. The process looks like pulling a person aside, using their name while providing a relevant and authentic affirmation, and using “I feel” statements to express your concern, describing the behavior you’ve observed. Then, provide the preferred behavior, ask if they understand and agree to it, offer support if they need it, and thank them for listening. This simple, non-authoritarian communication style can actually strengthen the relationship you have with this person, and raise their awareness of how their actions impact others.

I was able to practice this tool with a staff member at GRuB, when I felt uncomfortable with the way in which their personal beliefs were presented to a small group of volunteers and myself. I approached her later, one-on-one, and asked if we could speak briefly, and then proceeded to affirm her passion and dedication to her values. After, I expressed my feelings in response to her words and behavior, and shared what I would have preferred to have seen, and how it would have changed my response to it. We reached an understanding and both thanked each other for the learning opportunity. This experience taught me so much in the way of the power of this tool, and I have since applied it to mending family relationships as well.

The last communication tool I’d like to discuss here is used to self-reflect, and share and receive feedback from your community. Newly renamed Pros and Grows, this tool is simple and powerful. It asks participants to write two affirmations and one area for growth for themselves and another person in the group. Once these have been prepared, they are shared one at a time while being mindful of tone of voice, and the reaction of the recipient. Honesty, detail and gentleness are asked to be used by the person speaking. As a receiver, you are asked to remain open to the feedback, to look up, listen carefully, and store up the feedback you received. Of course each individual has the option of taking or leaving the feedback. This exchange of affirmations and outside perspectives on personal matters is an opportunity not usually afforded to anyone. Hearing others speak to your strengths and validate your presence is impactful enough as just that. Hearing what others are encouraging you to work on, sandwiched between two positive affirmations, makes that often difficult message to receive, a welcomed and supportive exchange. This experience strengthens relationships and the group’s dynamic and also challenges everyone to honestly reflect on how they show up in a group.

All of these communication strategies are interwoven into GRuB’s culture and into the operations of the organization and the GRuB School Program. Each serves a purpose in bring the group together, building relationships, and empowering people to make positive change in their communities. Without these forms of communication, or ones like them, GRuB would not be nearly as successful or impactful as their history shows them to be. The culture of the organization defines and informs the way in which the work they do is completed, and leaves a lasting impact on all those who are brought into the community.

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When I bring all of this understanding of the culture of the organization into context with the work that I was there to do, even more lessons unfold. A key planning tool used at GRuB and taught to me at The Institute is called “The 4 Rs,” which are relevance, relationships, responsibility and rigor. By these concepts, the activities and curriculum designed for the youth crew are checked to assure the youth are offered the most impactful experiences GRuB staff can offer. As they engage with the field trip program examples of these four criteria come to light. Leading field trips for younger youth provides an opportunity to build relationships with incoming guests, as well as with a workshop partner if you have one. They take on a lot of responsibility as the teach lessons, and guide tours, and are accountable to keeping track of time and the safety of the group. It is challenging for them to present in front of a group of people, practicing public speaking and lead group activities, which fulfills the rigor requirement. Lastly, this work is highly relevant to them, as they are teaching the same materials they learned previously in the year, as well as representing GRuB as ambassadors of their program. Because of the standard to which we hold the high schoolers, they learn and develop many skills throughout the quarter as they reflect on and adapt their presentations to each new group.

I too have and will continue to use these standards both in my personal development as well as in the curriculum work I am doing for the program. I have not yet compared my work to these criteria, but as I continue the work this summer, I will edit later drafts to account for the 4 Rs. It is an excellent tool to encourage hard work and ensure whatever you’ve created is serving the intended audience to its greatest capacity.

The reading I’ve done while working to build the curriculum has shed some light on a few important reasons why outdoor education is so impactful. Friedrich Froebel’s theory that in order for a lesson to be learned— to be understood— it must be connected to personal experiences, applies to outdoor education as it strives to connect traditional school curriculum to practical real world experiences. Getting a child to dig in the dirt to find worms and roli-poli bugs solidifies the understanding of the role of decomposers in composting. Similarly, the book Schoolyard-Enhanced Learning (in which I found Froebel’s theory) explains how a “change of pace and a change of place” allows for youth to learn materials through a variety of “instructional approaches”, needed for the variety of learning styles that exist. Repetition has been shown to improve learning as well, so learning first in the classroom, then experiencing the application of the learning in the field, and reviewing back in class helps students absorb and retain the information. Hosting these field trips over the spring, brings the lessons learned over winter to life in an enjoyable and memorable fashion.

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Now, to connect all that learning to the overarching theme of the quarter: Commodification Processes and Alternatives, I turn again to my reading material. The Food First publications I’ve read, namely *Agroecology “Lite:” Cooptation and Resistance in the Global North* as well as Vandana Shiva’s *Who Really Feeds the World?* have lead me to understand the history of the Green Revolution and the impact it has made on sustainable agricultural systems. The products created to “feed the world” ultimately destroyed biodiversity, farmer’s livelihoods, and the sustainable agricultural systems that have been in place for hundreds of years. What will it take to bring back these practices, biodiversity and respect for farmers? What are the alternatives to agribusiness pesticides and genetically modified seeds?

Shiva provides a thorough list of “The Way Forward” in chapter 9 of her book. I’d like to highlight a few of these steps that I believe GRuB is actively participating in. Her third point states that seeds must be viewed and treated as a shared resource of a community. At the farm, there is a Community Seed Shed, entirely free and open to the public. On field trips, we like to open it up, ask the youth what they know about seeds, what they’d plant at home if they could pick a seed they can see here, and then explain that they can come back with their families to take some home. Although we do not recollect the seeds from the people who check some out, as more sustainable methods of seed saving often do, the resource is still being provided, and the community is benefitting!

Additionally, the GRuB farm operates using organic practices and encourages biodiversity by maintaining a track of native species along the natural creek that runs through the property. This aligns with her forth goal of creating biodiverse ecosystems. The two systems, ecological and agricultural, work in a reciprocal relationship, buffering run off and attracting native wildlife species and pollinators alike. And lastly, as Shiva’s seventh and ninth steps work toward small-local food communities and cooperation instead of competition, GRuB works in cooperation with other organizations in the community, such as the Food Bank of Thurston County to provide local food to the local community. This is where the magic is, where change happens— local food movements are the driving force of global change toward sustainable agroecology communities. Of course, GRuB hasn’t figured it all out, they are constantly striving to improve themselves both as individuals and as an organization. The tool, Pros and Grows described early serves them well in this way, as does the culture, both creating a safe environment to be vulnerable in expressing errors, and a pathway for making constructive change and progress towards their ultimate goal of a world nourished by healthy, sustainably grown food, where each individual is an inspired and honored contributor to their community.

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All in all, my time at GRuB was an incredibly fruitful experiential learning opportunity. I’ve learned and practiced community building, interpersonal communication techniques for engaging with youth, and outdoor education programming. These experience will serve me on my educational journey as they’ve influenced my perspective and added tools to my repertoire. They will carry me into my next steps, as I dive deeper into curriculum development and step up to lead educator position for summer programming offered through GRuB to the Boy’s and Girl’s Club of Olympia. As I build relationships with these youth, I hope to integrate some of the tools I’ve learned, particularly the community contract and team building exercises. The communication style and strategies will certainly come into play as I offer agriculture-based outdoor programming, and support the youth in caring for their own community garden plot. Beyond the summer, I will continue to add new experiences and skills to my tool belt, as I determine where and how I can best serve a community, personally thrive, and make a sustaining impact.

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