Social Change through Social Gatherings

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I’d like to paint three pictures for you. One is of a school full of teachers devoted to teaching well. They work hard on it - some of them even give up their weekends to go to meetings about teaching well - but they tend to work alone or in pairs, on the things they can directly control, which means they don’t have shared awareness of what’s happening, what’s possible, even what it means to teach for diversity, equity, and inclusion. The work is good, but it’s fragmented and unsustainable.

Picture 2 is a classroom. There’s a deli tray on one side. 16 faculty members have broken up in interdisciplinary groups of 4. They’re eating lunch and discussing an article about teaching in the natural sciences. They’re talking about different ways to interpret the study, and they’re finding out what their colleagues are passionate about.

Picture 3: it’s a pretty spring day at a park not far from campus. 60 natural science faculty members have gathered to discuss a vision for a natural science division in which any student can pursue their passions and excel.

Now to be clear - all three pictures are current. We have not finished the work; we have only started. But by paying attention to a robust social fabric, which mixes semi-formal and highly-formal interactions, and which intentionally creates connections across perceived disciplinary barriers, we have created an environment in which change can happen surprisingly quickly. We’re going to ask you to think about ways this might be relevant to change at your own institution.

To that end, we’d like to ask you to start thinking about a couple questions. Take a minute to reflect yourself and then let’s have a quick reporting around your tables.

What is a barrier to inclusion which you think your colleagues would act on, if they knew more about it?

What kind of knowledge would help them take action?

At Kenyon we’re going to look at 2 examples. Our first example is a regular faculty reading group, which addresses the issue that faculty may not try out new classroom approaches, because they don’t know about them or haven’t seen the actual scholarship supporting them. Our second case study look at our Natural Sciences division retreat from last year, in which we spent a lot of time addressing the fact that faculty members do not always have accurate perceptions of curricular bottlenecks or of student perceptions of equity and inclusion issues in their departments.

We are following the Elrod and Kezar theory of change, which prioritizes an iterative cycle of reflection and landscape analysis, envisioning a goal state, choosing interventions, implementation, and assessment. Elrod and Kezar argue that this is not necessarily a linear
process. For example, events on your campus may cause your landscape analysis to shift while you’re in an implementation phase, and a quick reaction may be important. We find that semi-formal social spaces (like our Natural Sciences Faculty Reading Group) create opportunities for non-linear reflection, visioning, and discussion of new strategies. This serves as a vital compliment to highly structured social spaces (like our Natural Science Division Retreat), which tend to impose a more linear (if cyclical) path.

(After Elrod and Kezar)

Kenyon also chose to prioritize structures which support emergent solutions. Our goal is to find approaches to equity and inclusion which can be broadly shared across the faculty, both in the sense of shared values and in the need for more sustainable sharing of labor. Prescriptive strategies cannot accomplish that in our environment.

To that end, we have tried to structure our activities in ways which maximize the exchange of perspectives, so that people will form supportive social networks around topics which ignite their personal passions.

We found this model from Henderson, Beach, and Finkelstein’s (2011) research on change in undergraduate STEM education, useful in thinking about whether we’re changing individuals or structures. I will say that some of these emergent properties do loop around to the prescriptive side; course innovation grants from one course can become widespread pedagogies across a department; our action group on faculty incentives did propose changes to the college tenure and promotion policy. But the important thing is that our activities are structured to investigate and advance emergent ideas from the community.
We'll now turn to two case studies at Kenyon.

In Spring 2016, a pair of faculty started our Natural Science Faculty Reading Group. The group meets over lunch approximately monthly during the academic year to read an article about teaching and learning in the sciences, often on a topic related to inclusion. The meetings have a regular protocol which includes a particular stroke of genius - no homework. The meetings begin with 15 minutes to read the article. We then take about 20 minutes for table discussions in groups of 3 or 4 and about 15 minutes for whole group discussion. Attendance is generally between 12 and 16 people, occasionally reaching the low 20s; over the course of the year we see a majority of our Natural Sciences faculty attending at least one meeting.

In our model this is an informal or semi-formal gathering. There’s a schedule announced at the beginning of the semester, but commitment to attend any given meeting is only required about a week in advance, so people cycle in and out over the year. The atmosphere is highly social; some people are intentional about sitting in interdisciplinary groups and since the reading is new there’s a lot of collective on-the-fly interpretation happening. The only financial cost is for lunch, and the articles are usually selected from those the leaders or other community members have read for other reasons, so it’s highly sustainable.

This predates our institutional change initiative, and has in fact figured in multiple grant applications as evidence of Natural Sciences faculty commitment to evidence-based and inclusive teaching. Members of our Center for Innovative Pedagogy, and team leaders on various grants generally attend these meetings, so there are clear paths for getting support if a faculty member wants to use a technique from an article. The fact that the group is faculty led and based in the STEM disciplines appears to be important; combined with the club-like atmosphere, this informal gathering reinforces that interacting with the scholarship of teaching and learning is normal in our Natural Sciences division. We are currently working with our office of Institutional Research to assess the impact of the reading group, but our experience tells us that the reading group was instrumental in preparing the Natural Sciences division to talk about broader change.
In Summer 2018, we held a retreat for the Natural Sciences division facilitated by ambassadors from the Partnership for Undergraduate Life Sciences Education or PULSE. We found that the framework used by the PULSE ambassadors fit well with our theory of change and we want to acknowledge their tremendous work in designing and facilitating this retreat with us.

The PULSE process for catalyzing an emergent process actually began almost a year before the retreat, with the collection of longitudinal enrollment data in Natural Science departments and a current climate survey. This data was then shared with the community in a series of department meetings through the spring semester. Departments looked at their own data and at the division-wide data, in meetings facilitated by members of our HHMI Core Team. It was important to keep these meetings non-threatening and forward-focused, so that faculty would engage with opportunities in the HHMI grant, including the upcoming retreat.

We will argue that these meetings address a serious failing in retreats - poor prep work. It’s very easy to assign work that’s too much, too little, or not clearly relevant. Our IR staff and core team members did a great job of choosing data which was highly engaging but able to be discussed within the span of a regular department meeting.

In May 2018, we held our 2-day Natural Sciences division retreat. Our goals were to

- Develop a vision for a more inclusive Natural Science Division at Kenyon
- Identify, prioritize, and understand barriers to the envisioned more inclusive future state
- Make specific plans on how to leverage our resources to lower barriers

(Again we should thank the PULSE ambassadors for helping us formulate these goals and the process to achieve them.)

The retreat used a highly social structure to promote collective thinking. We used assigned seating on the first day, paying particular attention to creating interdepartmental groups. Since we are looking for division-wide approaches, it’s important to break people out of departmental groups as much as possible. On the second day, groups were based on areas of interest and we saw that we didn’t need to force interdepartmental groupings.

Over the course of the two days, we discussed theories of change, drew up a list of core values for the natural science division, and iterated that list into a set of visions for the Natural Sciences at Kenyon and actions we can take to remove barriers to those visions. We closed with a session in which we connected these large issues to our action groups which investigate potential policy or curriculum changes, and course initiative grant programs. Again we think this addresses a serious flaw in many retreats - people get excited by big ideas and then return to their regular routines. By creating clear paths for next steps, we were able to preserve some of that energy and direct it at a sustainable pace.
One more logistical note: Our retreat was held during our senior week - the week between end of exams and graduation. This ensured that there were no classes in session but faculty were largely in town. We also held it off campus at a nearby and relatively new park. Our main motivation here was to make sure nobody was running back to their office for “just a second” between sessions. We also found that even getting 15 minutes off campus created a little bit of excitement and there may have been a symbolic message in using a local “community” location to talk about our internal community issues.

So we’d now like to ask you to think about the social environment at your own institutions.

What social connections would help people form teams or support networks to act?

What kind of event will help form those social connections and spread that knowledge?