

Growing innovation in rural sites of learning

In the last of three articles, the authors talk about key aspects of successful projects and how innovative projects will be shared with other educators.

by Linda Farr Darling, Patricia Dooley and Terry Taylor



The initiative we call *Growing Innovation* is now in its second year. As described in the first two articles (October and December 2012 *Adminfo*), imaginative practices in rural sites range from local historical studies to environmental investigations, from intergenerational collaborations, to civic improvement projects, and more. As diverse as they are, all *Growing Innovation* projects reflect a desire to think differently about teaching and learning. Each brings something exciting to conversation about educational change. In 2012-

13, many of the original 18 projects continue to bring rural schools and communities together through inquiries that engage participants in creative ways. This is wonderful news for those of us who envisioned that this innovation could take root and flourish across the province.

To our delight, project leaders are taking the work far beyond the Ministry of Education funding that supported initial efforts in 2011-12. In some sites, project leaders have sought and received financial support from alternative sources, and in other sites, educators have dis-

covered ways to proceed without additional money. They are drawing in new participants, expanding communication networks, visiting each other in distant sites, experimenting with assessment tools, and documenting successes and challenges on websites, blogs and YouTube. Leaders' efforts to disseminate findings, exchange promising ideas, solicit practical advice, and collaborate to present their work, reflect deep commitments to their own learning and growth, as well to that of their students.

In our final article in this series, we take up the theme of diffusion as it relates to the projects and the people behind them. We start with an explanation of the principles behind plans for dissemination, and follow with a description of activities, such as our webinar series, that are intended to spread good ideas throughout BC schools. Of course, we cannot capture all the great and surprising ways students, teachers, principals and district administrators have found to sustain and extend their work. It's just a glimpse behind the scenes. ►

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Dissemination and Diffusion

After our Symposium in May 2012, where project leaders, university facilitators and graduate student researchers shared their experiences in *Growing Innovation* projects across BC, the next step was to analyze features that made so many projects work for students, teachers and rural communities. Based on what we knew about success in individual sites, we believed we could identify planning principles for innovative practice to take root elsewhere. We scheduled a two-day retreat for a small “design team” to focus on the notion of diffusion and plan how innovative practice might be cultivated across and beyond the original project sites.

Our first goal was to identify underlying principles and practices necessary for educational innovation to flourish in a rural setting. We understood our own commitment to grass-roots change was key to project success; leaders and partners appreciated the freedom they had to develop ideas appropriate to their own contexts. Personalization of the initiatives was key. But what else was at play? Our design team pored over project reports, reviewed notes and interviews from the symposium, and watched slide presentations.

Five features surfaced repeatedly, elements central to most, if not all,

project successes. By remaining attentive to these five planning elements, it appeared that *Growing Innovation* participants were able to design and carry out a wide range of ventures. In their own unique ways, successful projects were able to:

1. Embed research and inquiry, particularly student-led inquiry, in all phases of development.
2. Cultivate working partnerships with educators within, and across schools.
3. Engage community throughout development of the project.
4. Practice place-conscious learning, and see the local context as resource and opportunity for exploration.
5. Nurture purposeful student engagement in all facets of the project — from design through evaluation.

Having identified common features behind these innovative practices, our guiding question became: “How do we effectively diffuse ideas for sustainable innovation across rural contexts?” Using the image of a dandelion scattering its seeds as our *Growing Innovation* metaphor, we thought about ways project leaders and participants could spread

the word, and share their best ideas about student engagement and achievement, teacher collaboration, community involvement, and locally-based curriculum. The following practices became central in sustaining and growing momentum for innovation:

1. Make teaching tools and resources available online and showcase exemplars.
2. Build leadership capacity so project leaders become active advocates for change.
3. Create ways to communicate achievements and ongoing inquiries.
4. Revisit planning and bring project leaders to the table to share new ideas.

The design team then established what we came to call, “catalysts for learning,” structures to provide opportunities for educators to learn a little, or to more deeply engage with ideas about educational change. Let’s say a teacher or principal with interest in enhancing innovative practices in her own context, hears about *Growing Innovation* and wants to learn more. The curious educator can:

- Browse the website. Interested individuals who visit <http://www.ruralteachers.com> can find a project on the clickable map, watch a slide show or a documentary video, read school profiles, follow a research link, see student work, hear teachers explain lessons, or examine resources and assessment rubrics. They can also communicate on twitter, or join a blog.
- Participate in a *Growing Innovation* webinar. Seven

webinars on Adobe Connect are scheduled for 2012-13 thanks to the many project leaders who have volunteered their time and energy to present their work. Two presentations on project-based learning were featured in the webinar in November with over 70 participants. Likewise, in January participants across the province learned about place-conscious learning through digital storytelling, and Nature Kindergarten. (See <http://www.ruralteachers.com> for information on dates, times and free registration.)

- Join a learning round or attend a conference. Communication across districts is a step to building working partnerships, collaborating with researchers or bringing students together online. *Growing Innovation Learning Rounds* are in development; we hope to host several in 2013 based on our professionally produced videos (six to date). One example of an existing conference where *Growing Innovation* projects will be shared is *Investigating Our Practices* at UBC in Vancouver in May 2013 (<http://pdce.educ.ubc.ca/events/investigating-our-practices-2013-conference>)

- Arrange a site visit for teachers and students to a participating rural school. Many project schools are eager to show visitors their work, and educators have volunteered to become hosts at these learning sites. As one recent example, teachers and students from the Stikine visited schools in the Peace River district to learn about project-based learning first hand.
- Plan a short-term teaching exchange. These are already happening in small ways in several regions of the province, especially amongst teachers who are able to

bring areas of expertise to each other through face-to-face workshops or virtual meetings. In coming years, we hope to support annual teacher exchanges as short-term opportunities to see other classrooms, reflect on alternative modes of delivery, and renew practices.

Last words:

Prior to closing our series, we want to correct an omission in the previous *Adminfo* article; the opening quote should also have been attributed to Sarah Hook Nilsson who leads the *Connecting Generations* project on Salt Spring. 

This is the last of three articles. Linda Farr Darling (linda.darling@ubc.ca) is Eleanor Rix Professor of Rural Teacher Education at UBC. Patricia Dooley (pat.dooley2010@gmail.com) is an education advisor and the former Superintendent of the Kootenay Lake and the Kootenay-Columbia school districts. Terry Taylor (ttaylor@sd10.bc.ca) is District Principal, Arrow Lakes.

Acknowledgements: It is not possible to acknowledge here all the rural educators, students and community members who have contributed their considerable talents and energies to helping the Growing Innovation initiative bloom. However, we express sincere thanks for your individual and collective work. You are inspiring. Members of the Rural Education Advisory Committee should be commended for their ongoing support, without which the initiative would not have taken root. We also want to acknowledge the Ministry of Education's generous funding, and the advocacy of Alison Sidow and Kristin Mimick. Finally, our thanks are extended to the Rix Family Foundation for the endowment that created the Eleanor Rix Professorship in Rural Teacher Education at UBC.

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