

Local Learning Final Report

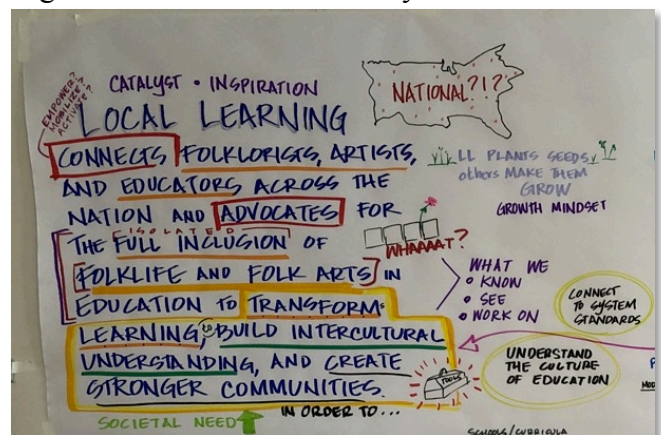
submitted by Lisa Q. Mount, Consultant and Lisa Rathje, Executive Director

The Local Learning board and staff gathered immediately prior to the annual AFS meeting with consultant Lisa Mount in Baltimore on October 14 and 15, 2019, to craft a bold vision for the future of the organization and to gain guidance on creating a robust network and financial foundation for advancing the mission of Local Learning. This marks the second Local Learning strategic planning session with Lisa Mount. The first was in December 2016, a pivotal moment in its organizational life with a major staff change coming up, a primary funder going away, and no current plan for the road ahead. The board hired Lisa Mount to lead a two-day retreat to examine these issues and we developed an action plan, detailed in this 2016 report on the AFS website: [Report on Strategic Planning for Local Learning](#). We identified leadership transition steps, specific actions in six key areas, and three-year goals. Following through on these steps, Local Learning has made substantial progress toward developing confident organizational sustainability and enhancing its status as a national arts service organization.

In 2019, Local Learning is in another pivotal moment. Prior to this face-to-face meeting, Executive Director Lisa Rathje conducted a series of field interviews with leading thinkers in folklore to ask what they saw as key opportunities and needs for Local Learning going forward. We knew big thinking requires partnership and a keen understanding of the current national landscape for folklore and its allies. Key findings from those conversations were carried into the planning:

- Local Learning should identify a big, galvanizing idea that draws upon the significant social value of Folk Arts in Education that can attract partners, funders, and participants. The idea needs to be mission-driven, outwardly focused, and practical within the limits of Local Learning's capacity. Secondly, this vision would also potentially offer infrastructure building for the field of folklore.
- Local Learning should coordinate communication strategies and branding to reach multiple audiences. Local Learning needs a vigorous, strategic communication plan to connect networks and to better tell the "cumulative story" of our deep engagement with culture, equity, ethnography, narrative, and community building.
- Local Learning would benefit from making its mechanisms for delivery of services and resources more visible.

We began with a mission review on the evening of October 14, diving into a discussion of what was most important in the statement crafted in 2016. People felt most passionate about the end of the statement: **transforming learning, building intercultural understanding, and making stronger communities.**



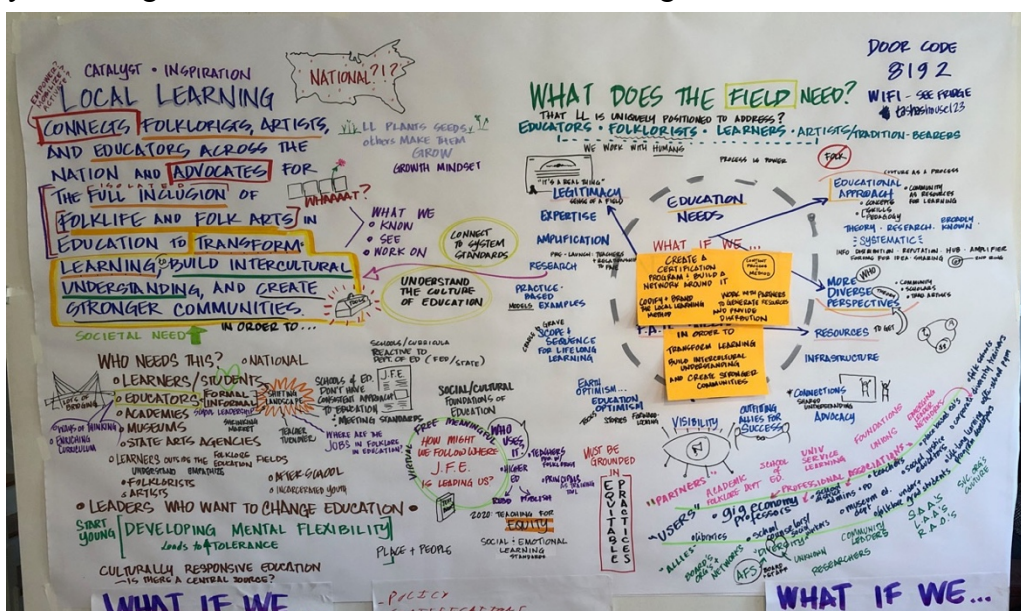
All present confirmed that these three goals still hold true and are powerful guideposts. The discussion further amplified how current Local Learning programs, publishing, and advocacy are advancing this mission. However, we also recognized that practitioners feel isolated—“like a flower in a crack in the sidewalk.” Additional reflection showed that the board “knows” Local Learning transforms learning, builds intercultural understanding, and makes stronger communities, but that this knowledge is not visible to others and without additional support, like a flower in the sidewalk, it will wither.

Local Learning needs to show what it knows, what its practitioners see, and what the network works on through a variety of media—including through existing platforms like the *Journal for Folklore and Education*, as well as through new research that assesses efficacy and impacts of bringing a Local Learning process to a variety of learning settings. The discussion set the stage for thinking to occur the next day around how to leverage the educational optimism and legacy of over 25 years to effect bigger change within the national education landscape.

Design Thinking to Create Actionable, Strategic Steps

On the morning of October 15, we began a design thinking exercise to develop a big idea as the centerpiece of Local Learning’s next strategic plan. The first step was to examine the NEED, with the question: What need does the folk arts in education field have that Local Learning is uniquely positioned to address? This conversation was further granulated into “who needs this?” and “what do they need us to do?”

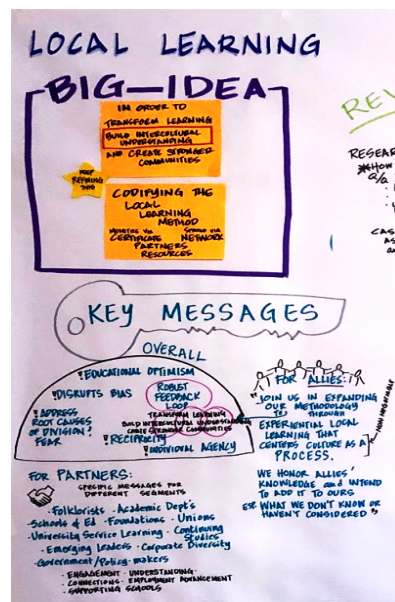
The results of the discussion included many answers, which were grouped into two categories: Education Needs, and Folk Arts in Education Needs. A third category wasn’t specifically written into the diagramming process but also informed some of the discussion: “Folklore Needs.” While these categories share some definitions of need, including resources and visibility, they also diverge—Folk Arts in Education needs legitimacy and Education needs more diverse perspectives, for example. These needs are complimentary, and bringing diverse perspectives from a codified folklore practice to education providers holds the potential to bring greater legitimacy and recognition to the value of the Local Learning model.



A leading idea emerged, initially, around creating a certification program and building a network around it to codify and brand the Local Learning method and work with partners to generate resources and provide distribution. We discussed at length who the potential partners for this work might be, who the users might be, and which allies working with folklife or folk arts in education could amplify this endeavor.

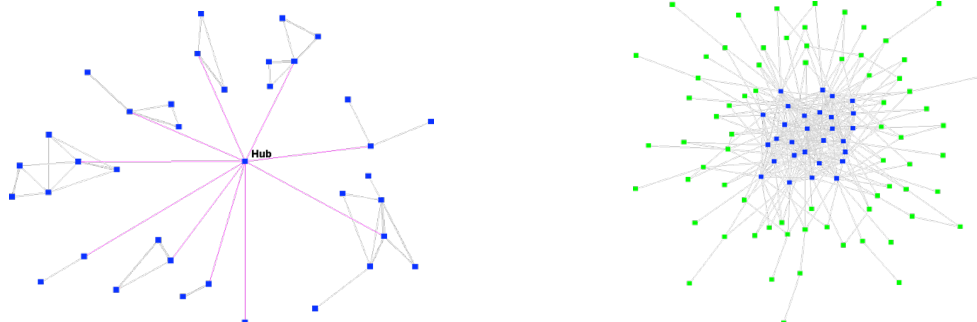
To further refine the idea, we moved into a second phase of design thinking, identifying the revenue and resources potential of the idea, the key messages about it, and the risks and obstacles to be dealt with in further developing and, ultimately, implementing it.

This discussion began to turn the idea upside down, putting the mission first: **In order to transform learning, build intercultural understanding, and create stronger communities, we will make the Local Learning process more visible, knowable, and usable.**



How can the Local Learning Model that this big idea is predicated upon be described? It is an iterative and reciprocal pedagogy, informed by the methodology and practice of folklore, that centers culture in experiential learning and inquiry. It is interpreted in culturally relevant ways for diverse students and educational environments, including K-12 schools, museums, and community centers. To bring this model to scale at a national level will require careful planning and convening with Local Learning's partners and rigorous evaluation of pilot projects to enable evidence-based practice that engages folk arts for building intercultural understanding and transforming learning through metrics that are useful and knowable to our stakeholders.

The network of Local Learning practitioners are allies and partners in this work because this initiative is not looking to build a hub-and-spoke Folk Arts in Education Network, but rather a core/periphery model as described by Krebs and Holley (2006). This will allow for the differentiation needed in diverse regions and disciplines, but create a shared understanding about the process for authentic engagement with culture in our classrooms and communities.



Diagrams from Krebs and Holly (2016). Hub-and-Spoke Network (left) and Core/Periphery Network (right).

We closed the day by identifying the next steps needed to put this idea into motion. Some next steps were immediate, such as testing the idea at AFS allied sections. Other next steps were longer-term, from research into how to operationalize this program and bring it to its logical markets, to building the planning infrastructure (timeline, board support) for the idea itself.

Following the face-to-face meeting, the idea and the overall plan surrounding it were further refined in meetings between Lisa Rathje and Anne Pryor, Local Learning's board chair, and will be presented at the next board meeting. A result is that the certificate program will not be the sole immediate emphasis, as we want to consider other revenue-generating delivery systems that also were proposed at the retreat. Toward reaching a decision on how to proceed, initial next steps include the following:

- 1) **PLANNING:** Identify willing partners with whom we can convene to help make more visible, knowable, and accessible the Local Learning model
- 2) **RESEARCH:** Starting with existing research on the outcomes of folk arts education for students and educators (i.e. Palmer Wolf et al, 2014; Deafenbaugh, 2018), and building on case studies where outcomes are identified and described through peer-reviewed articles (*Journal of Folklore and Education* Volumes 1-6, 2014-2019; Bowman and Hamer 2011; Pryor and Bowman 2016), Local Learning must build the case for additional research and funding for understanding the efficacy, engagement, and socio-emotional learning that happens when folk arts in education methods are engaged in a variety of learning spaces.
- 3) **TEACHING and TRAINING:**
 - a. Leveraging assets of Local Learning staff, board, and volunteers to design and conduct pilot training protocols aligned with key learning objectives and that will be useful for all our stakeholders—teachers, traditional artists, and folklorists.
 - b. Creating opportunities for additional colleagues to become credentialed Local Learning method trainers.
- 4) **DISTRIBUTION and BUILDING THE NETWORK:** Strengthening Local Learning communication strategies to serve the field with timely news, generate and distribute rigorous research demonstrating the value and impact of folk arts in education, and engage the education market to increase visibility for folk arts in education partners and the Local Learning model.

Connecting the Plan to Other National Infrastructure Conversations within the Field of Folklore

Local Learning staff also included in the board preparation materials for the retreat two reports recently published on recent convenings and current research into the state of folklore's national infrastructure. Key gleanings informing Local Learning next steps include:

- **RESEARCH**
 - The National Endowment for the Arts Folk & Traditional Arts Program published two recommendations under the heading "Policy Action Items" that serve as a call to action and a catalyst for work moving forward in the report, "Living Traditions: A Portfolio Analysis of the National Endowment for the Arts' Folk & Traditional Arts Program." The recommendation to "Develop best practices and impact

analyses related to signature Folk & Traditional Arts programs” (2019: 3) potentially connects with Local Learning’s research goals. We believe further analysis of regions where strong folk arts in education networks exist will provide data that also directly or causally implicate signature Folk & Traditional Arts program impacts.

- “The National Support Systems Summary Report” (NSSSR) published by the American Folklife Center and the Alliance for California Traditional Arts notes that “Research to provide an evidence base for the efficacy of a field is another critical aspect of field-building” (2019: 4). Starting with the case studies published in the *Journal of Folklore and Education*, and then working to secure funding to support rigorous research, Local Learning must build the case that its methods are transforming learning, building intercultural understanding, and creating stronger communities. This planning process has exposed what is needed to reliably demonstrate Folk Arts in Education effectiveness to a larger network and build the field.
- BUILDING THE NETWORK
 - The NSSSR highlights visibility as a critical issue for the field of folklore (2019: 5). Local Learning has identified through its planning process that visibility is a critical issue for folk arts in education as well. One service offered through www.locallearningnetwork.org is an online guide to Regional Resources for bridging efforts between educators, traditional artists, and folklorists across the nation. The NSSSR identifies this as the only online guide in existence (2019: 5) and recognizes the need for building out additional connections to other fields, such as education, which could generate significant engagement and relevance and “open up new opportunities for partnerships, programs, and funding” (2019: 6).
- TRAINING
 - The core of the big idea for Local Learning is to codify and better communicate the Local Learning method so that it can be brought to a national scale and influence current trends in education and public outreach. The Local Learning method is currently shared through training initiatives that demonstrate effectiveness on a local or regional level. The NSSSR report segments “Training” as a vehicle central to delivering the work being discussed (2019: 6). Local Learning has a significant track record here and is poised to be central to this effort if the will exists among its colleagues in folklore and allied fields.

The work implicated through this strategic planning session is significant and has the potential to create robust feedback loops to strengthen learners and communities. A new tagline also emerged from this planning process that Local Learning will be using to help frame the nature of our work: *Local Learning: Bringing a cultural lens to complex subjects since 1993*. This consultancy affirmed that the time to act is now. Local Learning has resources, training, and expertise that have been honed over 25+ years to address root causes of division and fear and to disrupt bias in our learning spaces. Bringing this key message forward, while mustering available revenues and resources, informs the work for the next three years and beyond.

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