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Executive Reticulater's Message

LANCE C. BUHL

The important news of POD is all around what I write here. Elections for new members of the Core Committee will be in process or completed by the time this issue hits the street. Planning is well underway for an exciting Annual Conference in Berkeley, California next October 14–16. The Task Force on Membership is working diligently on membership retention and growth and mix. A Research Committee operates. So, too, a Professional Relations Committee. And Regional Representatives. And an Executive Committee. We've even a journal, by Juno!

The important message in all this is that POD is working relatively efficiently as a formal organization. *But, is POD a "Network" as advertised?* And can it exist as a network given its formal life and structure? These are pertinent questions. Thoughtful persons on the Task Force on Membership have raised them. Like many people, they associate the concept of "networking" with informal relationships independent of any organizational base. Clearly, in this view of things, POD looks much like a typical professional association. So, they doubt the concept's validity for us.

This is more than a semantic quibble. Networking was central in the thinking of the folks who founded POD and has remained such in members' development and projections of it. Hence, for example, some members expressed concern at the general membership meeting at Fairfield Glade lest the Planning Committee for the 1980 Conference neglect to build in mechanisms for maintaining our sense of community.

I made the observation in my first statement as Executive Director in the last issue of the *Quarterly* that POD has achieved its present maturity by a process of "conscious negotiation of two possible alternative models of organization"—informal networking or formal professional association. Working the "resulting tensions" has been

meaningful. So my interest in the issue is born of something more than the idle curiosity of an erstwhile historian (though I can hardly deny any part of that characterization).

I propose that POD members over this next year or so focus systematically on the relevance and viability of "networking" before we think of abandoning it. My proposal is based on the conviction that we ought to struggle some to define our most viable, useful, and attractive present and future as a group. Probing the validity of networking seems like a fruitful place to begin.

We can turn, fortunately, to a modest but growing and estimable body of thought and research. I'd recommend for a start the series of eleven papers on "social networks" commissioned in 1977 by the National Institute of Education and, most pertinently, L. Allen Parker's piece on "Networks for Innovation and Problem Solving and Their Use for Improving Education: A Comparative Overview."¹

Parker's titling and definition of this special set of networks is helpful in coming to terms with the dilemma posed about POD. *Parker transforms the issues.* "Networks for innovation and problem solving" are formed by groups of people who seek to improve education and who discover quickly enough that established systems and organizations "prove inadequate or even obstacles" as resource banks for solving problems and doing new things. Consequently, the innovators create "new channels to link with people who can provide the information and assistance needed" to help each other succeed on the home turf. These people, of course, are devoted to solving similar problems and introducing similar innovations.

The striking thing about Parker's investigations of a variety of these networks is that *what makes them networks is not an absence of formal structure.* Indeed, they run the gamut from terribly loose (though purposeful and deliberate) to quite formal and purposeful and deliberate. Structure, purpose and deliberateness are not the decisive variables. Even leadership and "management" and "core" groups exist in all of them, necessarily it appears.

Two other, probably intertwined, variables are critical. The first

¹ For copies of these papers, write Gary Sykes, National Institute of Education, 1200 19th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20208. Also see Sarason, S. B., Carroll, C., Maton, K., Cohen, S. and Lorentz, E. *Resources Community and Exchange Networks.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977.

is what I would call the *marginality of the group's members*. They stand to one degree or another apart from the prevailing cultural norms of their organizations. They want to change things. They develop a shared sense of, in Parker's words, "being an alternative to established systems." Perforce they are marginal or they wouldn't need the network and the informational and psychological resources it provides. POD's membership is, in this sense, "marginal" and tends to be proud of it.

The second variable is the *degree to which the organization* that results from members' linking *is a powerful factor for professional advancement*. A group that performs a "credentialing" function is a professional association and not a network as Parker describes it. Volunteerism is the reverse side of this coin. People join a network primarily because they expect to find important information, moral support and renewal for the struggle back home, and a chance to share. POD members continue to say that these are predominant reasons for joining. Membership in it is not terribly likely to get one promoted.

At this juncture then *it is probably true that POD continues to exist as a network for innovation and problem solving*. Parker thinks that there may be an evolutionary (though not irrevocable) cycle of six stages for networks. Against his criteria, POD seems close to, if not in, the fifth stage or "position." He calls this the phase of "institutionalizing the network." Phase six, "dissipation of the network's spirit," occurs when maintenance or expansion of staff becomes the primary goal, obviating the role of voluntary efforts by members. If Parker's generalizations hold, we in POD face some issues of which we can greatly influence the outcome. Do we wish to remain a network? Have we and can we take full enough advantage of networking?

Matthew Miles, in his synthesizing paper of the NIE series, suggests that network self-study is very important for maintaining its healthy functioning. Let me suggest an agenda of questions which enterprising members might explore (and perhaps secure grants to support and even write an article that the *POD Quarterly* might very well be interested in publishing).

- What are the leadership functions which either facilitate or impede critical and on-going exchanges among members?

- Does the organization promote the feeling among members that they relate together as an “extended family,” an intentional community of good will? If so, how? If not, how?
- Is the “inner group” closed or open to other members?
- What motives do members have for joining and participating and which ones tend to promote and which to inhibit reticulation for innovation and problem solving?
- To what extent do members actually use one another as external resources?
- Is reticulation good or bad? (I’ll never use the word again!)