

PERFORMING OUR FUTURE

Since 2015, artists and diverse community members from [Appalshop's Roadside Theater](#) have collaborated with researchers from [Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life](#) (IA) and economists from the [Economic Empowerment and Global Learning Project](#) (EEGLP) at Lafayette College, to discover how the arts and culture can catalyze equitable development in communities with histories of economic exploitation. This project, which we call [Performing Our Future](#), is generating and sharing new knowledge about two related challenges:

- *How can the arts and culture promote individual voice and collective agency, unbind a community's imagination and ambition, and create the conditions for equitable economic and civic development?*
- *What core organizing principles and practices enable a community to overcome internal and external barriers and build an economy that's broad-based, just, and sustainable?*

Our work began in Letcher County, Kentucky: Appalshop's home, reeling from the collapse of the century-old coal mono-economy. Appalshop artists and organizers collaborated with county residents to create new theater, film, music, and radio pieces about the search for a sustainable future. As residents shared stories, they recognized how many values and dreams they shared—across generational, geographical, political, religious, and other divides—and began building a cooperative network they soon named the [Letcher County Culture Hub](#).

The Culture Hub became the first major test of Community Cultural and Economic Development (CCED): a new synthesis between Appalshop's Community Cultural Development methodology, through which residents find pride and hope through community-based storytelling and arts, and EEGLP's economic development methodology, through which residents discover latent assets in their communities and transform them into community wealth. In less than two years, with support from Appalshop, IA, and EEGLP, the Culture Hub has grown to 20 organizations, from volunteer fire departments producing solar energy to citizens collaborating with government to build county-wide broadband internet. The Culture Hub's credo: *We own what we make*.

In 2018-2019, struggling communities in other parts of the country will begin their own deep investments in local CCED projects. Partnerships are in formation in rural Mississippi, New Orleans, California's Central Valley, and on several Native American reservations, where Roadside/Appalshop has a history of collaboration. The research team, based at Cornell University and the University of California, Davis, will explore and document how the new sites test and grow the model of a successful CCED project: a grassroots-led, culture-driven development effort that creates the conditions for all members of a community to tell a new story about themselves and their future—and build the people-, knowledge-, and money-power to make that new story a reality.

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APPALSHOP and the **LETCHER COUNTY CULTURE HUB** present:

HOW TO MAKE (SOMETHING LIKE) A CULTURE HUB – IN FIVE STEPS...

1. Identify and assemble the primary actors.

Who will do the work to get the process started?

You'll need (1) an *anchor institution*, (2) a *planning team*, and (3) a *lead organizer*.

Start with any one of these—it might be you!—and identify and assemble the other two.

2. Identify existing (actual and potential) community centers of power, and build relationships with their local leadership.

Community centers of power...

- are spaces (physical or virtual) *owned and operated by the people* in a given community, where (ideally all) people in that community (feel free to) gather to imagine and build together.
- can include religious institutions (e.g. churches), locally-run municipal services (e.g. volunteer fire departments, community centers), cultural organizations (e.g. music and art groups), and any other institution where people gather as co-creators of their communities.
- are *not* top-down providers, where people gather primarily as consumers of services. This often—but not always—excludes governments, health and welfare providers, and educational institutions.

The primary tool for building relationships is the *one-to-one relational meeting*:

- a planned meeting with a *leader* of a (potential) community center of power...
 - planned meeting = in a public place, for a set amount of time
 - leader = can *represent the organization* and *deliver a following*, whether or not they've got formal authority
- ...conducted through *sharing stories* and *asking questions*...
 - sharing: try to talk 30% of the time and listen 70%
 - asking: try to probe, but don't pry
- ...with the goal of identifying partners who share mutual *self-interest* (cultural values, personal drives, material needs, spiritual hopes).

3. Identify goals and plan projects, based in shared self-interest.

This includes

- *collective* goals and projects, undertaken by some or all partners together, and
- *individual* goals and projects, undertaken by single partners with support for the group.

These projects can include planning an event, starting a business, or anything else that

- allows for the experience of *collective agency*, and
- works toward building *community wealth*, directly or indirectly.

4. Meet regularly—as a whole group, in smaller groups, and for one-to-ones.

The primary goals of these meetings include

- *relationship building*,
- *planning*,
- *accountability*, and
- the experience of *abundance*—a recognition and celebration of what we’ve got and what we can do together (our assets).

5. Keep growing...

...in the number and diversity of

- *partners*—with the goal of representing everyone in the community...including people and institutions who may feel uncomfortable;
- *projects*—based on the passions, interests, and needs partners express,
- *leaders and leadership opportunities*—to build a democratic culture; and ultimately
- *power*—i.e., organized people + organized money + organized ideas.

...AND FIVE “BEST PRINCIPLES”

1. We own what we make.

This is the basic shared value of all culture hub partners: a commitment to collective and inclusive *agency* and *voice*. It’s a non-partisan, democratic *populism*.

2. Work from the grassroots up.

A culture hub is a collection of *community centers of power*, owned and operated by the people in a given community. Non-grassroots organizations (often governments, service providers, etc.) can be valuable collaborators on projects, but they do not form the base.

3. Start from stories.

Sharing stories—in story circles, art and media making, one-to-one relational meetings, and other venues—is the backbone of organizing and growing a culture hub. Story sharing is a great equalizer, allowing all members of a community to interact in safety and on even footing.

4. Build collective power out of shared self-interest.

Power is the ability to act, defined by the tradition of broad-based community organizing as *organized people + organized ideas + organized money*. Build power *with* (not over) partners, out of the shared *self-interest* (cultural values, personal drives, material needs, spiritual hopes) you discover through relational meetings, story circles, and collective projects.

5. Embrace productive tension.

A culture hub is a change agent: toward a culture and economy where everyone belongs. As change happens, there will be tension among partners with differing values and visions, and with outside institutions interested in maintaining current inequalities and barriers. Remember that tension (like when you’re pulling a rope) means something may be moving!

LETCHER COUNTY CULTURE HUB AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ENGINE

For over a century the central Appalachian coalfields have been a rich land with poor people. The absentee energy corporations that controlled the mono-economy distributed wealth up and out, leaving behind a population suffering from some of the highest rates of poverty and illness in the country. With King Coal gone, the people who have stayed are working to build a diverse and sustainable economy that can serve the needs and interests of their whole communities. The effects of more than 100 years of poverty-inducing economic policy will take time, talent, and investment to reverse; to that end, in late 2015, the **Letcher County Culture Hub** was formed.

The Letcher County Culture Hub is a growing organization of community-led organizations in Letcher County who work together to build a culture and economy where *we own what we make*. The Culture Hub's eighteen current partners, **convened and facilitated by community organizers at Appalshop**, include community centers, business associations, artist and artisan organizations, volunteer fire departments, public and educational institutions, and for- and nonprofit corporations in the agriculture, tech, media, housing, and health sectors.

The Culture Hub is founded on the principle that every community has latent assets they can turn into new community wealth—but only if they can **unbind their imaginations** and **tell new stories** about themselves. (This principle is drawn from Appalshop's collaboration with economists at the *Economic Empowerment and Global Learning Project of Lafayette College* and researchers at *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*.) The Culture Hub facilitates this process by bringing diverse partners together in an ever-growing network, allowing them to recognize and create new opportunities for development and enterprise, together.

Since its founding in 2015, Letcher County Culture Hub partners have

- founded and incubated **three new businesses**:
 - *Mountain Tech Media*, a cooperatively-owned tech and media corporation housed at Appalshop, currently employing two full-time and numerous part-time workers;
 - *Community Agricultural and Nutritional Enterprises*, a food production and education corporation housed at the old Whitesburg High School, founded through a collaboration between Mountain Comprehensive Health Corporation, the Letcher County Farmers' Market, and the Letcher County Extension Office, set to employ at least four full-time workers in 2018; and
 - *Hemphill Catering Company*, housed at the Hemphill Community Center, currently employing and training several part-time workers from one of our hardest-hit areas.
- supported the **expansion of existing local businesses and social enterprises**:
 - The *Downtown Retail Association* has supported several festivals and civic initiatives to bring business opportunities to Whitesburg.
 - Ongoing *energy-efficiency initiatives*, in partnership with our regional Community Development Financial Institution and local and regional solar energy businesses, will reduce energy costs and bring additional revenue to many area enterprises.

- Culture Hub partners are leading the *Letcher County Broadband Board*, currently working on a multimillion-dollar project to incubate a municipal Internet Service Provider and bring broadband Internet to the entire county.
- The Culture Hub promotes *tourism and events* through a monthly flyer and a county-wide website (currently in development).
- The Culture Hub is partnering with PolicyLink and the Central Appalachian Network to develop *an agenda for policy and advocacy* to support culture-driven enterprise.
- created opportunities to **turn skills into revenue-generating activity**, including
 - filmmakers, photographers, musicians, web designers, technicians, programmers, and other media makers working at Appalshop and Mountain Tech Media;
 - chefs and cooks, and unemployed chefs and cooks in training, working contracts for the Hemphill Catering Company;
 - artists selling their work across the region through EpiCentre Arts;
 - theater directors, designers, and technicians working on plays produced by Roadside Theater, the Appalachian Media Institute, Cowan Community Center, the Blackey Improvement Committee, and the Little Shepherd Amphitheatre;
 - square and hip-hop dance instructors working in the public schools through a collaboration between Appalshop and the Letcher County Rec Center, and for events produced by the Carcassonne and Cowan Community Centers and the Kings Creek Volunteer Fire Department;
 - teachers and artists working events at the Letcher County Public Libraries;
 - storytellers, visual and performing artists financed by regional health organizations to work on the EKY HEAL project;
 - farmers, growers, food producers, artists, and musicians selling work at the Letcher County Farmers' Market. During the 2016 season, the Market:
 - generated over \$10,000 in income for some individual growers
 - employed local musicians to perform each week
 - created a permanent vendor slot for artists
 - generated revenue on some Saturdays exceeding the revenue of its entire first season in 2013.
- revived **two major cultural institutions**, which are now revenue-positive:
 - the *Carcassonne Square Dance*, the oldest-running square dance in the state of Kentucky, now operating at one to two dances per month and drawing visitors from several states; and
 - the *Kings Creek Bluegrass Festival*, a collaboration among several county volunteer fire departments revived in 2016 for the first time since the 1980s, which grossed over \$10,000 in its first year.
- **shared stories in public venues** that present examples of people, organizations, and communities in the region developing alternative and sustainable economic models—toward the goal of widening communities' understandings about what is possible—including several stories on Culture Hub partners and activity. These stories have been shared:
 - at various film screenings, performances, conferences, and workshops;
 - through several original plays about the past and future of the county; and
 - as local, regional, and national news stories, including on WMMT-FM radio.

FOUR PRINCIPLES OF APPALSHOP'S APPROACH TO GRASSROOTS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

...as drawn from *Community Cultural Development (CCD)*, developed by **Roadside Theater**, a part of Appalshop, and *Community-Oriented Design and Evaluation Process for Sustainable Infrastructure and Development (CODE-PSID)*, developed by the **Economic Empowerment and Global Learning Project (EEGLP)** at Lafayette College:

1. **Economic development must include cultural and civic development.** Otherwise it's extractive development.

"I don't understand economic development as being separate and apart from a development that is inclusive and is mindful of the kind of cultural assets, the social assets and the local assets of a community. Otherwise, it's an extractive development, which is not sustainable, which is going to be increasingly exclusive and increasingly unstable."

—Fluney Hutchinson, EEGLP

"The stories people are able to tell themselves and others, those they can imagine and understand, define not only what they perceive to have occurred, but what they think could be possible in their individual and collective lives."

—Dudley Cocke, Roadside Theater

2. **Create the conditions for agency, voice, and ownership.** Build and strengthen *community centers of power* (in Bayard Rustin's words): public, inclusive, and free spaces, where people can collectively imagine and create the future. Keep the door open to more and more institutions and people, of different kinds, seeing their self-interest in this work as it grows.

"Strengthening the capacity of residents to exercise voice, agency and ownership over their community affairs is essential to their ability to create communities that they value."

—Fluney Hutchinson and Ute Schumacher, EEGLP

"By sharing (performing) and examining one's personal story in public settings marked by manifold perspectives, not only can one learn to speak for one self from the depth of one's own experience, but one can learn to act in concert with others to achieve what is fair and just for the whole in which one resides."

—Dudley Cocke, Roadside Theater

- 3. Work based on assets, not liabilities.** Identify current assets, and build a plan to grow them—institutionally, locally, regionally, nationally, internationally.

“We advocate for a cultural development paradigm that utilizes the inherent intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material traditions and features of a community to encourage individual agency in support of community well-being.”

—Dudley Cocke, Roadside Theater

“Combining the mapping, assetizing and commoditizing of Central Appalachian culture with residents’ strengthened voice, agency and empowerment over their own experiences, and their strengthened participation in market-based exchange, can contribute to those goals and the rooting of a community civic that is inclusive, equitable and strengthening of the human security and freedoms residents enjoy. The project’s central focus on cultural processes and products as an essential basis for economic renewal and human development recognizes the special ways in which culture shapes individual and collective identity, bounds or expands the imagination, affects the psychologies of ambitious or unambitious preferences, and ultimately determines microeconomic behavior.”

—Fluney Hutchinson and Ute Schumacher, EEGLP

- 4. Build a process with room for participatory, democratic work. Balance the necessary top-down (administrative) leadership with significant bottom-up (popular) leadership.** Participants must be agents of change, not clients or consumers. Work toward a sustainable project, financially and otherwise, and be prepared to change course as circumstances shift (and they always will!).

“This is what’s going to also transform the Appalachian region. These young people I am seeing are bright. They are motivated. They are ambitious and all I think we should do is find ways of encouraging that, find ways of catalyzing that, find ways of rewarding that...I’ve seen it in many other places, so I come at this with the experience of knowing that this approach ...bottom-up but invested in individuals first and foremost at the level of their individualness, and then they come into the collective, into groups, into organizations knowingly fully confident that they have a responsibility to come and create value there because they’ve built their unique skills. Then that organization is able to take that cluster and move out into creating greater value. That’s the kind of economic development that ensures that we all are invested and remain invested because it represents and it recognizes our unique ability to contribute to it.”

—Fluney Hutchinson, EEGLP

“The Appalachian culture’s tradition of participation, for example the tradition of call-and-response singing, is a reason that it has been able to resist the forces of homogenization and commercialization seeking to bottle and sell it—for a people without a fair share of economic independence, cultural freedom is that much more important.”

—Dudley Cocke, Roadside Theater

PERFORMING OUR FUTURE PRINCIPLES OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Performing Our Future takes **Roadside Theater’s Community Cultural Development (CCD)** practice as its central model of inclusion. For 41 years, Roadside Theater has created a body of Appalachian plays where none existed; collaborated with racially diverse professional theaters and communities across the country to make new plays which address pressing economic and civil rights issues; fostered justice movement leaders through college and community training and teaching; and advocated for cultural equity as a universal human right. The basic unit of CCD practice is the **story circle**, an empathic, inclusive listening exercise. Story circles embody a basic tenet of community change work: that those who directly experience a problem must make up the generative base for devising and enacting the solution. Roadside’s orientation to the arts and public humanities is grounded in patient, deep collaboration that intentionally crosses lines of race, class, gender, age, and ability. Our stakeholders include all those invested in achieving inclusive and equitable community well-being; as such, our work is distinguished by its multi-generational, intercultural audience of economically poor, working-class, and middle-class people.

Performing Our Future’s diversity model understands **race, gender, and other modes of oppression** to be **inseparable from class**. By placing conversations about white supremacy, transphobia, and misogyny in dialogue with data on economic exploitation and discrimination— informed by our lived experiences of poverty and its harmful effects on voice, agency, belonging, and participatory civic virtue—our work targets structural inequalities that current liberal diversity models often fail to address. We seek to build a strategic framework for cultural equity that rejects zero-sum, reductionist, and false dichotomous logic, and which can recognize seemingly irreconcilable worldviews by **enabling collective action**. Majority-white populations affirm that black lives matter; environmentalists and strip miners make common cause in building community centers of power; career academics present research findings alongside workers with no formal education; and urban entrepreneurs collaborate with rural democratic socialists to test a standard of economic development in which the communities who create value (including songs, stories, plays, farms, and businesses) enjoy the material benefits of that value.

Consistent with our views on class and geography, Performing Our Future understands **cultural isolationism as a primary impediment to just economic and cultural transitions**, both for Appalachia and for its urban and rural sister communities who share histories of exploitation rationalized by negative stereotypes. We oppose this isolation, imposed by 40 years of anti-community public policy, which has resulted in addiction, mass incarceration, and the defunding of frontline organizations serving rural and inner-city communities with shared economic conditions. We hold that **artists and cultural workers, drawn from their communities, are in a unique position to combat isolationism and foster diversity and inclusion**. With their firsthand knowledge of the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and material traditions of their communities, and the skills to draw on these traditions to create the conditions for communities to develop their collective agency and voice, they play a critical role in local, regional, national, international movements toward a robust and durable pluralism.

THREE MAJOR LESSONS LEARNED FROM PHASE 1 OF PERFORMING OUR FUTURE

- 1. Focus on ownership and belonging.** Working with communities with histories of economic exploitation, it should have been no surprise that the question came up over and over: “*Who owns the value created by this work?*” In the fields of creative placemaking, arts- and asset-based development, cultural organizing, community/civic engagement, and economic transition, the dominant paradigm presumes a process driven from the top—by those in leadership positions in government, business, and large nonprofit anchor institutions—and seeks to put “artists at the table,” *i.e.*, to legitimize the contributions of artists alongside others in the existing power structure. Performing Our Future flips the script: the work is owned and controlled by large numbers of poor, working-class, and middle-class residents (the majority in most communities), who organize themselves through arts and cultural work linked to economic development efforts. Government, business, and other large-scale stakeholders play an important role, but the terms are reversed: instead of these institutions engaging the community, the community engages them, as equal partners in a democratic and citizen-led process. We have also discovered a close relationship between issues of ownership and belonging: the problem with gentrification, for example, seems to be not that more wealth comes into low-wealth communities, but that people in those communities lack control over how that wealth is created and deployed. Approached this way, an issue that often divides communities (on racial, ethnic, class, and geographic lines) can be “re-storied” as a common quest to fulfill a universal need: a place to live where we belong, where no one can turn us out.
- 2. Go deep, then go broad.** We initially planned to work in three separate geographic sites, which would simultaneously create plays and link them to economic development work. We soon realized this would spread our resources too thin. We chose instead to go deep: to invest heavily in many sites within a single rural county, in the sickest and poorest Congressional district in the nation – while offering ample learning opportunities for other partners in our nascent national network. Now, with nearly two years of learning from Letcher County, KY under our belts, we have started going broad: as partners across the country begin their own deep investments in local projects, we will facilitate cross-site sharing and learning. Research will broaden and deepen as local projects in new sites push on and complicate our model.
- 3. Community organizing is critical.** The challenges of turning community-led art into community-led economic development require organizing skills: forging public relationships, negotiating the self-interest of a broad range of partners, creating a network powerful enough to launch a successful grassroots development process, and building communities’ capacity to take over leadership of the network. Many organizers have arts backgrounds, and artists today often work toward developing organizing skills; both skillsets are essential. The synthesis of arts and organizing will be critical to weaving the specificity of local stories into a shared national narrative—which will demonstrate how culture can move from the margins to the center of community and economic development; and how artists can help create communities where all voices are heard, all assets are recognized, and all needs are valued.

BUILDING A PERFORMING OUR FUTURE DIGITAL COMMUNITY

The digital dimension. As communities across the country are strengthening relationships, mapping assets, and turning those assets into wealth at the local level, Performing Our Future organizers based at Virginia Tech’s [VArtWorks initiative](#) are building the infrastructure for an online collaborative hub to support this work at a national and international level.

Co-created from the ground up. When community and economic development efforts leverage technology, the standard model is ‘top down,’ where a small number of “experts” produce the content. Performing Our Future works in a different way. Our community, online and off, is built co-operatively from the ground up, by community artists, planners, activists, citizens, organizers, scholars, and technologists working with a growing group of organizational partners nationwide, including Appalshop/Roadside Theater, Imagining America, CoLab Cooperative, the VArtWorks Initiative, and the Economic Empowerment and Global Learning Project of Lafayette College. These intended user groups have been involved closely in the development process from the outset, and have shaped the vision, design, and technical implementation of the hub.

At the cutting edge of technological research and social entrepreneurship. Consistent with the central value of *we own what we make*, we are building a virtual commonwealth owned and operated by the hub’s contributors and users. The hub will demonstrate the impact and engagement of the Performing Our Future network, through tracking value flows, engagement metrics, and user contributions, and mapping this data in eye-catching and accessible visualizations. This data will form the foundation of a sustainability plan including reciprocal exchange of monetary value via *blockchain technology* and *micro-payments*. These technologies will enhance the ability of community organizations, artists, and enterprises to contribute and receive economic returns through engagement on the platform.

What does this look like on the ground, in real terms? Take Bill, volunteer fire chief and partner in the Letcher County Culture Hub. He’s a former strip mine boss and Trump supporter—and he’s working with other Culture Hub partners to put solar panels on the roof of his firehouse. *Now imagine this: he posts about his experience on social media. The content of this post populates a discussion of the merits of alternative energy in economic development efforts in other regions of ‘coal country.’ A technology entrepreneur working in alternative energy in Silicon Valley gets involved in the discussion. Inspired by the work he sees happening in Letcher County, he contributes resources via the network to support further development—and encourages his peers to do the same. Meanwhile, a co-op development specialist from Ithaca, NY learns of the project and refers Bill to resources and funding for setting up a solar co-operative. Based upon this support from peers in other regions of the country, Bill and his neighbors set up a solar co-op. They secure funding and additional publicity after a local video production collective (several already exist) makes a short film about their work. This film gets uploaded to our digital platform’s asset library, gets noticed by partners in other places, and is soon being screened in partner towns around America. Resources flow to the fire department, the solar co-operative, the co-op education outreach organization, and the film production group. Some viewers also download a package of materials on “How To Start Your Own Local Solar Collective,” reach out for further*

support, and get the opportunity to connect directly with Bill in a dedicated discussion forum online, where they get advice and share their own successes and challenges.

Does this sound far-fetched? Far from it. The hardest work has already happened: the creation of a community where a conservative, pro-coal fire chief can embrace alternative energy, despite its ‘hippie lefty’ associations. But given scarce local resources, the project is moving slowly. If only he had a way to share his work with a broader range of possible supporters...

The vision. The world has not yet seen a complete and integral synergy between online and offline community development. This is the vision we are committed to build. Only then can we truly break down the divides that prevent us from working together for the common good. This is the technological system we are building, which will extend our work from local on-the-ground organizing and development to a networked and collaborative system for national development.

The details. The digital platform will facilitate collaboration based on *algorithmic recommendation engines* and *machine learning*—the same technology that recommends friends on Facebook and songs on Spotify—but with a different purpose. Rather than dividing consumers into profitable market segments, here these technologies will break down siloes between rural and urban, wealthy and poor, black and white, and unite communities in an exchange of ideas, stories, creativity, and resources...even (especially!) among people and cultures who may have assumed they had nothing to offer each other. Where other technological systems primarily seek a profit motive, we build technology through a community development lens which leverages civic participation, virtue, and artistic and economic engagement at every level of the project—encouraging both real-world meetups as well as online discussion and collaboration: the next frontier of our world.

The system is made up of three primary technological components:

- A **forum** supporting peer-to-peer discovery, connection, and collaboration.
- A **digital repository** that serves as a resource commons for those working in the field of community cultural and economic development.
- A **system of value mapping and exchange** that both provides sustainability to the overall platform and moves resources according to a meritocracy of ideas and needs.

The promise. Performing Our Future is launching at a critical moment in the platform co-operative movement. Recent exciting technological innovations such as blockchain technologies and secure ledger transactional systems have the potential make long-imagined systems of decentralized governance and value-exchange into reality. Such systems, governed by diverse communities united by a common drive to support the flourishing of cultural and economic development across America, hold great promise. Activated with the human connections already woven by 50+ years of grassroots organizing efforts, such a system may hold the key to our collective ability to imagine—and perform—the future of America.

For more information on the Performing Our Future digital community, contact Rylan Peery, co-founder of the technology coop CoLab, at rylan@colab.coop.

For more information on the VTArtWorks Initiative, contact Bob Leonard, director of the Initiative, at bob.leonard@vt.edu.

RESEARCH PROGRESS REPORT FOR PERFORMING OUR FUTURE AUGUST 2017

*Scott Peters, Lead Researcher and Professor
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In this brief research progress report, we summarize the way we chose to design and frame our research project, what we have done and learned so far, what questions have emerged, and what we plan to do to pursue them.

Designing and Framing Our Research

During the initial design phase of our research (fall 2015 and winter 2016), we suggested that Performing Our Future (POF) represents an attempt to test and refine a theory of change in a distressed region of Eastern Kentucky:

The work of interweaving two development paradigms—one from community arts and the other from agency- and asset-centered economics—can help struggling communities break out of bounded imaginations about their identity and potential. In doing so, it can identify and awaken latent assets that can enliven and enrich not only a place’s economy but also its civic life and culture.

In developing our research design in relation to this theory of change, we rejected several common ways of framing and pursuing research projects. We decided not to attempt to identify “factors” in an explanatory model that could be used for prediction and control purposes. We decided not to attempt to assess or measure impact, outcomes, and results. And we decided not to try to verify, in factual terms, what “actually” happened (and/or is happening) in the POF initiative. Instead, we decided to embrace the project of opening our imaginations to possibilities for constructive action and change, and the dangers and dilemmas encountered in pursuing them. A good way to pursue this project, we hypothesized, would be to invite and make sense of stories that community members in Eastern Kentucky—including but not limited to POF participants—choose to tell about their lives, families, communities, and work.

Guided by and grounded in collaborative inquiry, action research, and public scholarship principles and methods, we developed our research design around an invitation we planned to offer to research participants to join with us in answering a key question: *What’s the story about what’s happening in Eastern Kentucky?* Obviously, the POF initiative is only one of many things that are happening there, about which stories can be told. We hoped that casting our research question broadly would enable us to put POF into perspective by situating it in a dynamic, complex context that was already full of action—and stories. This would help us avoid the danger of overblowing POF’s significance, including the significance of the roles and contributions the professionals from the two development paradigms that POF was bringing

together were taking up and making: the economists from Lafayette College, and the theater artists from Roadside Theater.

What We Have Done and Learned So Far

Reflecting the narrative orientation of our research design, project, and question, we worked with POF leaders to identify people to conduct narrative interviews with. In the four research trips we have made to date, we have conducted 29 interviews with 27 people. Some of these were individual interviews, and some were in pairs or groups. All interviews were video and audio recorded, and transcribed. We have also conducted, recorded, and transcribed three story circles, and 12 discussions about our research plans and findings.

We haven't yet worked with our interview data in a deep and sustained way. But in reflecting on our experiences and our readings of interview transcripts, we have generated a number of insights about the possibilities for constructive action and change POF is helping to open up, and the dangers and dilemmas encountered in pursuing them. For the purposes of this report, we highlight here what strike us as being most interesting and important:

- First, the main thing that has emerged as the centerpiece of the story of what's happening in Eastern Kentucky is the building and organizing of what's being referred to as "the culture hub." (We didn't anticipate that when we were designing our research. At that time, we thought the centerpiece would be limited to the theater artists' work in organizing processes with community members to write and stage plays about the future of Letcher County and the larger region, informed by and interwoven with ideas and methods that come from agency- and asset-centered economic development.) The stories people who have been involved in the culture hub have told us are largely hopeful and energizing. They include stories of personal and community action, change, and transformation. By and large the stories appear to affirm the efficacy of POF's broad-based organizing philosophy and methods, and its community cultural development principles and methods. More than anything else, they drive home the indispensable role and work of a full-time organizer who is identifying, convening, and developing community leaders across many lines of difference, including geography, politics, age, race, and sexual orientation and identity. The stories also illuminate dangers and dilemmas, the most important of which have to do with the potential overdependence on a full-time paid organizer, and the human tendency among culture hub participants to slip into "us versus them," "zero sum," and naïve, romantic, pessimistic and/or cynical perspectives.
- Second, the broader stories beyond the culture hub work that we've heard about what's happening in Eastern Kentucky reveal an expected mix of struggle and hardship, and fragile, tenuous hope. They also reveal important avenues and possibilities for constructive action and change already at play in the region. Most interesting here are stories younger people told us about what they are doing, artistically and politically, both in connection to Appalshop and not.
- Third, based on interview data that is still quite limited, the theater artists' work in organizing processes with community members to write and stage plays about the future of Letcher County and the larger region is generating stories, relationships, and connections that appear to offer promise in helping participants—and potentially other community members—identify new assets, and break out of their bounded imaginations about their identity and potential. We intend to conduct additional interviews about all this

in our next research trip to the region. Here, we want to identify a danger we've perceived: the danger of disconnecting the culture hub organizing and the play creation work, and/or not investing enough time to carefully and intentionally connect and interweave the insights and resources of each.

Emerging Questions, and Plan to Pursue Them

At this stage of our research, the main questions that are emerging have to do with our approach to interpreting, analyzing, and making sense of the stories people told in our interviews. Which method or methods should we use to do that? Which conceptual and theoretical tools? Who should be involved? What purposes should we prioritize, for which audiences? How might this stage of the research help advance POF and the culture hub, both in the process and work of doing it and in the products it generates?

Inspired by an approach sociologist Arthur Frank calls “dialogical narrative analysis,” we plan to organize and facilitate opportunities for our research participants to engage with us and each other in collective meaning-making, analysis, and interpretation of the stories they have told. One avenue for this will be the development of a rough-cut documentary drawn from our interviews, and screened in an invitation-only event that includes everyone we have interviewed. This will not aim to generate “correct” or “finalized” interpretations, but multiple interpretations, and with them, more stories.

As we continue our research about what's happening in Eastern Kentucky, we also plan to attend to the issue of how stories about what's happening can be used to refine and revise POF's original theory of change, and with it the idea that culture and its public expression through theater can be productive catalysts for economic development in disenfranchised communities. We are also eager to explore how our research design and narrative analysis methods might become a support for the project's expansion into other regions of the U.S., which, in turn, will become sites for further testing and elaborating a useful and trustworthy theory of change.

WORKING DEFINITIONS OF KEY ECONOMIC TERMS IN COMMUNITY CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Compiled by Ben Fink

*Since 2013, the grassroots media center **Appalshop** has partnered with the **Economic Empowerment and Global Learning Program (EEGLP)** at Lafayette College, with major support from *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*. Faculty and students working with EEGLP have worked for fifteen years with high-poverty communities in different parts of the world to create sustainable, just economies. Artists, organizers, and media makers at Appalshop have worked for forty-seven years to create opportunities for cultural development in the central Appalachian coalfields. Together, Appalshop and EEGLP have spent the past four years developing a method of community cultural and economic development. Below is a list of key economic terms emerging from this collaboration, along with working definitions.*

Agency is an individual's and a community's capacity to imagine and create a reality different from the one that currently exists. Economist Amartya Sen calls it the freedom "to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values [an individual or community] regards as important." Agency is inextricably linked to **voice**—an individual's and a community's capacity to speak for oneself, to express and communicate its goals and values—and **ownership**—an individual's and a community's capacity to control the value and wealth one creates.

Anchor institutions are institutions, deeply rooted in a community, which can mobilize and make actionable the collective will of disparate stakeholders within that community. Anchor institutions are the central organizing hubs of community cultural and economic development efforts.

Assets are everything a community or organization has, both physical and cultural, which has the potential to create value and community wealth. Types of assets include:

- **Core assets**, central and well-established,
- **Foundational assets**, which undergird other assets—often deeply held cultural values.
- **Instrumental assets**, useful in commoditizing other assets,
- **Known/tangible assets**, which are already actively creating value and community wealth, and
- **Latent assets**, which are not yet creating value and community wealth, and must be activated.

Asset mapping is the process of recognizing and ordering a community's assets, in order to better understand, cluster, and activate synthetic and synergistic opportunities and create new value and community wealth. (The opposite of asset mapping is **liability mapping**, which seeks

to discover a community's important liabilities.) In its cultural dimensions, asset mapping reflects Alan Lomax's assertion that every community's culture has "inherent genius." The process of asset mapping seeks to discover:

- What's working in the community? What **known/tangible assets** does the community have that makes it thrive, that makes people want to live and be and stay there? Where is its value and wealth?
- What's not working yet, but could be? What **foundational** and **latent assets** does the community have that, if it can be bundled and clustered to create new kinds of synergies, will create new and increased value?

Assetizing, or **commoditizing**, is the process of turning a latent asset into a known/tangible asset, which is actively producing value and community wealth.

Bounded imagination, or **resigned preferences**, is the condition in which an individual, a community, or an organization lacks or fails to exercise sufficient agency to pursue the full range of possibilities for the creation of value and wealth. Development begun from a condition of bounded imagination/resigned preferences tends to be **imposed** and **extractive**, elevating market value above other kinds of values and maintaining a culture of voicelessness. A critical first step in community cultural and economic development is to unbound the imagination and un-resign the preferences of a community, through artistic and/or other creative processes.

Bridge funding—see **funding**.

Capitalism is an economic system in which certain people and groups (capitalists) invest value into the means of production (capital) with the aim of getting more value out than they put in, and others (workers) produce value for the capitalists in return for wages. Community cultural and economic development makes distinctions among various kinds of capitalism, including:

- **Corporate capitalism**, based in the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of large corporations, which create wealth by extracting value from workers and natural resources;
- **Entrepreneurial capitalism**, a form of capitalism at the center of community cultural and economic development, based in the proliferation of small- and mid-size grassroots corporations (for- and nonprofit) that generate **community wealth** as well as wealth for the owners; and
- **Social enterprise**, or **conscious capitalism**, the deeper premise on which entrepreneurial capitalism is built: that corporations, by being more intentionally civic-minded, can improve their long-term profitability.

Commoditizing—see **assetizing**.

Community describes a group of people that understand themselves as a collective and act as a whole. Individuals in a community communicate and collaborate to further their individual and collective aspirations.

Community centers of power (derived from Bayard Rustin) or **free spaces** (coined by Sara Evans and Harry Boyte), are organizations of, by, and for the people in a given place, where those people can practice and develop the capacity for agency, voice, and ownership together.

Community centers of power form the essential building blocks of place-based community cultural and economic development efforts.

Community organizing describes the process of bringing people together to act on their common interests, to build a base of people and money organized around common concerns and aspirations, and to enable community members to act in concert.

Community wealth is the value (monetary and otherwise) that is collectively created through community cultural and economic development work, and owned by the community that creates it. An ethos of community wealth is what separates democratic, inclusive, sustainable development from extractive development.

Conflict theory of change refers to an understanding of development in which the status quo is itself the major problem, and change comes from building power to challenge that status quo. This, as opposed to **functionalist theory**, in which the status quo is accepted as a given (at least for the moment), and change comes from finding ways to work within that status quo. Community cultural and economic development efforts often exist in tension between conflict- and functionalist-based efforts toward change.

Conscious capitalism—see **capitalism**.

Consilience is when the paths of multiple entities coincide for an ongoing, continuous length of time—as opposed to an **intersection**, where they cross only at a single point and never again. (For consilience to occur, the paths cannot proceed in straight lines; at least one needs to bend.) Value creation in community cultural and economic development depends on finding consilience among people, groups, and institutions within a community, not mere points of intersection.

Constitutive weightlessness is EEGLP’s term to describe the ideal practice of the third party (non-local partner) in a collaboration: working in close, mutual collaboration with local partners, yet without allowing its own values and biases to influence the development process. It is a contested term within the Appalshop-EEGLP collaboration. Appalshop generally considers “weightlessness” not only impossible but also undesirable; collaboration, from this perspective, occurs at the **consilience** of the various parties’ self-interests. At the same time, Appalshop will speak of being a “catalyst” in development process—facilitating the reaction without itself being a reactant—which resonates with EEGLP’s understanding of “weightlessness.”

Creative discovery paradigm is the approach to development that carries the implicit assumption that there are always new resources for a community to develop, through processes such as asset mapping, commoditizing latent assets, and finding new syntheses and synergies. It is gaining traction in business schools across the country, as they hire artists and designers to aid in the discovery process. The discovery paradigm stands opposed to the **finite resource paradigm**, which assumes that there is a finite amount of resources to be developed, and once they are developed there’s nothing left.

Culture is the intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and material traditions and features of a people. In essence, it’s who we are. Culture can be location-specific or non-location-specific (philosophical). A central tenet of community cultural and economic development is that *culture drives development*—for better or worse. (There are many cultures of dependency, submission, and victimhood.) For community cultural and economic development to be successful, it is

necessary to build a culture that's freedom-enhancing, wealth-creating, and allowing for agency and value-creation by the people in a place.

Culture hub refers to an organization that can identify **latent assets** (especially cultural assets) and catalyze their transformation into **community wealth**.

Democratization is the process of creating a culture where all stakeholders feel dignified and fully engaged in shaping the society, where all stakeholders see the representation of their cultural lives, the representation of their social lives, the representation of their dignified lives being represented in how economic life is organized. Democratization is essential for economic development to be stable, sustainable, and inclusive.

Development (economic, community, cultural, and otherwise) describes a process of analyzing the resources and needs of a particular community or organization, then planning and implementing a program of interlocking initiatives to build from these resources to meet those needs. Practitioners of community cultural and economic development work toward

- **Democratic or grassroots development**, where members of a community define their own aims, determine their own paths to reach them, and own the resulting development as community wealth, and
- **Iterative development**, where planning happens through continual dialogue among a wide and representative range of community members and institutions, and plans change appropriately as circumstances change and learning occurs;

instead of the paradigms of

- **Imposed development**, in which outside entities direct the development, approaching communities as problems to be solved by bringing circumstances in line with predetermined norms, and
- **Extractive development**, in which these outside communities extract value from a community's assets (including land and people) and remove that value from the community.

Discovery—see **creative discovery paradigm**.

Entrepreneurship, in the context of community cultural and economic development, is the process of converting activated and latent cultural assets into economic products with economic, social, and civic values that can be competitive and wealth creating in market exchange. Successful entrepreneurship, which requires **creative discovery** and risk-taking, produces profits and financial gain *and* strengthens the social and cultural bonds that undergird a democratic culture.

Entrepreneurial capitalism—see **capitalism**.

Extractive development—see **development**.

Failure to unify, describes the situation in which myriad initiatives are started, with overlapping interests and goals and resources, but remain in separate siloes and sectors. They do not recognize each other or work **iteratively** to develop together—and, for this reason, they do not develop into powerful organizations.

Finite resource paradigm—see **discovery paradigm**.

First voice refers to people speaking for themselves, including through media: people telling their own stories in their own words and ways, rather than being spoken for by experts, commentators, or narrators. It is a bottom-up, participatory paradigm of art and culture.

Formal arts—see **informal arts**.

Formal economy—see **informal economy**.

Foundational assets—see **assets**.

Free spaces—see **community centers of power**.

Funding describes contributions of capital to a development effort outside the context of market exchange, often by a philanthropic organization, in order to catalyze the commoditization of latent assets. Funding can occur at three different stages of a community cultural and economic development effort:

- **Incubation funding**, to assist the start of the effort;
- **Bridge funding**, to assist in growing or scaling up the effort; and
- **Sustaining funding**, to assist in maintaining the effort over a longer term.

Funders are often most interested in incubation funding; this is also the type of funding most likely to challenge a community's agency, voice, and ownership and lead to imposed development—to the extent that leaders shape the effort according to the funder's priorities instead of the community's. Bridge funding and sustaining funding pose less of a risk in this way, since the effort has already been established; however, funders tend to be less interested in providing these types of funding.

Functionalist theory of change—see **conflict theory of change**.

Hedonic value—see **value**.

Imposed development—see **development**.

Informal arts refers to unincorporated arts projects and practitioners, not part of for- or nonprofit corporations. Like the informal economy, the informal arts contain a huge amount of creativity but are often about surviving; like the formal economy, the formal arts can be about establishing a value chain and thriving. Artists working in the informal arts often lack the resources (money, time) to focus on their art because they need to make a living somewhere else.

Informal economy is a situation where value is being created but not counted as part of a formalized (regulated) economy. The informal economy is often a place where exploited and excluded people find dignity, independence, and joy—for example, minority populations selling their goods outside a planter-controlled formal economy. The problem is, due to the lack of funding and resources available in the formal economy—including intellectual property and other property rights—people in the informal economy often find their ideas stifled and their activity driven by necessitousness or necessitous activity instead of being part of a value chain to create

wealth. A challenge of community cultural and economic development is to create pathways for exploited and excluded people to participate in the formal economy, and thus commoditize their latent assets, without contributing to their exploitation.

Incubation funding—see **funding**.

Instrumental value—see **value**.

Intersection—see **consilience**.

Iterative—see **iterative** development.

Known assets—see **assets**.

Latent assets—see **assets**.

Liability mapping—see **asset mapping**.

Narrative—see **story**.

Necessitousness is the condition in which people are acting in order to fulfill immediate needs (survive), rather than to create wealth (thrive). Necessitousness is characteristic of economic situations where scarce funding and resources are available, and it often leads to stifled ideas and bounded imaginations.

Opposition-ness is the disposition to be skeptical of the fairness/justice/goodness of the status quo, and toward changing that status quo rather than preserving it. Opposition-ness is a critical quality of an effective anchor institution in community cultural and economic development work: it ensures that the institution represents the collective voice of the people trying to make change; it allows the capacity for building agency/voice/ownership among black, brown, poor, and other people who need more of it; and it allows all members of a community to own the development work, to participate as agents rather than as clients.

Ownership—see **agency**.

Populism is a political position whose proponents advocate for a society of, by, and of ordinary people—and oppose plutocracy, technocracy, bureaucracy, and other forms of rule by *elite*. Populism takes two primary forms:

- **Democratic populism**, characterized by the sentiment “we own what we make,” which supports communities that build agency, voice, and ownership together—the essential politics of community cultural and economic development—and
- **Authoritarian pseudo-populism**, characterized by demagoguery and exclusion, which supports authoritarian individuals and institutions that claim to act in the name of ordinary people against a perceived *elite*—a threat to democratic development.

A critical and perhaps determinate difference between these two types of populism is the presence of **community centers of power** in the former but not the latter.

Resigned preferences—see **bounded imagination**.

Re-storying—see **story**.

Social enterprise—see **capitalism**.

Story, or **narrative**, is the means by which we learn, by which we make meaningful experience from the events of our lives together. The stories we tell ourselves and others, and those we can understand and imagine, determine our individual and collective identity. They define what is possible in our individual and collective lives. A critical element of community cultural and economic development is changing the way a community tells its own story (**re-storying**) from one of victimhood and hopelessness to one of agency and possibility.

Sustaining funding—see **funding**.

Synergistic opportunities are opportunities created by combining an organization’s existing assets.

Synthetic opportunities are opportunities created by combining an organization’s existing assets with assets outside of the organization.

Tangible assets—see **assets**.

Third parties are non-local partners, often in higher education (such as EEGLP) or cultural institutions (such as Appalshop’s Roadside Theater, when working outside their home community), who act as a catalyst for development efforts. Third parties intentionally avoid a controlling or co-dependent relationship with local partners; EEGLP uses the term **constitutive weightlessness** to describe this practice, while Appalshop, skeptical of the possibility or desirability of weightlessness, prefers “catalyst.”

Value is the worth of a commodity, measured in the extent to which others will make a sacrifice, forgo other things, in order to consume or experience it. The ways in which value are determined are often culturally specific, for good and ill; dominant understandings of value in a culture can prevent some groups from understanding the value they already have. A central objective of community cultural and economic development is to identify aspects of every culture that create value, or **value propositions**, which can be used to build community wealth based on that community’s aspirations. Different types of value—beyond use value, exchange value, and labor-based value—include:

- **Hedonic value** is value measured in the direct pleasure given to the user, e.g. in listening to a Jamaican reggae band or a Kentucky bluegrass band.
- **Instrumental value** is value measured in the worth of products that can be created from it, e.g. sales of recordings by those bands.

Values are the bedrock principles that define a community’s culture. For community cultural and economic development to be successful, a culture’s values must include a basic commitment to building community wealth through democratic means, and must be understood and expressed clearly and transparently, e.g. through storytelling-based cultural work.

Voice—see **agency**.

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