

Institute for Humane Education
Solutionary Congress Program
Phase 1 Pilot Study
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Introduction

The purpose for this small study emerged from a series of exploratory conversations with Sarah Speare and Barbara Fiore of the Institute for Humane Education (IHE). Eleven teachers had participated in piloting the precepts of IHE's Solutionary Congress project, including perhaps, as circumstances allowed, conducting a full Solutionary Congress with their students.

Barbara is preparing a new version of the guidebook, while also preparing for the next generation pilot work. It is important, therefore, to learn from the experience of these initial pilot teachers, and to incorporate that learning into the planning for the next round of piloting.

Barbara developed a set of detailed questions about how the pilot teachers implemented the IHE precepts with their students, the answers to which would inform her planning for the pilot work for school year 2016-2017. Please see the appendix for a copy of these questions. The external evaluator, Bill Nave, derived a set of evaluation questions, which inform the evaluation design.

Evaluation questions:

How did the pilot teachers implement IHE precepts with their students?

What factors supported their implementation?

What factors hindered their implementation?

What are their plans moving forward?

Methodology

The data to answer these evaluation questions is necessarily teacher self-reported data. Such data could be collected in writing (through a survey or questionnaire) or verbally (through an interview).

Bill and Barbara agreed that conducting interviews with the pilot teachers would be the better choice for this study for several reasons. First, in order to address all the questions on Barbara's list, the questionnaire would be quite long, and therefore burdensome for the teachers and not respectful of their time and commitment to IHE. Second, phone interviews could be scheduled at the teachers' convenience, and in addition, Bill could ask follow-up questions as needed to address more of the questions on the list. Third, the phone conversations would lay the foundation for an ongoing relationship between Bill and the teachers, which will be valuable for continued data collection from the teachers should they choose to continue their pilot work with IHE.

Barbara emailed Bill the spreadsheet with contact information for the teachers, and in addition sent an email to each of the teachers to introduce them to Bill and the purpose for his invitation to each of them to schedule a phone interview with him. Subsequent to this email Bill contacted the teachers by email to schedule the phone conversations. Six interviews have been completed and one is awaiting a teacher's return from vacation.

A phone headset allows Bill to type notes during the interviews, scripting teacher comments verbatim to the degree possible. These notes are subsequently coded (thematically analyzed) in preparation for writing the report.

Findings

The report presents the findings in two stages: first, in the form of each teacher's contribution to Barbara's detailed questions; and second, in summary fashion in response to the overarching evaluation questions. The teachers varied widely in the degree to which their IHE work resembled a fully-formed Solutionary Congress process, and their comments during the interviews vary in how they provided data on each of the detailed questions.

Responses to Barbara's Questions

Describe your process for planning your Solutionary Congress event

How did your students choose a problem to address?

Teacher F: We asked them what they were passionate about, what they were excited about – then we let them choose.

Teacher E: We began in Nov following up with articles we read in class – homeless kids and their pets; palm oil – contacted the girl scout who discovered that the cookies have palm oil; reusable water bottles for kids; child labor and candy, clothing; true cost cycle. All our reading is about environmental awareness, social issues, fairness, equality, power; we raise awareness about all these issues. We teach kids reverence for the natural world, and to find their passion and go for it. Our service learning projects focus on research and raising awareness. For example, the kids discovered that our school milk has palm oil – wrote to principal, foodservice, higher-ups – the city is looking for another vendor.

Teacher A: We went through the starter packet together, whole class talked about the suggestions – then formed small groups based on their preferences.

Teacher B: We bring kids back to their personal interests and passions. We talk about how their passions can drive a solution.

How did your students conduct their research and how did you ensure accuracy?

Teacher B: We did Internet research, but I did not have time to address the credibility issue – I wrongly assumed that the ELA teacher or the social studies teacher had done that basic work with them; they had not. Next year we'll do this in the social sciences curriculum. Next year I'm collaborating with the SS teacher, who will teach research skills and how to determine the validity of resources during the global issues unit.

Teacher A: We researched together, broke into sub-groups to do our research. We went online and made a list of relevant websites. We used some of the resources from IHE's dead zone curricular unit as well.

Teacher G: I have been working with these students for several years in a special course that teaches them the research process, which includes how to validate sources.

How did you introduce the idea of a 'solutionary solution'?

Teacher F: We used the starting kit.

Teacher B: We talked about this but I need more lessons to help them understand what a solutionary solution is.

Teacher G: The concept of solutionary solutions has always been part of my research class with these students. Each year they research a problem they're passionate about and write about a possible solution.

How much time did you spend on the Solutionary Congress Project?

Teacher B: 18 classes of 80 minutes each

Teacher E: We spent months on the project.

Teacher F: We used the rotation period in our schedule. This meant for each group of three students during their twice-weekly half hour in the rotation period, they spent 7-9 hours total on their projects.

Teacher G: We worked on the Congress for only six weeks. This was not enough time to do it well.

Once the students identified possible solutions to their problem, what research was done to ensure that their solution would positively impact the problem in a solutionary way?

Teacher E: We discussed this all along – kids include a definition as part of their presentation – 'imagine what you can do to make the world a better place.'

Teacher B: We discuss why the idea of pledging to work on an issue as we do in our service learning class is not the same as crafting a solutionary solution.

Did you use the Solutionary Unit on the Dead Zone? The SC Starter Kit?

Teacher F: We used the starter kit.

Teacher A: We used the starter kit to do a modified first unit. The Dead Zone came out too late for us to use in full.

How did you introduce systems-thinking and help make connections with respect to the problem they were addressing?

Teacher B: As we're going through the Solutionary Congress structure we define systems.

Teacher A: We had been doing work on systems thinking, so we had a foundation – the Dead Zone unit took that to the next level for us with a bigger view

Teacher D: Systems thinking is part of what we do here – it's in the curriculum from 5th grade through 8th grade – the 8th graders have to do a project that thoroughly systems in nature; biological and other systems are embedded in the curriculum – it's part of the way of being and of thinking for our students

Teacher F: We did lessons on true price, oceans and plastic, systems thinking – most kids got the idea of systems thinking.

Teacher G: The idea of systems thinking is a natural part of the research process that my students learn.

What connections did the students make to community partners/experts, and how were the experts were involved in the process?

Teacher F: For the animal abuse issue – students wrote to legislators, got letters back. For the kindness campaign – involved several other groups, did surveys, used our advisory periods, we kept data on what this behavior leads to. For the universal pre-K issue, we invited a judge, a mom of one of our kids, and a congressman. We also involved our K-5 STEM consultant, our science teacher, and our wellness teacher.

What resources did you use to organize the work?

Teacher A: We used Google Docs to keep ourselves organized.

Teacher E: We used a lot of ideas from the IHE website to keep the work organized, and we got a lot of personal help from Barbara to help keep us organized.

What planning tools (or processes) helped students organize their action steps?

Teacher F: The fact that the students kept their data in organized ways helped a lot.

What were the challenges in evaluating the students' work?

Teacher B: The scoring guide does not match what we do here in this school.

How does the SC process and event connect with your usual curriculum?

Teacher F: We incorporate IHE stuff into our other classes.

Teacher D: Our school is already largely solutionary – we all do service learning in an ethos of sustainability – all we do is framed as a lifelong journey.

Teacher E: As the G&T teacher all of this is my curriculum – it's a perfect fit.

Teacher B: This is part of our service learning course.

Teacher G: The solutionary Congress is a natural extension of my research process class.

Did you host a Solutionary Congress?

Teacher A: Not a full one – we shared our work the last week of school. Students made Google slides and presented just to the class, to their classmates. Next year we'll do public presentations.

Teacher E: Yes, we combined it with our end of year musical talent show. The students wrote the whole script to incorporate their research and solutions into the show.

Teacher F: We did a series of small solutionary projects: universal pre-K, plastic dessert cups in the cafeteria, animal abuse and animal welfare, a kindness campaign, composting, deforestation and palm oil, oceans and plastic waste, and true price research.

Teacher G: The kids worked in groups of 2-4, and each group did a four-minute presentation, and they got feedback from the audience for four minutes. Barbara and Zoe were there to see it. The kids thought it was a great process, and I agree.

What evaluative information did you collect on the event itself?

Teacher F: We did a survey together. They said they learned a lot and it was fun. They became more aware and mindful about issues they cared about, and they understand the change process. They learned how to write their thoughts. They want more time to do these projects next time – they wanted to keep working on these.

Teacher B: We used the scoring guide on their slide show presentations, but it did not work for me. It does not fit what our school does. Next year I'll have service learning standards and that will fit better. These will be academic driven and part of the social science standards so they should fit nicely.

Did the students receive feedback at this event? How did they incorporate that feedback into their plans?

Teacher B: Feedback occurred on a continuous basis as they were working – I circulated among the groups giving feedback. One challenge was getting the kids to cooperate and collaborate well – I stepped back from one group to let them work out how to do this on their own. I need to be more pro-active with some groups, insert little mini-lessons along the way that can be seamlessly introduced in the context of what they are doing.

Teacher A: We wanted more time for feedback and debriefing and we would like to engage more outside experts next time around.

Teacher G: The kids got four minutes of feedback after their four-minute presentations.

What are the next steps for you and your students?

Teacher F: Students want to do more for others, work on animal problems; they are more mindful and they are better at problem solving; they are now working on the food waste issue.

Teacher D: My next challenge is the obvious one – how to expand this to include my colleagues – we all have different ways of working, and that hinders unity – sometimes I just had to break away to get things done. I'll address this soon in our

circle process. My goal for next year is to document our process, use video diaries all year long, and then produce a documentary of the process after the presentations. I also want to figure out how to measure impact.

Teacher A: We'll do this again next year, but we'll take more time. We're a small place-based school, so it should be easy for us to figure this out.

What do you think the impact was of this experience on your students, the problems they addressed, your school community, and you?

Teacher B: The kids got good at looking at bigger systems, but had a hard time because they wanted to change the whole world at once – it was hard for them to keep themselves bounded.

Teacher F: Our universal pre-K presentation got quite a community reaction – lots of folks attended the presentation to protest that the kids were trying to take their clientele away (private pre-schools) – they objected to a private school looking into this public issue.

Students learned that their legislators are responsive when they responded to the students' letters.

Students learned the impact of behaving kindly.

Students created a PowerPoint presentation on how to change their family's shopping habits in response to their palm oil/deforestation research.

What support was most useful in facilitating this program?

Teacher E: IHE website, Barbara, summer residency course last summer.

Teacher A: Barbara

Teacher G: Barbara

What supports or resources would improve the facilitation of this program?

Teacher A: I would like to be able to Skype with other programs and teachers/students. Maybe Barbara can publish a directory for us on the website – then we can Skype each other like an online community.

Did the program meet your expectations?

Teacher E: Yes!

Teacher F: Yes – students were deeply engaged because they cared about the issue they were working on.

What obstacles hindered your implementation of the program?

Teacher F: I didn't run into any obstacles.

Teacher D: Our challenge is to figure out how to go deeper next year.

Teacher B: One of the obstacles is that our IB and AP programs require service learning, but with a *check-box* mentality. Kids can earn these credits just by taking a trip, like the most popular one of traveling to help at a Habitat For Humanity site.

Teacher G: Circumstances resulted in my starting the project too late and we didn't have enough time to do it well.

Would you like to be involved in the next pilot of the SCP? (There will be additional resources and structure).

All but one of the teachers talked about doing this again next year, and the one who did not describe her thoughts on this has left her school, and at the time of the interview had not secured a new position. However, her enthusiasm throughout the conversation and her descriptions of the benefits of this work for her students and for her suggests that she would participate from the context of her new school.

What types of classroom resources would you like to see in the future?

Teacher B: Would love to see a directory of other IHE teachers so I can talk with them and we can share ideas etc.

What teaching techniques would be better suited for implementing the program?

Teacher B: I have a poster of a wheel labeled problem, solution, barriers, contact people. I direct students to this poster when they get stuck to remind them that it's a circular process that you just keep working. When you succeed locally, begin working on how to scale up.

Teacher D: My whole way of being with the kids is constructivist, and I don't put ideas and issues on students before they are ready – I need to prepare the soil.

Teacher F: Teachers need to understand this is a process, a pathway, and need to let go and let the kids pick the problems to work on. Teachers need to know the

essentials of IHE, know the resources, know where to pull from, know how to speak the language; need to be confident in asking questions, not doing direct instruction.

What background, skills, or experiences would improve your ability to implement the program successfully?

Teacher F: As an IHE graduate I learned what I need to do to implement the SC program.

What other factors would improve the program?

Teacher C: It would make my job in putting an SC together easier if I could contact other teachers who are doing this and talk/Skype with them – share ideas, get ideas, get encouragement, etc. – so I'm not alone.

Teacher A: The dead zone unit is geared toward older kids – it's hard to find readings that are appropriate for 7th graders.

Teacher F: Teachers need to be encouraged to tweak the program to fit their situation.

Teacher G: Teachers need support to be flexible in how to do a Solutionary Congress project so it's not a add-on, but can be incorporated into what we're already doing.

Answers to the Evaluation Questions

How did the teachers implement IHE precepts with their students?

The six teachers interviewed to date describe a wide range of variation in the degree to which they were able to implement a robust Solutionary Congress project with their students.

One teacher conducted a series or what might be described as mini-congresses on successive issues during her twice-weekly 'rotation time' with her students.

Another was not able to implement any of the ideas because her school was in flux with personnel changes during the year, but she plans to begin the next year with discussions among colleagues about how they might implement the IHE work in a school that has a culture amenable to such work.

A third teacher is the teacher of the gifted and talented students at her elementary school, so it's easy to use the Solutionary Congress framework for her instruction. This year she combined the Solutionary Congress presentations with the annual musical/talent show that her students do, and the students wrote and produced the show themselves, presenting their SC work through music and dance.

The fourth teacher did a modified, scaled down version of a Solutionary Congress, working together with her students doing research in small groups and doing modest presentations to each other within the classroom using the Google slides they had created. This teacher plans to expand her approach and do public presentations next year.

Yet another teacher was not able to implement the program for several reasons – she was relatively new to the school, her teaching partner with whom she planned to do the SC work moves, and the teacher herself was assigned to a different grade level. Next year she plans to use one of her elective courses as an SC course for her students.

The sixth teacher did a modified and slightly scaled down Solutionary Congress, and her seventh grade students loved the experience. She did this work in the context of her service learning course, but next year she and the social studies teacher will collaborate to create a Solutionary Congress experience for the students that includes world issues topics from the social studies curriculum.

What factors supported their implementation?

Three factors seemed most salient to the teachers in supporting their implementation. First, the personal support Barbara provided was important, as was the experience that some of them have with IHE courses. Third, if the culture at their local school was such that they were free to pursue IHE work without interference, and if they had colleagues who were supportive of the work (whether the colleagues actually participated), the teachers were successful in implementing the IHE work to a great extent. Each teacher who implemented some form of IHE work modified the process in varying degrees in order to produce a better fit with her local context.

These supporting factors – Barbara’s personal support, the teacher’s experience with IHE courses, and their local school culture – seemed equally important. Teachers who were missing any of the three factors were less successful in implementing the IHE work.

What factors hindered their implementation?

The paragraph directly above suggests one answer to this question. Teachers who had less experience with IHE coursework or did not reach out to Barbara for support, encouragement, and ideas, were less successful. Teachers whose local school contexts were in flux or did not include a positive professional culture, or where the teachers was essentially alone in thinking about IHE kinds of work, were less successful in implementing the work.

What are their plans moving forward?

All six intend to carry on this work, as described earlier, although one has yet to find a school in which to do the work.

A common suggestion the teachers made was a request for Barbara to create a list of participants and their contact information so that the teachers could reach out to each other as well as to Barbara for support, ideas, encouragement, etc. – sort of a virtual professional learning community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As an early pilot, the Solutionary Congress framework shows substantial promise. The factors that supported and hindered these six teachers seem clear, as described above. As Barbara completes the implementation guide and initiates the virtual learning community among the participants, some of the obstacles that the teachers encountered will be less problematic. These moves will address the external support and the learning from IHE challenges noted above.

With regard to the challenges of working in less supportive local school contexts, perhaps Barbara could develop a questionnaire/needs analysis/checklist of sorts to help teachers analyze their local school context for the purpose of planning ways to address and overcome obstacles up front before beginning the actual SC work with their students.

Two big-picture take-away's emerge from the teacher conversations. It's easier for a teacher to incorporate a Solutionary Congress into a classroom that's experienced with project-based learning. It's also easier to incorporate a Solutionary Congress into the flow of an existing curriculum than to treat the process as different, an add-on, or somehow not an intrinsic part of the flow of an existing curriculum. The guidebook, training, and personal support should incorporate these insights from these pilot teachers.

Based on our several planning conversations in preparation for this modest evaluation, it is this evaluator's belief that Barbara is the right person at the right time to carry this project forward.

Appendix

Describe your process for planning your Solutionary Congress event.

- How the students chose a problem to address:
- How they conducted research and ensured accuracy:
- How did you introduce the idea of “solutionary solution?”
- How much time did you spend on the SCP? (# of classes, weeks, months).
- Once the students identified possible solutions to their problem, what research was done to ensure that their solution would positively impact the problem in a solutionary way?
- Did you use the Solutionary Unit on the Dead Zone? The SC Starter Kit?
- How did you introduce systems-thinking and help make connections with respect to the problem they were addressing?
- What connections did the students make to community partners/experts? Please describe how the experts were involved in the process.
- What resources did you use to organize the work?
- What planning tools (or processes) helped them organize their action steps?
- Were there any challenges evaluating the students’ work? If so, please describe.

How does the SC process and event connect with your usual curriculum?

Tell me about your Solutionary Congress event.

- Did you host a Solutionary Congress?
- Please provide the agenda for your SC event.
- Please provide a summary of the students’ projects.
- Did you collect any evaluative information on the event itself? If so, please share.
- Did the students receive feedback at this event? How did they incorporate that feedback into their plans?
- What are your/their next steps after the Solutionary Congress event?

As you reflect on your event and the process leading up to the event and debriefing the event, what impact(s) do you see?

- Please share any reflections or observations you have on the impact you think this program had on your students, **the problem** they addressed, your **school community**, and **you**.
- What support was most useful in facilitating this program?
- What supports or resources would improve the facilitation of this program?
- Were your expectations of this program met? Explain.
- Were there any obstacles toward implementing the program? If so, please describe. (These could include problems gathering support from the principal; opposition from other teachers/students/parents; time constraints; difficulty securing and maintaining resources/materials; planning/preparation; evaluating student progress; student engagement; problems understanding the curriculum; problems articulating/explaining the curriculum; etc.)

- Would you like to be involved in the next pilot of the SCP? (There will be additional resources and structure).

What suggestions might you have for improving the overall Solutionary Congress Program?

- What types of classroom resources would you like to see in the future?
- Are there teaching techniques that would be better suited for implementation of this program? If so, please describe.
- What background, skills, or experiences would improve your ability to implement the program successfully?
- What other factors would improve the program?