

EDITED BY
DOUGLAS BOURN AND RICHARD PALSER

Span the World with Friendship

PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION, INTERNATIONALISM
AND THE WOODCRAFT FOLK



 **UCLPRESS**

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and the Woodcraft Folk*

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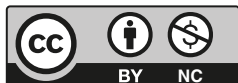
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Youth is not wasted on the young

Delilah Wallbank

‘Youth is not wasted on the young’, claim the Woodcraft Folk – but who are the young within Woodcraft and what are they doing with their youth?

This chapter focuses on the District Fellows (DFs); aged between 16 and 21, they make up the oldest group of ‘youth’. The DFs function as a semi-autonomous movement within the Folk, running their own camps, committee and website, as well as managing their own bank account. This liminality, the space the DFs occupy somewhere between the categories of child and adult, young person’s charity and autonomous youth moment, provides an interesting starting point from which to explore the Woodcraft Folk’s own theories of youth. As I will show, observing the practices of young people can provide us with innovative strategies for thinking about more general issues.

When I started this research, I was Chair of the DF committee and had previously been responsible for organising DF events. In this chapter, I combine my own experiences as a longstanding member of the Woodcraft Folk with my study as an anthropologist, bringing together research into the history of the DFs and ethnography of their present-day practices. I draw on a diverse range of sources: from semi-structured interviews with people involved in the 1980s, when the DFs had just been set up, to participant observation of contemporary DF events. I supplement this with archival research, drawing on the special collection held at UCL, the personal collections of previous members and the DF’s digital archives.

From my conversations with DFs, old and new, I was able to discover both how the DF movement came about and become engaged with what more there is to be learned from the DFs as an organisation. They are not only an example of youth empowerment but also demonstrate

techniques for inclusive, democratic and co-operative organising in general, disrupting the socially constructed distinction between children and adults. This chapter records and describes the history and practices of the DFs to acknowledge their work and to showcase what they have to offer to wider society.

Axiom

In Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*, a radical claim is made: 'down with childhood'.¹ She argues against the claim of the child as a biological reality and instead claims that the difference between children and adults is a social construct.² Within this chapter, I take this idea seriously and ask what happens when we don't distinguish youth from adults. This opens up space to recognise the organising practices of the DFs as relevant to more than just other youth movements but to how young people are engaged in society as a whole.

Firestone shows that what we mean by 'youth' is contested. The characteristics associated with children are socially constructed, two major opposing themes being 'fun' and 'trouble' (understood here as linked to lack of experience). The DFs offer an opportunity to explore both these characteristics and to move beyond the dichotomy of child and adult. They are not just an example of young people organising themselves but have also had a considerable influence on the way in which the Woodcraft Folk functions as a whole; the relationship between the Woodcraft Folk and DFs is one of mutual support. Furthermore, the possibility of learning from the organisation of young people is not something that should be ignored. After all, one of the major social distinctions between children and adults is lack of experience, but this is not restricted only to the domain of youth. Not knowing what to do or not feeling adequately experienced is something that can occur at any time in the life course.

What is youth?

Firestone writes about childhood as a classed and gendered concept, drawing out a history of the child linked to the development of the nuclear family and modern schooling.³ She argues that what really reveals childhood to be a social construct is the way in which it has been unevenly distributed. Childhood has historically been a category applied only to

those who would at some point achieve the status of full humanity; thus, various groups have been excluded.⁴ Firestone points out the experience of women and the working class, but this can also be seen in the lives of Black youth who are observed and treated as adults by the police.

Segregation of children from adults served to further increase the inequalities between these two categories. Firestone distinguishes between adults and children based upon experience, stating that 'adults are, after all, simply larger children with worldly experience'.⁵ While Firestone's work is useful for bringing our attention to the social construct of childhood, this clean-cut idea of experience distinguishing between the adult and the child risks reproducing the very distinction Firestone argues against. I would point out that while it is true that generally an older person will have had more worldly experience than a younger one, age does not always imply greater experience. It is entirely possible for a younger person to be more experienced than someone older than themselves. Thus, while experience is certainly a better way of distinguishing between children and adults than some idea of immutable biology, it still creates a barrier between the two groups.

Another lens through which to consider youth emerges from the sociology of the 1920s and the ethnographic study of young people in cities. Here, youth is understood as a period of transition between childhood and adulthood; youth in this liminal capacity is a danger.⁶ Youth are imagined as violent and as trouble for society.⁷ They are untrained and uninitiated in its rules; the trouble of youth stems from their lack of experience.

Dick Hebdige describes further ideas of youth that arose in the 1950s: 'youth at its leisure: exotic, strange, youth-as-fun'.⁸ This is linked to a growing consumer culture where the key distinction between the teenager and the child was that of money. This concept of youth is no less a social construction than Firestone's childhood, as can be seen in the fact that Hebdige acknowledges that the early study of youth was that of boys. Youth being a category only extended to include girls at a later date.⁹

This social construction is further emphasised by the idea of youth as a liminal stage. In his seminal text exploring liminality, Victor Turner uses rites of passage from childhood to adulthood as a key example.¹⁰ Liminality is described as a state outside of classification, 'at once no longer classified and not yet classified'.¹¹ Liminality is importantly a cultural process rather than a biological one.¹²

If we bring each of these ideas of youth together, we have an interesting mix of juxtapositions. On one side there is youth as a problem to

be solved, as troublemaker; on the other we have youth as fun, as leisure but also as innocence. We also have the idea of youth linked to lack of experience and knowledge. As I stated in response to Firestone's distinction between adults with experience and children without, I would posit that initiation is a process that is not inherently linked to age. We will all, at points in our lives, enter new environments – places with rules and procedures we are unfamiliar with and which we must learn to understand. Thus, to relinquish the distinction between adults and children opens up new possibilities for thinking about how experience and skills can be gained and shared.

Organisations who want to include new members and to adapt to new ideas and influences need to think about how to induct those with less experience into their decision-making structures. If children are considered to be the epitome of those who lack experience, then the methods of inclusion for their voices and ideas within organisations become a possible model. By looking at how youth inclusion occurs, we can learn how to better include all those with less experience, children or otherwise. The premise of my argument is that we can learn something from the organisational capacity of young people, especially when we no longer dismiss their efforts as childish and ignore the importance of both fun and trouble. To explore this requires an example of youth organising and leadership; the DFs provide an ideal case study as they shed light on all the aspects of youth I have so far detailed while also existing as a genuinely youth-led organisation. Thus, while nominally they are organised based on assumptions of age-based skill and experience, in actuality, they provide a space from which to question these ideas.

Who are the DFs?

Leslie Paul set up the Woodcraft Folk in 1925 when he himself was just 19 years old; however, by the 1970s young adults of this age had become a problem for the Woodcraft Folk.¹³ While becoming adult members at 16, having a vote at the annual delegate conference and expected to run younger groups, they had little space to make actual change within the movement. Furthermore, as young people increasingly moved away from the places where they had grown up, for work or for education, the Folk found that its sources of young leaders were diminishing.

DFs would become a solution to existing issues of retention as children aged into young adults. It was intended that the District Fellowship would be less managed than the younger groups but instead be required

to commit time and energy into their local district, alongside organising their own activities.¹⁴ However, while DFs were certainly guided in their creation by the aims of the movement as a whole, they were also always influenced and structured by young people themselves. This was especially the case for a group of under 25-year-olds on the National Council at the time, who supported the establishment of the first DF committee.¹⁵

In the late 1970s, it was recommended to the Woodcraft Folk's National Council that a new age group should be formed, one that could replace the existing category of Senior Venturers (16- to 17-year-olds), which had not been taken up widely.¹⁶ This new age group was seen as a way to better meet the needs of both young people and the districts (local groups). In 1977, a letter was sent with recommendations from the Folk's education committee imagining a new role for over-16s within the Woodcraft Folk.¹⁷ The emphasis of this letter was on each district finding its own way of working alongside 16-year-olds to keep them involved with the movement.

Stating that Districts must take a hard look at the way they are working with the 16 plus age group. A programme must be worked out between District Leaders and the over 16s that is satisfactory to all concerned and complies with the recommendations with respect to commitment and is acceptable by National Council.¹⁸

As this letter shows, from the very beginning of the DF movement, young people were considered to be key actors in shaping these new developments.

Initially, District Fellowships existed in several ways around the country. A typical programme for this new age group varied from the standard weekly meeting of younger groups; it was instead a range of activities from discos and sports days to camps, money raising and helping with district tasks such as fixing tents.¹⁹

There were also attempts to bring the separate DF groups together at regional and national events. From 1978, District Fellowship rallies were organised by the National Council with rules for good behaviour: silence at 11pm and a requirement to wear the folk shirt.²⁰ The content of such weekends included workshops on social issues and the purpose and planning of DF groups as well as social elements such as dances.²¹ Feedback on the first conference in 1978 from National Council members Bev Wight and Jess Cawley described it as a useful 'interchange of views' which at points developed into a sharp examination of the role of a DF in their local area.²² While in the early years of the District Fellowship much of its activity seems to have been guided by districts themselves and National Council, these reports reveal that DFs were active participants in conferences when they were held even if their input

was not always acknowledged. Wight in particular discusses her frustration that the DF conference was treated as secondary to the district leaders conference held on the same day, arguing that 'the DF rally has much broader implications in the long term' and pointing out that the DFs are 'one of the most aware sections of our movement and are quick to scent variances of feeling. This must be acknowledged and used.'²³

DF groups were a success in terms of retaining young people within the movement. By 1983 there were 21 registered District Fellowship groups,²⁴ compared to only 3 Senior Venturer groups in 1976.²⁵ As their numbers grew so did the DF interest in self-organisation; in 1984 this became more concrete with the establishment of a national DF committee at the District Fellowship Weekend. This was an attempt by the 50 DFs who attended to create a movement that was 'self controlled and self generated'.²⁶ This was an attempt that would be successful, as the DFs were to become a semi-autonomous group within the Woodcraft Folk, with their own committee and eventually their own constitution and democratic procedures.

The new DF envisioned in 1984 and 1985 was one that was guided and run by the ideas of young people themselves. Suggested events were not too different from those described in 1977, except more focus was put on involvement with socially aware and political activities outside the Folk; specifically, it was mentioned that while young people should contribute to their district they shouldn't be expected to become leaders.²⁷ When 1985 was named International Youth Year by the UN, the Woodcraft Folk and the newly formed DF committee tried to organise a series of consultation meetings with 16- to 25-year-olds, which were unfortunately mostly unsuccessful.²⁸ The committee as it had existed in 1985 was not democratically selected by DFs themselves; in July 1986 this committee disbanded in favour of a committee composed of under-21s and elected by them as well.²⁹ This occurred due to the action of young people in the DF movement, who wanted to do things for themselves rather than have activities organised for them by other people; however, resources and time from National Council were still requested.³⁰ By 1987, a DF committee of ten members had been elected; plans were established for regular national forums to bring together DFs to discuss the issues of their age group; and a DF info pack was envisioned to help educate both DFs and other young people on social issues as well as on the inner workings of the Woodcraft Folk.³¹

The first ten years of the DFs were tumultuous: what started as a strategy for keeping young people involved in the Folk soon became an outlet for young people to express their own aspirations for self-organisation. However, the occasional splits between the desires of

National Council and of DFs themselves can also be seen as less diametric than may have been felt at the time, as it is only through the support and work of both National Council and young people themselves that DFs were able to establish themselves and become the movement they are today.

While the DFs were argued for on the basis that they would train up future Woodcraft leaders, they were also always a genuine attempt to include young people on their own terms. The stated purpose of the District Fellowship, as implied by its name, was to create a support network of young people to help run districts, but DF groups were also spaces for young people to organise themselves.

For some, however, the creation of the DFs in fact returned them from the status of adult leader back to that of a beneficiary and thus a child.³² One person I spoke to, who became a DF in the 1980s, just as they were starting to become more organised, described feeling conflicted about receiving the news that, at 16, they were a DF rather than simply being treated as an adult leader. DFs, to them, meant a reduction in responsibility because it returned 16-year-olds to the category of children rather than recognising them as leaders in their own right. The DFs, from this perspective, could be seen as a group that extends and reinforces the category of youth.

It is true that the Woodcraft Folk, with its age-based delineation of children, in some ways reifies the idea that age is the primary factor in the development of learning and experience, in line with Laura Tisdall's categorisation of non-utopian progressive education in the UK.³³ Tisdall distinguishes between two approaches to the concept of childhood: the utopian where children are seen as innocent in contrast to neurotic adults,³⁴ and which focuses on the inclusion of children through the use of school councils;³⁵ and the non-utopian that aims to teach children how to be good adults and focuses on meeting specific developmental needs linked to age.³⁶

I would argue that the structure of the DFs can be seen to straddle these two ideas. Young people are both included as participants in decision-making and in the formation of their own organisation and considered a specific age group of children who need to be guided into becoming co-operative adults. However, it is precisely this ambiguity that establishes the DFs as an interesting example through which to question the distinction between adults and young people. Both the utopian and non-utopian approaches to progressive education continue to uphold an idea that children and adults are biologically distinct and therefore require different methods of organising. The question remains: how to

get beyond this distinction when the social effects of such a distinction are very much felt? How can we truly appreciate the capacity of young people to organise when they are continuously distinguished from adults and their efforts dismissed? In this case, it is the very fact that DFs are separated from adults and also from other children as an age group that allows them to question this distinction. The ‘adult’-free spaces created at DF events mean that, experientially, youth comes to have no meaning as it no longer has an ‘other’ against which to define itself. At DF events everyone is a young person and thus no one is.

How do the DFs organise?

Camps

Around 25 young people, in various states of sleepy disarray, sit in a circle of chairs, waiting for the morning meeting to start. They chat to their neighbours, eat breakfast from plastic plates or simply take the chance to nap. When everyone has gathered, or in some cases been dragged from their beds, ‘WOODCRAFT’ is called; ‘FOLK’ is shouted in response. This is the sign to quieten down because someone has something important they need to say – something that could range from a request for help to an announcement of snacks (meaning it is always in your best interest to shut up and listen just in case it gets you first chance at a new packet of biscuits). In this case, the call starts the beginning of a short meeting that is supposed to happen at the beginning of each day of camp, where the organisers go over who is on shift,³⁷ what each clan’s job is,³⁸ and the programme for the day.

As the activities are being announced, it becomes clear that there is a gap in the schedule, originally set aside for a session on ABBA opera singing, which has been cancelled as the DF running it could not make it to camp. In this gap, I see an opportunity: I can run my planned group discussion as a workshop on ‘doing anthropology’ – I announce this in the circle as a morning activity.

Quite a few people volunteer to join in, but then there is not much else on, and eventually I gather around 15 people in a circle slightly smaller than that morning’s. They start chatting immediately, debates on everything from card game rules to the best way to eat egg bread fill the room. When the time comes for the discussion to begin, I start with an icebreaker, well known to most Woodcraft members: going round the circle and encouraging each person to introduce themselves by their name,

pronouns and what they like about Woodcraft.³⁹ This is not an individual interview but instead a chance for me to combine asking a few pre-written questions about people's experiences of DFs with an observation of what District Fellowship is actually like. Throughout the discussion people move into and out of the space, heading to dorms, searching for food or company. Sometimes people join in, some just sitting, others coming into the circle and talking, or interrupting from outside of it. People talk to one another and respond to me, telling the stories they want to tell. A few people speak more than others; some people don't speak at all. It is a fun conversation, as much filled with in-jokes as it is serious reflection. One thing that strikes me is the mention that District Fellowship seems to be well organised; from my own experience of organising events, this is not exactly the case. I've experienced midnight phone calls the night before camp trying to make sure someone has booked the food delivery, or last-minute changes to camp dates due to unexpected train strikes. From my interviews with older members, this has always been the case. While talking about some of the earliest camps, a last-minute desperate shopping trip was described to me, occurring when a van full of DFs who hadn't booked turned up at a weekend event, doubling the number that had been catered for.⁴⁰ This sentiment is supported by the people on the committee or involved in co-ordination in the room who shake their heads. Of course, this disorganisation may not be obvious to most DFs, as even when these problems occur, they very rarely actually mean a camp is cancelled; instead, a solution is found and the event goes on.

The major outcome of DF organising and also where they are most actively 'adult' free, both physically and in planning, are camps. While DFs were, for some, originally seen as a reduction in responsibility, for others I interviewed, the start of the DF movement meant creating a space for those aged 16 to 21 to be young, to have fun and to not be forced into acting as a leader before they felt ready to.⁴¹ One way in which DFs create space for this is at camps where 16- to 21-year-olds can come together without supervision.

While camps have always been an important part of Woodcraft Folk organising, being seen as a place in which members could actually live the principles of the Folk,⁴² they are even more central to the DF movement. Most districts do not have enough DFs to support weekly meetups, and only a few groups meet even monthly, so it is at camps that DFs get the chance to come together and experience what it would be like to live co-operatively.

The majority of DF energy has always gone into national or regional activities. In 1988, this meant a weekend-long DF conference (the first

one organised by DFs for DFs), where the structure of DF committee was discussed and criticised, amendments to the Woodcraft constitution were written, and topics such as sexuality and apartheid were raised.⁴³ It was also a social event, bringing together 60 young people and giving them the space to get to know one another and to be young together. In 1990, this had expanded and a second national event was introduced: the DF camp, a week-long event in the summer that involved both DFs and an international delegation, inspired by the international camp hosted by the Woodcraft Folk the year before.⁴⁴ These events continue to be organised by volunteers from within the DF movement; co-ordinating teams work together to book sites, order food and plan activities. With each event they successfully organise, DFs both carve out a space for themselves to have fun and prove that they are just as capable as any older member of the Woodcraft Folk.

DF events of various sorts have been held throughout the years, from a trip to Peru in 1997, where UK 19-year-olds travelled the Andes alongside young people from Lima who would never normally have got the chance to leave the city,⁴⁵ to protests against the treatment of asylum seekers at Yarl's Wood; and many successful music-based fundraising events, such as the Brighton-based Summer Madness which ran each year from 1999 until 2002.⁴⁶

These social events are important, but they are not the only thing organised by the DFs, and it is to another type of DF event that I turn to next, once called the DF conference and now known as Althing. These events are where DFs discuss and make decisions about their movement, as well as elect a committee to manage their activities.

Things

Alongside social events DFs have always also met to discuss issues and make decisions related to their own internal structures, the wider Woodcraft Folk and the world in general. Originally called DF conference, an annual weekend event open to all DFs, since 2000 this event has been called Althing, the original name of the Woodcraft Folks' annual conference and 'an Icelandic Parliament ... open to any adult over sixteen years'.⁴⁷ An important aspect of an Althing, in the historical Icelandic sense, is that as well as being a place for business and discussion it is also a festival.

The DF movement is run by a committee, elected annually at Althing, that has taken on many forms over the years. From 1987 until 2007 it was split up into regional delegate positions, with a chair,

secretary and treasurer being elected from within the delegate pool. However, as early as 1998, changes were beginning to be made. In recognition of the fact that not all of the regional roles were being filled, the DF conference decided to turn any unfilled regional posts into alternative elected positions called Other, open to all members of the DFs.⁴⁸ This also led to the addition of specific roles to the committee, including rainbow network,⁴⁹ workers' beer,⁵⁰ and international opportunities rep.⁵¹

Until 1999, the DF committee met four times a year to discuss the organising of national events and any projects that they were working on, such as DF hoodies or poetry books.⁵² However, this meant that, unless you were one of the few DFs elected to the committee, many discussions and decisions were made without consultation with the wider movement. In a 1999 edition of *DF News*, an article entitled 'Large Debate on Committee' was submitted; it responded to criticisms aimed at the DF committee's secrecy, bureaucracy and cliquiness with an invitation to join the giant debate on the committee.⁵³ While the exact form this debate took is not recorded, a later *DF News* of the same year announced the new DF forum, which replaced committee meetings with a weekend event open to all DFs who wanted to discuss 'the DF movement, forthcoming events + other woodcraft stuff'.⁵⁴ These forums (now called Things) were to rotate around the country, visiting each region and ensuring the maximum possible engagement from the national movement. These Things are 'supposed to be enjoyable as much as it is business'.⁵⁵ This can be seen in the reports of Things found within *DF News*, the front cover of which is shown in [Figure 9.1](#), throughout the early 2000s where discussions are interspersed with games, and evenings are set aside for 'copious amounts of fun'.⁵⁶

At Things I have attended, fun is achieved in a variety of ways: ranging from time reserved to hang out and play games after and around discussions to the assertion of any individual's right to take a break and encouraging the use of fidget toys or activities such as knitting during meetings. The right to fun is also asserted through jokes and play. This can be a tool to reappropriate more formal practice such as calling any other business (AOB) Area of Bike (a reference, at the time, to the many DFs who cycled to events). Or complaining about RON, that annoying guy who's always standing for election; RON here stands for ReOpen Nominations in the single transferable vote system used by the DFs. This can also be a way to break up the often long and serious discussions with more light-hearted proposals and motions, for example, a proposal to acknowledge the elephant in the room.⁵⁷ These jokes and techniques are not always the same but what does remain is a commitment to the idea

DF NEWS

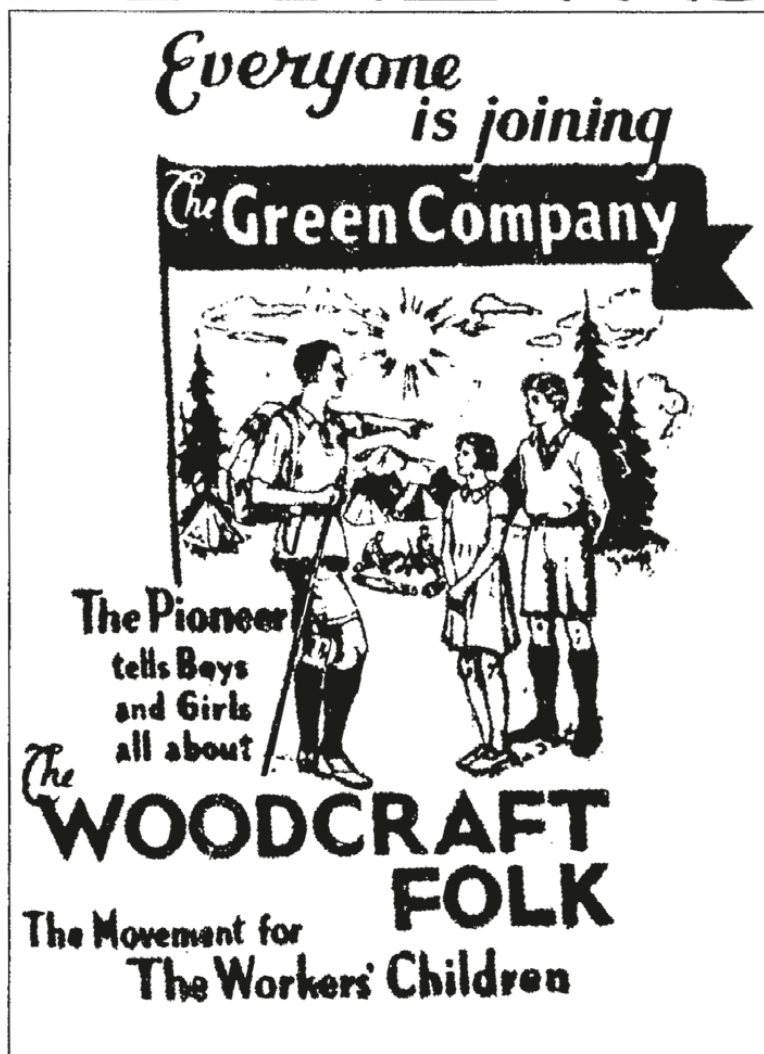


Figure 9.1 DF News, 2001. Illustration courtesy of Woodcraft Folk.

that business should also be fun. This practice is also intended to include those with less experience and make them feel welcomed into the democratic processes of the DF movement.⁵⁸

Another noticeable feature of Things is their facilitation, which is undertaken by the Chair of the DF committee, a role that does not imply leadership but a more practical responsibility for the literal chairing of meetings and pastoral support.⁵⁹ Things and discussions are facilitated through the use of hand signals, which help to keep the discussion flowing but also provide space for other interventions such as the jargon-buster hand signal, which signals a request for a specific term or reference to be explained. While generally these hand signals are followed, in my observations of Things there were also times when the discussion descended into a less structured but in some ways more engaged chat. In an online Thing I attended, this occurred more obviously later on, after three hours of discussions and a half-hour break. While this deviation from structured discussion slowed down the progression of the meeting, it also allowed for those involved to make jokes and riff off of one another. I could feel the energy in the otherwise quite tired Zoom call rising, as voices overlapped and became louder. So, while hand signals and structured discussion are important for the creation of non-hierarchical structures within DF organising, the space around this to relax and joke was also important for engagement in the meeting and participation in discussion.

Constitution, policies and procedures

The final aspect of DF organisation I am going to explore is that which is represented through their documentation and physical resources. While I am interested in identifying the aspects of DF organisation that could be usefully applied elsewhere, this also allows me to recognise that they do not operate in a vacuum.

In 1999, DFs introduced a set of guidelines, inspired by the Woodcraft Folk's national aims. They dealt with general behaviour, participation, drugs: legal and illegal, hygiene, child protection, sanctions and organisation.⁶⁰ Over the next 25 years these guidelines would develop into the DF constitution and policies.

The main influence on these documents continues to be the principles of the Woodcraft Folk itself; many of the formal procedures followed by the DFs reflect the Woodcraft Folk's own policies and structures. One reason for this is that while the DFs operate semi-autonomously, four spaces are reserved for them on the Woodcraft Folk's general council. Models of democracy and organisation observed by DF delegates are thus

brought back to the DF committee as possibilities to try out and experiment with. This could be further formalisation of agendas and papers for meetings, or attempts to review the aims and principles of the movement such as the DF strategic review 'Grooving to a Phatter Bassline' in response to the Folk's equivalent 'Dancing to a Stronger Beat'.⁶¹

DFs are also influenced by external forms of political organising, as can be seen in DF pamphlets (as shown in [Figure 9.2](#)) where mention is made of practices such as non-violent communication and the organising principles of groups like the Zapatistas.⁶² DF events, as well, have often invited and involved connections with other groups. They have been linked with and played host to a range of movements over the years, most obviously the co-operative movement but also the National Deaf Children's Society,⁶³ as well as young asylum seekers who were invited to attend a DF camp.⁶⁴

DF organisational practices must thus be understood as being influenced by a range of organisations and ideas which are brought into and out of focus as different members bring their experiences into the group. This leaves the DF structure with a certain elasticity of practice that allows for every new generation to gain their own sense and experience of what organising could be like; and to add to and change its shape.

In trying to describe the specific ways in which DFs organise, I have been confronted with the fact that the DFs are a movement that changes year on year. Everything from the camps they hold to the structure of their organising committee, and the specifics of their policies, is open to debate and is available for new generations of DFs to edit as they please. DF organisation must be understood as it is, that is, flexible and playful, guided by ideas of democracy and always ready to learn from its own mistakes.

In this section, I have made links between DF organisation and the Woodcraft Folk in general; in the next I consider the reverse: the impact that DFs have had on the Woodcraft Folk, showing that young people are capable of more than just organising a movement for themselves but also influencing the structure and practices of a national charity.

Learning from the DFs

The relationship between the DFs and the Woodcraft Folk is not a one-way system. As I have shown, the District Fellowship is often a place for young people to experiment with ideas they have learned throughout their time in the Folk: practising skills acquired through organising international

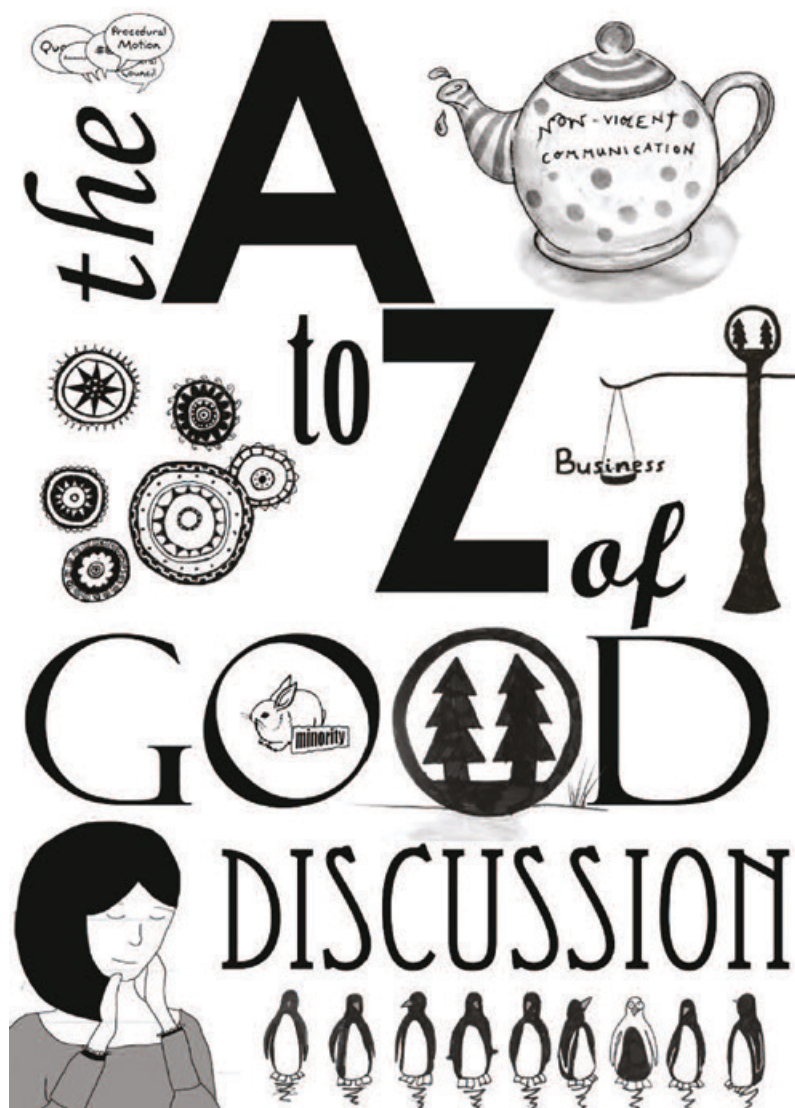


Figure 9.2 *The A to Z of Good Discussion*, booklet for District Fellows. Illustration courtesy of Woodcraft Folk.

campus and trying out different forms of organisational structure taken from interactions with the Woodcraft Folk's general council.

The District Fellowship has also always been an outward looking movement, from its membership, some of which comes from pre-existing Woodcraft groups but also includes new members who have never been

in the Folk before, to its connections with other youth organisations and its engagement in wider political issues. DFs are as much a conduit for bringing new ideas and ways of organising into the Woodcraft Folk as they are a product of its teachings.

Richard Palser has written about how the culture of the Woodcraft Folk changed in the 1980s due to the influx of new parents who had been involved in the youth movements of the late 1960s. These parents moved the Folk away from tradition and ritual, connecting it with the political campaigns of the time.⁶⁵ I argue that the DFs contributed to sustaining these changes within the Woodcraft Folk and continued to open it up to new political movements. This can be seen in the 1990s when they helped to develop positive approaches towards sexuality, and in the 2000s up to the present day where their work on increasing support for volunteers can be linked to the Occupy movement's focus on activism that is emancipatory, both in its results and in its practices.

In 1996, DFs formed the Rainbow Network, which was a space to provide support for those who identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual and to promote awareness of related issues in society. The DFs also wanted to influence national Woodcraft policy in regard to issues of sexuality in the Folk.⁶⁶ This was not the first time sexuality had been discussed within the Woodcraft Folk (in reaction to Section 28 the annual delegate conference passed a motion encouraging and supporting gay and lesbian members; while the motion passed, it was hotly debated and some districts even walked out),⁶⁷ but the work of the Rainbow Network went beyond this. It held workshops at Venturer camps (for 13- to 15-year-olds) and at national DF gatherings. The importance of this group was recognised by the creation of a role on the DF committee tasked specifically with the co-ordination of these activities.⁶⁸ In 2002, a DF written motion sent to the Woodcraft Folk's annual conference was passed; it instructed the General Council to actively support the expansion of the Rainbow Network to the wider Woodcraft Folk.⁶⁹ This involved formalising a commitment to host Rainbow Network events at all future gatherings and producing and distributing Rainbow Network materials.

The Rainbow Network is not the only DF project that has influenced the wider Folk; debuting at international camp in 2001, MEST-UP is the Mediation, Education, Support Team Umbrella Project.⁷⁰ It originally drew upon training in conflict resolution and peer listening that a group of DFs had received at a mediation seminar in Strasbourg the year before. They were encouraged to adopt the model after successfully practising it over the summer of 2000, when they helped to resolve arguments that occurred at an Austrian international camp.⁷¹ MEST-UP originally

worked closely with the Rainbow Network and eventually combined with it, extending its support programme to more general services and continuing to teach young people about conflict resolution. As MEST-UP developed, it also became integral to the functioning of DF events. Current policy requires MEST-UP representatives to take on shifts at all camps which the DFs run; their major role is to support the mental wellbeing of their peers but also to provide information on sexual health, alcohol safety and questions around sexuality. I would argue that the Woodcraft Folk's pioneering position in relation to gender and sexuality, which include the Rainbow Network's resources for under-12s on LGBTQ+ issues,⁷² is due to the work done on these topics by the DF movement. MEST-UP's presence, which is deemed so essential at DF events, has also started to influence practice at Woodcraft camps in general, with the introduction of volunteer support roles and wellbeing spaces at international camps, and an increasing emphasis on the satisfaction of volunteers.

What more can be learned from DF modes of organising? Looking at the DFs demonstrates that they already hold a vast wealth of experiences from which Woodcraft, other youth movements and indeed wider society can draw on. In particular, that lack of experience can actually be generative for the production of new ways of thinking. Due to its age range, the District Fellowship has a high turnover rate; thus, it often has issues with organisational memory and the passing on of knowledge and skills. Rather than holding them back, this seems to provide DFs with the space to experiment with new modes of organising.

Furthermore, experience is shown to not be an issue distinctive to youth. Within the Woodcraft Folk young people, due to their time within the DFs, they often have more experience than adult volunteers. If the trouble with youth – their lack of experience – is not confined only to young people, I argue we should seriously consider the extension of youth's other associated quality – fun – to the organisation of adults as well.

David Graeber explores the role of play in emancipatory organisation and education. In various writings he has described the key role of the carnivalesque in creating space for the possibility of imagining a different future. What I want to highlight is his ethnographic description of the organisation of direct action in the context of early anti-globalisation activism, specifically what he describes as 'silly fantasies'.⁷³ Through his observations of the planning process for an anarchist action at the Summit of the Americas, held in Quebec City in 2001, Graeber identifies the suggestion of the absurd as key to achieving the aims of a movement that wants to change the very parameters of what is currently considered to be possible.⁷⁴

The Canadian press keeps framing this as some kind of alien invasion. Thousands of American anarchists are going to be invading Canada to disrupt the Summit. The Quebecois press is doing the same thing: it's the English invasion all over again. So my idea is we play with that. We reenact the battle of Quebec.⁷⁵

In Graeber's text, this plan is further embellished through discussion, with the addition of outfits combining hockey jerseys and the group's signature chemical jumpsuits. It is then clarified as involving climbing a 180 ft cliff, a further 15 ft of chain fence, and finally fighting past 2,000 riot police, all in order to present a petition to Bush, a conclusion added just because it would be 'really funny'.⁷⁶ This plan is a silly fantasy, but what Graeber argues is that even when the conversation has gone on too long and devolved into unstructured play, 'what goes on in meetings, the structure of decision-making, is critical to the movement'.⁷⁷ It is this playfulness and experimentation that integrally produces a space both for creating new forms of democracy but also for revealing the inherent hypocrisy and contradictions of the capitalist world system. What may seem to be silly, the discussion of a seemingly impossible protest task or in the context of DFs the elephant in the room, is still a process of trying out and of practising important skills. It requires people to speak up and express their ideas and opinions, to listen to the thoughts of others, to come to a final decision. By being silly it does all this without taking itself too seriously; its playfulness opens up more space to be wrong, to make mistakes and thus to get involved. The liminal space of youth, not quite adult and not quite child, has meant that for the DFs business has always been something that should be engaging and fun, something you can enjoy doing.

The defining feature of DF organisation is the very Woodcraft process of learning by doing. This emphasis on experience as important for learning is already acknowledged in adult theories of education; what is left out is the other side of DF organisation: the element of fun or leisure. From its start, the District Fellowship has been about the balance between extending Woodcraft beneficiary status to those up to the age of 21 and preparing young people to become leaders of their own groups. This process can be seen within their self-organised social events, which are advertised as festivals but require the young attendees to learn and use skills in admin, site management, safeguarding, first aid and cooking. As all attendees to camps will have clan duties, DFs require active engagement rather than passive consumption in order for events to happen.

One of the arguments for the separation of children from adults is based around the need to protect youth from the hardships of the adult

world. What this assumes is that being an adult requires the abandonment of fun and leisure or at the very least its limitation. Shulamith Firestone makes the point that actually, 'what we ought to be protesting, rather than that children are being exploited just *like* adults, is that *adults* can be so exploited. We need to start talking not about sparing children for a few years from the horrors of adult life, but about eliminating those horrors.'⁷⁸

Carole MacNeil has explored the possibilities for applying adult leadership theory to youth leadership development.⁷⁹ What about the other way round? What if the importance of play in the education and organisation of young people was extended to adults as well?

Conclusion

The central axiom of this chapter has been that we should attempt to understand children and adults together rather than as biologically distinct beings. From this starting point many questions could be raised; I have focused on only one of these: what can be learnt from an organisation of young people? I have approached this question from the assumption that youth is socially constructed, but this does not mean that the way young people are viewed does not have an impact on how they interact with the world. In deference to this, I have explored how youth has been understood, drawing out two key traits that also define my argument; youth as linked to lack of experience, and to fun.

The effects of this social construction is what makes the DFs an ideal point of focus. Most of the time, they are seen as young people, but occasionally they are able to come together to create spaces that question that categorisation; in which, by being free of adults, they are no longer defined in relation to that which they socially are not.

Through the example of the DFs and my articulation of one social definition of youth I have shown that we all lack experience sometimes; thus, questions of how we organise to include those without experience are essential. Furthermore, if lack of experience is not solely limited to youth, then the other side of youth, that of fun, could also be extended to the daily lives of adults.

Through articulating some of the methods by which the DFs make things happen, I have provided examples of different possibilities for organising more generally. Theory exploring more enjoyable ways of organising and more equal ways of educating already exists, but it is through concrete examples of how fun can be incorporated into work, and experience can be gained through failure, that the DFs become a

useful source of inspiration for thinking about how to create better and more inclusive organisations.

Some questions do remain: the DFs are in a privileged position of being only semi-autonomous; when things work well, they are able to act independently but if things go wrong, they can also retreat to the Woodcraft Folk for support. The negative consequences of failure as a learning technique are much higher without this safety net. Another question is how to encourage fun without being patronising. As anyone who has ever done an icebreaker knows, it is incredibly awkward to feel like a child in a work environment. It is that feeling, however, that is exactly what this chapter contests, the idea that it is bad to feel like a child once you are older than 21. Throughout our lives we will all, at times, experience a lack of knowledge or skills. At the same time, we all deserve enjoyment and to have fun even while organising. If we want to create organisations and spaces that are welcoming to everyone and that can continuously engage new volunteers, then we need to learn from the DFs.

Notes

1. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 72.
2. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 85.
3. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 78, 81.
4. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 81.
5. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 85.
6. Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London: Routledge, 1988).
7. Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, 27.
8. Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, 29.
9. Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light*, 27.
10. Victor Turner, 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage', in *Reader in Comparative Religion*, ed. William Armand Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, 234–43 (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).
11. Turner, 'Betwixt and Between', 236.
12. Turner, 'Betwixt and Between', 239.
13. 'The Role of the 16 Plus in the Folk', Woodcraft Folk Heritage website [FH_028_02].
14. 'The Role of the 16 Plus in the Folk'.
15. Interview with Delilah Wallbank (Zoom, 15 August 2023).
16. 'The Role of the 16 Plus in the Folk'.
17. 'The Role of the 16 Plus in the Folk'.
18. 'The Role of the 16 Plus in the Folk'.
19. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/FH_20b].
20. London, UCL Special Collections [FH_20b].
21. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/FH_17d] Organisation.
22. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/FH_17d] Organisation.
23. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/FH_17d] Organisation.
24. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/FH_20b].
25. Richard Palsler, "'Learn by Doing, Teach by Being": The Children of 1968 and the Woodcraft Folk', *Socialist History* 26 (2004): 1–24.

26. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/FH_20b].
27. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/FH_20b].
28. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/FH_20b].
29. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/FH_20b].
30. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/[FH_20b].
31. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/[FH_20b].
32. Interview with Delilah Wallbank (Zoom, 17 May 2023).
33. Laura Tisdall, *A Progressive Education? How Childhood Changed in Mid-Twentieth-Century English and Welsh Schools* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).
34. Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, 1.
35. Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, 2.
36. Tisdall, *A Progressive Education?*, 3.
37. Being on shift means being responsible for the health, safety and wellbeing of all of those on the camp. There are day shifts and night shifts, and for those over 18 being on shift also means staying sober. There are various rules about how many people need to be on shift, dependent on how many people are at the camp, but generally there will be at least two camp organisers or committee members (orange hi-vis), one first aider (yellow hi-vis) and one MEST-UP rep (pink hi-vis). MEST-UP is the DF name for those trained to look after the emotional and mental health of their peers.
38. Before camp, everyone attending is put into a group (which is called a clan and often has another name inspired by the theme of the camp – in this case, they were all ABBA themed). These groups are assigned different chores each day, generally cooking, washing up or tidying. This way, everyone is involved in keeping the camp running.
39. This final point can be and is swapped for any small fact, ranging from favourite biscuit to political hero.
40. Interview with Delilah Wallbank (London, 13 August 2023).
41. Interview with Delilah Wallbank (London, 13 August 2023).
42. Annabella Pollen, ‘“The Most Curious” of All “Queer Societies”? Sexuality and Gender in British Woodcraft Camps, 1916–2016’, in *Queer as Camp: Essays on Summer, Style and Sexuality*, ed. Kenneth B. Kidd and Derritt Mason, 31–50 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 22.
43. London, UCL Special Collections [YMA/FH_20b].
44. Woodcraft Folk Annual Report 1989 (London: Marx Memorial Library and Worker’s School, Woodcraft Folk Collection); interview with Delilah Wallbank (Zoom, 21 May 2023).
45. *DF News*, May 1996, 7; Interview with Delilah Wallbank (Zoom, 25 May 2023).
46. *DF News*, Summer 1999, 2; *DF News*, Summer 2002, 6.
47. *We Are of One Blood: Memories of the First 60 Years of the Woodcraft Folk 1925–1985* (London: Marx Memorial Library and Worker’s School, Woodcraft Folk Collection), 4–5.
48. *DF News*, Winter 1998, 3.
49. The DFs’ sexuality and identity working group.
50. The main liaison was with Worker’s Beer, an organisation which employs members of trade unions and left-wing campaign groups to work on bars at events and festivals, providing the volunteers with free access to these events and funding to the groups they represent.
51. In charge of organising and advertising opportunities for DFs to get involved in international projects, often through the Woodcraft Folk and IFM-SEL. *DF News*, May 2001, 11–13.
52. *DF News*, Summer 1999, 8.
53. *DF News*, Summer 1999, 8.
54. *DF News*, Winter 1999, 3.
55. Personal communication.
56. *DF News*, Spring 2001, 2.
57. Interview with Delilah Wallbank (Lockerbrook, 19 August 2023).
58. *DF News*, Summer 2004, 19.
59. A distinction made tangible by the existence of the DF chair, a hand-sized carved wooden chair that symbolically holds the leadership power of the movement to emphasise a commitment to lack of hierarchy.
60. *DF News*, Winter 1999, 9.
61. *DF News*, Winter 2002, 2.
62. *The A to Z of Good Discussion*, personal collection.
63. *DF News*, Spring 2009, 14.
64. *DF News*, Autumn 2003, 4.

65. Palser, 'Learn by Doing, Teach by Being', 13.
66. *DF News*, Spring 1996, 6.
67. Interview with Delilah Wallbank (Zoom, 15 August 2023).
68. *DF News*, Summer 1997, 4.
69. *DF News*, Summer 2002, 4.
70. *DF News*, Winter 2000, 5.
71. *DF News*, Winter 2000, 2.
72. Pollen, "'The Most Curious" of All "Queer Societies"?'', 21.
73. David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009), 1.
74. Graeber, *Direct Action*, 2–3.
75. Graeber, *Direct Action*, 1.
76. Graeber, *Direct Action*, 2.
77. Graeber, *Direct Action*, 11.
78. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 96.
79. Carole MacNeil, 'Bridging Generations: Applying "Adult" Leadership Theories to Youth Leadership Development', *New Directions for Youth Development* (2006): 27–43.

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