

Designing Learning Communities for Enhanced Impact

Often the benefits of a grantmaker-grantee relationship flow in a unidirectional way—toward grantees. While grantmakers provide finances, knowledge and other “value added” support in these relationships, they typically do not benefit to the same degree from knowledge, experience and wisdom generated by the grantee from initiative or project work.

A learning community, when well designed and executed, is a useful tool to enhance the learning and practices of all participants, including grantmakers. The following reflections come from our experience designing and implementing learning communities of both grantmakers and grantees, and in some cases, technical assistance providers and evaluators. Although the specific purpose, configuration and context of these learning communities varied, a set of common benefits and key design elements emerged.

BENEFITS TO GRANTMAKERS

Learning communities provide a variety of benefits. For grantmakers, the experience of participating in a learning community can result in:

- More open and transparent conversations with grantees about their progress, challenges and needs,
- More regular input and feedback to inform foundation planning and decisions,
- An environment conducive to generating, sharing and/or testing new ideas, strategies and innovations,
- Enhanced usefulness of evaluations due to obtaining learning community participants’ input throughout the evaluation, from the design and data collection phases to the review of findings, their dissemination and application, and
- New and strengthened relationships and networks that benefit grantmaking beyond the formal learning community.

What is a Learning Community?

A learning community is a group of individuals who come together over time in a specific space or environment to build their mutual knowledge and understanding through interactions that add value to their work. Typical interactions are shared reflection, story telling and learning. Learning communities are often connected to foundation funding (e.g., an initiative or cluster of grants with a similar focus). In philanthropy, other terms are sometimes used to indicate a learning community, such as community of practice, learning cluster and learning circle.

KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS

Create a clear focus. Before inviting participants to form a learning community, identify a clear rationale for the group and then share and test it with them. There must be a unique reason or “added value” as compared to other gatherings.

Ensure common expectations and group commitment to learning. Consider employing an application or interview process to ensure that participants share a commitment to learning and are willing to fully participate. Make sure participants understand and agree to group-generated expectations (e.g., frequency of in-person meetings, type of participation between meetings and processes for input and decision making).

Utilize a strong facilitator. Effective third-party facilitators can help maintain continuity, plan and support productive exchanges and keep the group moving forward. Facilitators serve a more neutral role when gathering input about the learning community’s design and execution from both grantmakers and grantees. They set the tone and ground rules for discussions and guide conversations to effectively support reflection and sharing among all participants.

Include face-to-face gatherings. The initial cultivation that leads to shared learning depends on face-to-face engagement even though, over time, members may rely more on virtual forms of communication. Geographical distance and the degree to which participants already know each other and/or see each other at other gatherings factor into the appropriate balance between in-person and virtual meetings.

Provide an adequate time frame for support. A learning community has life cycle stages that should not be skipped or ignored: coming together, building trust and communication, exchanging experiences and learning. Typically, a learning community needs a one to two-year period with outside support to “hit its stride.” A transition/exit plan should be developed prior to the end of foundation support.

Recognize that “time is money.” While participants and their organizations benefit greatly from an effective learning community, associated costs to the organizations should be acknowledged and appreciated. When possible, provide funding (even symbolic support) in recognition of financial costs associated with participation.

Be an intentional contributor. Grantmakers need to participate fully in learning communities, relying on the same rules of engagement and accountability established for grantees. Many times, due to the actual and perceived power differentials, it is especially important for grantmakers to take more initiative and risks to model transparency, self-reflection and sharing—especially learnings related to challenges and mistakes.

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