

# Learning Together

## Collaborative Inquiry among Grant Makers and Grantees

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#### **Evaluation Techniques: A Series of Brief Guides**

*This guide was written by Craig McGarvey. It is part of the GrantCraft series.*

*Publications and videos in this series are not meant to give instructions or prescribe solutions; rather, they are intended to spark ideas, stimulate discussion, and suggest possibilities.*

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# What is collaborative inquiry?

**Grant makers turn to formal assessment techniques for several reasons: to increase the impact of their investments, help grantees improve effectiveness, strengthen intermediary organizations and fields of work, or build learning more deeply into their own philanthropy. Some, believing that a collaborative approach can best achieve those goals, are pursuing learning along with their grantees.**

Collaborative inquiry creates learning partnerships among grant makers, grantees, and consultant researchers or evaluators to build useful knowledge from practice. The approach draws from diverse disciplines, including participatory action research, organizational development, and adult learning theory. Although practice can vary – in this guide, we offer a “mini-case study” as an example of how one grant maker went about the process – the important common elements are these:

■ **A candid, collegial relationship** among funders, grantees, consultants, evaluators, and other participants, within which goals can be developed collectively, no one has exclusive status as an “expert,” and individual and common learning can be pursued side-by-side.

■ **An early commitment to working together on formulating the questions to be answered**, the way knowledge will be gathered and examined, and the process for drawing conclusions – not partitioning those tasks based on people’s separate disciplines, occupations, or credentials.

■ **An open process of implementation and evaluation** in which all sides are aware of and engaged in what’s happening in connection with the grant or grants, the challenges and surprises that arise along the way, alternatives that present themselves, and lessons to be distilled.

■ **A rhythm of interaction among the participants** that allows for cycles of action and reflection, bridging practice and theory.

■ **A shared belief that diverse experience and ideas advance learning**, and that expert knowledge comes from front-line practice in active relationship with research and evaluation – in short, as some participants describe it, that knowledge is “co-produced.”

## Why would a grant maker want to use collaborative inquiry?

As one program officer explained, collaborative inquiry poses the question, “Who is doing the learning?”

The answer depends on the situation. Community leaders? Local organizations? The field at large? Researchers and evaluators?

## Where the examples in this guide come from

For advice and insight in this guide, we turned to a number of grant makers, grantees, and grant seekers who drew from experiences in collaborative inquiry that include the following:

- A regional foundation that formed a “learning collaborative” around issues of civic participation and naturalization for immigrants. The collaborative included fourteen organizations besides the foundation.
- Members of a national funder collaborative that uses common learning and inquiry as “a key, perhaps the key” in pursuing a common mission of building “wealth, leadership, and self-sufficient families” in poor rural communities.
- A national foundation that invites its national award recipients to work together as “co-researchers to make new knowledge around leadership for social change.”
- An international foundation that used collaborative inquiry to encourage organizations to explore how youth activism could be employed as a component of youth development programming.

*“The dominant culture says people who think are more important than people who do. Collaborative inquiry can get everyone thinking and doing. Funders, researchers, evaluators, and practitioners all have hypotheses. They can all gather data. They can all own an evaluation.”*

*– A grant maker, describing the promise of collaborative inquiry*

The foundation itself? Any constituent who belongs on the list should be actively engaged in the collective process from the start.

Collaborative inquiry is intentional learning, and it may be helpful whenever a funder’s goal is to build knowledge that can be put to active use. People interviewed for this guide explained that the approach integrates the components necessary to strengthen a field of work. In other words, collaborative inquiry may be helpful when you want to:

■ **Build networks of peer learning among institutions and leaders.** One foundation used the approach as an organizing vehicle for developing relationships among grantee practitioners who worked in the same business but had never communicated with one another. “Some of them became close colleagues who could call each other for advice,” said the grant maker. From a consultant participant in another project: “Learning together turns out to be a great way to build trust – much better than ice breakers and ropes courses.”

■ **Develop relationships between practitioners and researchers.** “Idea exchange between theorists and practitioners is what moves learning forward,” said a funder, “and it’s amazingly rare.” His foundation consciously used collaborative inquiry to create an expanding conversation among people “in the trees and overlooking the forest.” They grew to know, respect, and influence one another’s work.

■ **Link individual, organizational, and field learning in mutually reinforcing ways.** For example, some programs to develop community leaders of color through civic participation have involved community members in the design and testing of leadership curricula, involved community organization staff in improving their ability to cultivate leadership among community members, and brought community organizations together to distill ideas and techniques of this kind of capacity building.

■ **Build and strengthen intermediary organizations within a field.** A program officer who developed an initiative around collaborative inquiry said, “It was important that the learning get lodged someplace other than at my foundation.” She selected an intermediary institution to manage the inquiry process and carefully staged her own exit as the intermediary grew in knowledge and stature.

■ **Improve your own work.** Grant makers need to learn, too. The funder of one collaborative inquiry process explained, “We had to be open to critique and feedback, just like the rest of our partners; if [our foundation] didn’t show that we were trying to get better, how could we expect anyone else to take the risk?” From the director of a foundation collaborative: “We were trying to create a learning laboratory, where we’d all get feedback for self-improvement.”

## Getting Past the Evaluation Jargon

As grant makers, we want evaluation and assessment techniques that help document and analyze the work we support in ways that are meaningful to our foundations, grantees, and wider field or community. To help grant makers weigh the advantages of different approaches, GrantCraft offers the **Evaluation Techniques Series: A Series of Brief Guides**. Each guide explains the basics of one technique, answers common questions about its use, describes how some grant makers are applying it, and includes a list of resources for readers who want to learn more. See [www.grantcraft.org](http://www.grantcraft.org) for other titles in the series.

# A mini-case study: Using collaborative inquiry to support growth in a new field

**Some years ago**, a grant maker began noticing that more and more community organizations were establishing projects designed to encourage young people to participate in civic life. The idea was relatively new at the time, and not much was known about it. “People were out there trying to do it,” she said, but few of them seemed to be talking with one another. “There was a lot of practice, but not much theory. Nobody was writing about youth as civic actors.”

Her foundation, like many others, encouraged program work that brought grantees together to learn. But the results had been mixed. She had watched other foundations create forums where community organizations were invited to give input, but without any clear message about what output was intended. Participants couldn’t always be sure who was intended to benefit from the discussion, for what purpose, or what risks the exercise might create for those who participated.

The grant maker was interested in acquiring knowledge for herself and her institution, but she was equally interested in assembling knowledge for the field. “I wanted to legitimize youth organizing as a practice within youth development,” she explained, but that meant getting help from practitioners and observers who were not used to sharing information even with one another, much less with a funder.

## **How did they build a common learning agenda?**

The grant maker started by assembling a group of practitioners, consultants, and other grant makers into an early design team to create a new initiative. “We wanted to surface the broadest, best, widest thinking” and “build a field around practice.” Ultimately, a diverse

group of a dozen organizations from around the United States and four organizations in South Africa and Kenya were invited to participate in a three-year learning network.

“We were key groups coming together,” one grantee explained, “to bring about learning that could be thrown back into our work through an experiential process. We designed the framework together, developed the key learning questions together.” The foundation brought in an intermediary organization to distribute grants, manage the initiative, provide technical assistance, and take responsibility for gathering and disseminating field knowledge. A team that included grantees selected the researcher-evaluator.

Participating organizations received operational support — an important component, according to the director of the intermediary, who noted, “You have to pay people to reflect.” The inquiry process included annual learning group meetings, site exchanges for peer learning, annual site visits for training and technical assistance by the managing intermediary, assistance from the evaluators in asking questions and collecting and analyzing data, and individualized mini-grants to support such things as strategic planning, self-evaluation, and leadership development for youth.

“We were there,” said a participant, “to identify our assumptions, answer questions, find good practices. Each group had its own proposed goals and deliverables.” The intent, according to the intermediary’s director, “was to be truly learner-focused, to have every organization learning what they needed to learn, while contributing to the common learning.” That agenda entailed seeking answers to two questions: What organizational strengths are required for grassroots youth activism organi-

zations to do quality work? And what does youth activism contribute to youth development outcomes? To distribute the answers widely, the program design included publication of a final report.

#### **What was accomplished?**

Evaluators' written reports and testimony from participating organizations suggest that the process achieved at least four important outcomes:

- **Improved program performance.** As just one example, the initiative helped participants survey young people to pinpoint ways to improve the quality of their services. As a staff member from one group explained, "We looked at the gaps and developed a plan to make leadership opportunities more available to youth who have been here less than a year, to help them feel more engaged."
- **New relationships and wider networks.** "It was exciting and invigorating for our staff and youth to be exposed to diverse, passionate people doing things 14 or 15 different

ways around the country," said a participant. Strong relationships were built, and many of them have stuck. According to one grantee: "We still stay in touch with several of the organizations, sharing information and resources."

- **Better self-evaluation and organizational improvement.** "We learned," said a participant, "that it's one thing to be committed to social change and youth organizing. It is another thing to be committed to a learning process that is by nature long-term, where mistakes are owned, beliefs challenged and sometimes changed, and flexibility and adaptability are paramount."
- **A stronger field.** The learning initiative helped spur the creation of the Funder's Collaborative on Youth Organizing, and articles on youth participation and leadership appear far more regularly in the scholarly and practical youth development literature. "Success," says the program officer, "is seeing the idea of youth activism being inserted in so many places."

#### **In This Case**

**Collaborative inquiry is about learning and doing together. So what did the participants in this learning initiative actually do? Here's a partial list:**

- Agreed on key questions
- Met in "learning groups"
- Received training and expert assistance
- Made site visits to see one another's work
- Conducted research and data analysis
- Studied the capacity of their own organizations
- Published a final report on their findings

# Common questions about collaborative inquiry

When we asked grant makers and grant seekers about the opportunities and challenges of collaborative inquiry, these are the questions and answers they considered the most important:

## **How can a true learning partnership among peers be created when one of the partners distributes the funds and others receive them?**

Real partnerships between funders and grantees are difficult but not impossible. They are nearly always the result of negotiated compromise. Grant makers represent their foundations, after all, and can't be entirely free from the constraints of that role. But the goal of the learning relationship is not to obliterate differences among the participants, it's to make those differences valuable, transparent, and part of the learning process.

Yes, funders will use some of what they learn to make judgments about funding, and will require certain information as a condition of the grant. The point is not to pretend this isn't so, but to build a relationship in which all participants understand the funder's needs as just one element in a broader learning process – one that will also serve many other purposes and will be open to common discussion and reflection.

One program officer said, "I try to be as professionally and responsibly transparent as possible." Another explained: "I said to the grantees, 'I'll show you what the rules of the game will be going in, so you can make an informed choice.'" Those rules included a formal and rigorous reporting relationship back to the foundation. But another key element was a continuous feedback mechanism for honest exchange along the way, and a willingness on the part of the grant maker to listen and respond.

Trust is essential, and trust is built over time as people see that others can be relied on to do what they said they would do. Budgets need to provide enough time for knowledge-gathering and reflection; participants have to practice the necessary patience. It is also important that foundations guarantee something of true value to the participating organizations in the collaborative. "They are giving you their work," said one program officer. In return, she tries to help grantees open doors and develop relationships with the world of philanthropy.

## **When you come down to it, aren't the interests of the participants – what they want to learn – fundamentally different?**

Interests among funders and recipients can be different and yet politically aligned. It is in the interest of each to see the other succeed. "Foundations want to figure out how to measure impact," said a director of a collaborative fund. "They tend to look to product, and to the field as a whole. [Grantee] organizations want to learn how to increase their capacity – they're more interested in the process at their individual institution."

But if practitioners can come together to articulate more clearly their ideas of how social change happens, their strategies of approach, and their achievement of outcomes, they strengthen the hand of the grant maker and can draw in more private investment and public support.

A representative of a grantee in one collaborative said, "It was invaluable. We were able to see what was going on in the larger field, what was working, what not." Grant makers, on their side, can strengthen the hand of grantee leaders, helping them to become more effective by encouraging the exchange of promising practices among peers. "Each participant saw what it takes to make a better world," said a grant maker, "but it was from a narrow, small view. It was one of the reasons we consciously sought diversity in the mix."

## **Some advocates of collaborative learning say "eliminate the experts." But then, in come the consultant researchers and evaluators. Aren't they "experts"?**

The goal, in most cases, is not to eliminate expertise, but to eliminate exclusive roles for expert authority – intellectual fiefdoms that end up excluding people with non-academic backgrounds or credentials, or treating them as consumers of knowledge, rather than producers. The selection of the participating evaluators or consultants is therefore one of the most critical decisions in forming a learning collaborative.

Credentials, expertise, and experience are valuable, but in this context, human skills are just as important. Political skills, too. A representative from an intermediary said, "Evaluators have to commit to the values of creating a participatory learning environment to 'get the innovation out.' Lots of bad experience over time has created mistrust. It's been 'The Invasion of the Body Snatchers' – researchers coming in to steal knowledge. There are also race implications, because many researchers are white."

In one initiative, a successful evaluator had clearly made an equal commitment to the production of knowledge and the development of knowledge producers among participating practitioners. It was an authentic partnership. "We gave the raw data back to the organizations so they could participate in the analysis," said the evaluator. "They became even more thirsty for learning, even more interested in improving. And it was a very rich experience for us. We shed the aura of being an 'objective outsider' and were there to learn along with the group." That stance, of course, carries risks for the evaluators, which they themselves must understand and negotiate. As one researcher said, "We stood the chance of being rejected by the practitioners because we were academics, and being marginalized by our peers because we had lost objectivity."

### **What about the issue of loss of objectivity? If the evaluator is a participant, won't the results of the evaluation be suspect?**

If the purpose of an evaluation is to audit for accountability, then yes, the use of a participant-evaluator will raise legitimate concerns. Conflict of interest, real or perceived, is not something we want in auditors. Valid questions would also likely be raised in the case of an evaluation intended as pure social science, to demonstrate causal links.

Collaborative inquiry uses evaluation to create a collective learning experience. As one grant maker said about the multiple roles of the participant-evaluator, "When we are being educated, we don't worry a lot that our teachers are, all at the same time, designing course syllabi, creating lesson plans, inspiring us as lead learners, and assessing our progress; it's what we expect from them."

### **When is the collaborative approach not appropriate?**

It is probably not as useful when the practices in a field are already long established, there is broad agreement on what methods work best, and the purpose of monitoring and evaluation is mainly to ensure quality control. When an evaluation process is meant to determine whether agreed-on standards have been met, approved techniques were applied correctly, and the usual, expected results were achieved, then there is relatively little in the process on which to collaborate. Collaborative inquiry, said one participant, "is not applying a model, it's discovering a model."

The approach should also not be attempted, in one consultant's words, if "the relationships are imposed but not earned; if a facade of democratic participation is created, but it is dishonest and there are hidden agendas." The process is not completely controllable. It depends on patience and trust among the participants. So if the foundation cannot create an atmosphere of tolerance and open-mindedness, where unexpected outcomes may arise and new approaches evolve, it should probably stay away.

### **What should a grant maker know going in?**

Grant makers experienced in using collaborative inquiry say there is a range of depths at which it can be implemented. Their advice therefore includes these key points:

- Know your foundation, know your role, and stay in it. Your relationships will be more honest, effective, and comfortable if they're based on reality, and if they take account of your responsibilities to your own organization.
- Manage in such a way that people have choices; be honest so they can make informed choices; and expect to fall short now and then. "There will be misunderstandings, and you'll get

challenged in any case," said a program officer. "You have to be okay with it."

- Find participants who are ready to learn and share what they know. Not every organization is at a stage of development where it is willing to reexamine its own assumptions, especially in front of a funder.
- Invest money to make it possible for participants to take the time to learn from one another. Money and time are essential.
- Organize around the self-interest of the participants. That is, find each member's stake and try to create a process that, while holding to standards of common accountability, accommodates and serves the various interests around the table. Those interests are what draw participants into the collaboration. Some will come for new knowledge, some for new relationships, some for new resources.
- Be open to unanticipated learning and ready for the process to evolve. The best collaborative learning processes are greenhouses, not blueprints.

### **And how about grant seekers? How can they enter with eyes wide open?**

Grantees and grant seekers who have participated in learning collaboratives offer these points of guidance:

- Take ownership of the process; it is you and your staff, your organization, and your field of work that have the chance to learn and grow.
- Remember that it is a collective process, and there will be compromises. But give honest feedback and expect it to be listened to and respected.
- In difficult situations, find ways to be heard. Grantees in one learning collaborative instituted a system for anonymous feedback that got them through a rough period.
- Cultivate your own curiosity.
- Seek, with integrity and clarity, outcomes that are useful both for your own organization and for the rest of your field. In short, as one participant put it, the challenge is to distinguish "what is idiosyncratic to your organization, and what is common to the work as a whole." There is much to learn in both areas, and they'll often intersect.
- Open yourself to sharing with other grantees. "We were allowed to talk about the personal experience of the work," said a participant. "It was profound – powerfully bonding and helpful."

- Take the tools of learning that are offered and adapt them to your organization. Make use of the learning process itself – don't just wait to see the end result. Intentional learning means answering questions like these: What change are we trying to make, and why is it important? How are we trying to make the change, and why is that the best strategy? What questions should we ask and what answers should we seek to know if the change is happening, so we can make adjustments, if necessary, and we can demonstrate the outcomes of our work to others? A grantee in one collaborative said that the process of answering such questions was more valuable than the ultimate document that resulted from it.
- Finally, expect honesty from your grant maker, but don't forget that she or he reports back to an institution, just as you do, and there will be times when that duty sets a limit on flexibility and candor.



# Rules for Collaborative Inquiry

## The Ideal

**ENGAGE.** Bring participating grantees and consultants into program governance, including the design and implementation of the collaborative learning program from the start. Give responsibility, invest in it, staff it.

**DEMOCRATIZE.** Eliminate hierarchy, reduce power imbalance, and banish “experts”— i.e., treat all participants as both sources and recipients of knowledge. In particular, value practitioners as knowledge builders.

**BE TRANSPARENT.** Communicate agendas and constraints completely and with honesty and integrity.

**BE FLEXIBLE.** Create objectives, timelines, and budget line items that can evolve in response to what is being learned. Invest in the time it takes to build relationships.

**CREATE SAFETY.** Reduce the stakes for failure and promote the value of learning from mistakes.

**BE CURIOUS.** Let inquiry guide action. Formulate questions, gather data, test knowledge in the real world. Be willing to reject hypotheses.

**BE ACCOUNTABLE.** Hold one another to a high standard of learning skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

## The Real

**ENGAGE.** Expediency, efficiency, foundation policy, and culture will limit the authority of the program officer to engage participants as fully as possible. Money will be short. But strive to maximize engagement.

**DEMOCRATIZE.** The power imbalance between grant maker and grantee will not disappear. Strive to make the hierarchy as flat as possible, and be ever vigilant and honest about it.

**BE TRANSPARENT.** It’s never possible for a grant maker to discuss every last thing about the foundation’s internal constraints and agendas. Try to make your transparency as transparent as possible.

**BE FLEXIBLE.** It’s often hard to make grants with all the flexibility needed for the learning process. Sometimes re-granting intermediaries can help. Strive to create internal foundation mechanisms that can be responsive to positive change.

**CREATE SAFETY.** Mistakes and even failures will happen: Not all grantees will measure up to agreed-upon standards or outcomes. An organization might need to be dropped from the collaborative. Strive up front to establish and describe expectations and consequences as clearly as possible.

**BE CURIOUS.** Everyone has trouble rejecting hypotheses — program officers with their guidelines and policies, and community leaders with their years of experience and organizational norms. Both sides need to work hard on this, and to challenge one another.

**BE ACCOUNTABLE.** Grant makers will have an easier time holding others accountable than being so themselves. Strive to “learn along with” the group, and practice the preaching.

## To learn more ...

If you're interested in digging deeper, here are some resources to consult:

### Online sources

- <http://www.cpepr.net/>  
The Web site of the Center for Popular Education and Participatory Research (CPEPR) at the University of California, Berkeley.
- <http://leadershipforchange.org/research>  
The research page from the Web site of Leadership for a Changing World, a program that is employing collaborative inquiry as one of its research techniques. The research team, led by Sonia Ospina, is based at New York University.
- <http://www.new-paradigm.co.uk/Appreciative.htm>  
*A portal to many resources on appreciative inquiry, a collaborative inquiry approach based on the premise that people and organizations "change in the direction in which they inquire." A search of the Web will turn up several other sites with information about appreciative inquiry.*

### Books

- *Action and Knowledge: Breaking the Monopoly with Participatory Research* by Orlando Fals-Borda and Mohammad Anisur Rahman (Apex Press, 1991).
- *Collaborative Inquiry in Practice: Action, Reflection, and Making Meaning* by John N. Bray, Linda L. Smith, Joyce Lee, and Lyle Yorks (Sage Publications, 2002).
- *Utilization-Focused Evaluation: The New Century Text* by Michael Quinn Patton (Sage Publications, 1996).

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