

What Makes a Successful Learning Community?

Learning communities are powerful vehicles for both individuals and communities to amass a shared collection of experience around learning and results from collective action. Grantmakers are well positioned to provide the types of support that catalyze, develop and sustain learning communities. This piece offers key learning for grantmakers about the design, execution and outcomes of learning communities.

What Is a Learning Community?

A learning community is a group of practitioners who, while sharing a common concern or question, seek to deepen their understanding of a given topic by learning together as they pursue their individual work. These communities are based on the notion that peers exchange knowledge, acquire skills and change their practice in and through social relationships.¹ Learning communities are also known by other names, such as communities of practice or learning networks, and are distinct from other learning structures. They are defined by three primary characteristics:

- Participants learn *in action* while grappling with real-life questions; their participation complements their day-to-day work and responsibilities.
- Participants learn *together*, generating collective wisdom as a group; reliant primarily on peer exchange and the assumption that peers have something valuable to offer each other.
- Participants learn on *an ongoing basis and over time*, taking part for as long as they see value in participating.

For more on this topic see [Learn and Let Learn: Supporting Learning Communities for Innovation and Impact](#) (Washington, D.C.: GEO and Research Center for Leadership in Action, 2012).

¹ Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

What Key Roles Can Grantmakers Play?

Within a learning community, grantmakers can play a variety of roles, and these may change over time:

- **Catalyst** — Identifies potential learning communities and helps connect participants to one another by drawing attention to their shared interests.
- **Sponsor or Funder** — Provides the financial resources for starting, sustaining and transitioning the learning community across phases.
- **Organizer** — Assists in designing, structuring, recruiting for, governing and implementing the learning community; sometimes also serving as the sponsor and a participant.
- **Participant or Peer** — An active partner in the learning community. The potential effect of grantmaker presence and engagement in the learning community requires consideration in advance.

How Can We Build a Successful Learning Community?

In analyzing six case studies,² GEO and the [Research Center for Leadership in Action](#) identified nine key insights for grantmakers about what goes into building successful learning communities across three stages:

1. Design for success

Learning communities are an opportunity to advance participants' day-to-day work while building collective knowledge. But to do so well, the learning community must have a participant-centered design.

- **Make it relevant.** A learning community needs to stem from participants' objectives and priorities and be relevant in their day-to-day work. One way to ensure relevancy is by engaging participants in the design to ensure that the structure aligns with participant needs.

² The six learning communities studied were: Embedded Funders Learning Community, Eureka-Boston, Community Clinics Initiative's Networking for Community Health, Council of Michigan Foundations' Peer Action Learning Network, Schools of the Future's Community of Learners and The Wallace Foundation's Education Leadership Professional Learning Communities.

- **Think about the “Who.”** The learning community should be diverse and should encourage teams to participate whenever possible, and its design should allow for different participation levels and points of intersection.
- **Inspire a collective and bold vision.** In addition to getting help with something pressing in their own work, participants of successful learning communities value the sense that they are tangibly contributing to something larger.

2. Execute for success

To set the stage for success, it is important to recognize that learning is not static, learning communities are constantly evolving. This requires an approach that is flexible, responsive, open and builds trust, as well as a commitment to providing the resources required for learning to take hold.

- **Embrace fluid structure.** By closely listening to and gathering feedback from participants on an ongoing basis, organizers and facilitators can ensure that a learning community is fluid and responsive to participant needs in its purpose, structure and engagement.
- **Create a safe space for learning and risk taking.** For learning communities that can actually change practice it is essential to create a culture of innovation and experimentation and establish a high tolerance for failure. Organizers and facilitators can set up a safe space by openly acknowledging challenges and limits, encouraging constructive feedback and mining failures.
- **Provide the resources it will take.** Learning communities can require a wide range of resources. The more ambitious the scope of the learning community, the more resources will be required — these include facilitation, small projects, research and the dissemination of learning. One critical element is having a good facilitator that can create safe spaces for peers to share openly, document learning, make connections, ensure accountability and help participants apply learning in their work.

3. Extend the success

A learning community has the potential to deliver a range of possible outcomes, yet success is difficult to assess because of the community’s emergent nature. To that end, grantmakers should stay attuned to what participants are achieving, what’s working and what can be improved on throughout a learning community’s existence.

- **Be open to unanticipated outcomes.** Learning communities create success in many forms — from building knowledge to changing practice. Results may not correspond directly with the initial vision, but could include: gaining visibility for the community, increasing social capital and building new relationships, expanding peer and resource networks and forging new collaborations, experiencing transformational learning and enhancing participant resilience.
- **Put intentional learning practices in place.** A learning community will often produce reports, guides and toolkits that codify the group’s work and serve to further everyone’s learning, and sometimes participants will create parallel learning opportunities in their work to feed forward lessons.
- **Help integrate learning into day-to-day work.** Organizers and facilitators can help participants anticipate potential challenges in applying learning at their organizations, and can offer expertise and resources to help ensure changes are implemented in the participant organizations.

Conclusion

Built on a shared question or challenge, learning communities are a unique, action-oriented, collective and ongoing strategy to tap the wisdom of a group of stakeholders. To do so successfully, though, learning communities require intentionality in design and execution as well as resources and buy-in from participants. Regardless of the approach to grantmaking, learning communities can amplify effectiveness. The emergent and peer-driven elements of learning communities make them dynamic platforms for connecting learning to action.

Resources Learning Communities Need:

- Time (design, participant recruitment, checking in with individuals and facilitators and participation)
- Facilitation (identifying and hiring the right person with the right skills)
- Meeting space and travel stipends
- Food and refreshments
- Research and documentation (commissioned research and evaluation)
- Technology (webinars, online discussion and knowledge-sharing platforms)
- Dissemination (websites, communication materials, presentations)