

What is a Learning Group?

This tool will provide information about what constitutes a learning group and learning group principles.

In the summer of 2001, a committee of the Pan-Valley Institute (PVI) staff, Central Valley Partnership for Citizenship (CVP), and members of the Civic Action Network (CAN) conceived the idea to design a festival that used cultural expression and the arts to bring immigrant communities into the public square, create a forum for their voices, and encourage civic engagement. The first Tamejavi Festival demonstrated that intercultural learning can play an important role in creating relationships built on trust, collective knowledge, and public voice in order to build stronger communities and increase civic engagement.

To continue this process, the idea of forming learning groups came about with the intention of engaging immigrant and non-immigrant communities in intercultural learning. For the second Tamejavi Festival that took place in 2004, we formed different groups based on different media or artistic skills. We had a documentation learning group, theater learning group, youth learning group and a women's learning group, with each group in charge of their component of the festival. This became an effective approach because it was a collective process that decentralized the organizing of event, and it helped group members contribute their existing knowledge while continuing to increase their knowledge and skills.

For our Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program (TCOFP), this idea of forming learning groups was an effective approach because it extended the fellows' opportunities to others in their communities. The exercise helped fellows demonstrate their convening capacity and ability to engage people in a collective learning process. Fellows who did not form a learning group learned that they had to do most of the work themselves and did not create a collective process.

How Do Learning Groups Work?

One person from each group is appointed as cultural organizer, or head of the group. This person is responsible for engaging the group in activities and keeping them organized and updated on current events. Each learning group will meet on a consistent basis and engage in self-initiated activities, meaning that each group will hold these activities on their own. For example, the Dance Learning Group may want to plan an evening where the Folkloric, Hmong and Cambodian dancers come



Principles

- Creating a safe learning space takes patience and is important when convening diverse groups

Tips

- When recruiting members for learning groups, if the first thing you hear from a person is that they are too busy, it is an indication that he or she may not be an effective member

References

- The Theory Behind Our Work booklet
- Who is a Cultural Organizer? Tool
- TCOFP Tool
- Glossary

together to learn one another's dance routines, and most importantly, discuss the cultural significance of the dances.

What is the Goal of Each Learning Group?

Throughout the process of engaging in self-initiated activities and meetings, each learning group will create a Collaborative Learning Project that will reflect a merging of the different cultures within that group. For example, the Dance Learning Group may decide to create a dance routine that incorporates styles of Folkloric, Hmong and Cambodian dance while also reflecting transformations of the style through the immigrant experience.

Learning Group Principles and the Roles and Characteristics of Members

This tool provides learning group principles and information on the roles and characteristics of effective learning group members.

Learning Group Principles

- *Enrich Community Cultural Life:* Learning groups promote understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity.
- *Build and Promote Civic Engagement:* By dignifying cultural background and opening spaces for cultural expression, learning groups allow participants to develop a sense of community belonging.
- *Build Local Capacity:* Learning groups promote alliances with community stakeholders and professional resources.
- *Strengthen Leadership:* Learning groups allow for self-initiated activities and leadership to grow.
- *Encourage Diverse Collaboration:* Learning groups nurture a diverse environment that allows groups and people of different ethnic backgrounds to come together and collaborate on a unified project.
- *Thematically Focused:* Learning groups focus on centralized themes, allowing for commonality and cohesion between group members.
- *Promote Art and Culture:* Learning groups foster appreciation of the arts while also cultivating cultural awareness.
- *Uphold Values of Learning:* Learning groups maintain that the process of learning is continual; we are always teaching one another so that we are always learning from one another in return

Learning Group Members Roles and Characteristics

The learning group is crucial to the development and decision-making process of the Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program (TCOFP). We have learned that effective learning group members have the following roles and characteristics:

- Share the importance of art and culture as venues for organizing and community building
- Believe in collective learning and social change, and are committed to making their community a more just and democratic place
- Do outreach work in their community by engaging community members in a learning process, assisting their community in developing forms of arts and cultural



Principles

- Start from people's own experiences
- People work collectively (in groups), share experiences, and encourage participation

Tips

- Have a recruitment criteria
- Members should be interested and committed
- Never force anyone to be part of a learning group

References

- The Theory Behind Our Work booklet
- Glossary
- TCOFP tools



expression for the public presentation, and by building audiences for the presentation

- Attend monthly mandatory meetings
- Engage in cultural organizing and activities and follow through on work agreed upon
- Recruit volunteers for public presentations and/or recruit sponsors and donations

Learning Group Formation

This tool provides steps for the formation of a learning group.

Who Should You Invite?

Invite a solid team of allies that will engage with you in planning, assessing and reflecting about all aspects of your cultural organizing work. They should also be willing to involve other community people in cultural organizing.

Recruitment

- Recruit people who have a sense of community and are engaged and interested in organizing for social change.
- Be gender, age and educational level inclusive.
- The learning group should be as representative of the community as possible.
- Learning group members should have connections to the key community people you will need to inform and/or ask for further information, advice and help from as the program moves forward.
- Choose members who are comfortable working as a team. Avoid those who feel so “expert” or educated that they will likely tell the others what to think or do.
- When recruiting a team member, explain your role as a cultural organizer and popular educator who has taken on the responsibility to facilitate the effort and make sure things are moving forward.
- When recruiting a team member, explain why you are approaching them to engage with you in a cultural organizing process.

How Many Members Should Be in a Learning Group?

You should include five or hopefully more community members who want to volunteer their time because they share your vision, are interested in building robust communities, and are excited about doing cultural organizing work.

The number of people in a group has great influence over the group dynamics. For interactive processes and nurturing collective leadership, smaller groups are recommended. When the group is too big, there are fewer opportunities for each person to share and participants tend to lose focus.



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Success Story

When participating in the Tamejavi Cultural Organizing Fellowship Program (TCOFP), Cher Teng Yang (also known as Bee Yang) formed a multigenerational and gender diverse group of Hmong youth and adults who were involved in art and cultural activities within the Hmong community. Cher Teng Yang's group was very effective because most of its members shared a common interest and had a deep understanding of the importance of art and cultural expression. It also helped that Cher Teng Yang is a cultural holder and well-respected member of his community. Throughout the fellowship program, they met regularly and worked well together, resulting in the presentation of a beautiful and well-organized event.

Building A Shared Agenda: Relationship Building

The process of setting a shared agenda is essential for building meaningful relationships that lead a group to engage in collective action. This tool will explain what that process can look like.

Sharing an agenda is one of the key steps in groups formation as it helps the group have a clear understanding of the following: who are the members of the group; the skills and knowledge each member brings to the group; the ground rules that will guide the group; goals and motivations for engaging in an action; and projects and problems that most concern the group.

A shared agenda has five components:

1. Relationship building, allowing group members to get to know each other
2. Establishing group ground rules and guidelines
3. Identifying group assets and the skills each member brings to group
4. Establishing group goals and objectives; what would the group like to accomplish?
5. Identifying specific issues of concern to the entire group

Relationship Building

After you have recruited members of your learning group, the first time you come together is an excellent opportunity to do an exercise that allows all members to introduce themselves. This can be done using different activities like the Tree of Life, a story circle or any other activity you can think of. Here is an example.

Starting with Ourselves Activity

Objective: to provide the group the opportunity to learn about one another.

Time: 1 hour

1. Instructions, 3 minutes

Draw a picture of yourself that maps out your own perspectives and experiences using imagery that best represents your life. Provide only information you want to share at this time with a group of people you are meeting for the first time.



Principles

- The learning has to be relevant. We do not have curriculum because each group has to decide what they want to learn.
- People are more motivated/interested in organizing around issues that are relevant to them.



Tips

- It takes time for a group to get to get to know each other; this doesn't happen with one activity
- Allow informal time for people to get to know each other

References

- The Theory Behind Our Work booklet
- Glossary
- Convening Learning Groups tools
- Popular Education Section How to Make it Work I

2. Answering questions, 40 minutes

Center of the body – what is at the core of the lifework you aim to participate in?

Eyes – what are the injustices or experiences you find yourself observing or living?

Feet – what are the main events and experiences that shaped your life so far?

Backbone – what gives you strength?

Arms – share a story about the main people who have affected your life, then share a story about people whose lives you've touched.

Head – what are the main ideas or realizations that guide your life and work?

Environment – have you ever taken a stand on an important issue?

3. Sharing, 10 minutes each

Building a Shared Agenda: Group Ground Rules, Guidelines & Assets

Group Ground Rules & Guidelines

The second step for building a shared agenda is to establish ground rules and guidelines under which the group will operate.

Think about and agree upon guidelines needed in order for the group to feel comfortable working and learning together.

When working with the group, try to remember the best and worst learning experiences you have had working with a group. These could be from school, community organizing, staff training or some other formal or informal situation when you were hoping to learn something or collaborate on an action or project.

Based on these experiences, what group guidelines would you suggest in helping the group create the kind of learning setting in which everyone feels comfortable and respected?

Use those suggestions to draw up a set of guidelines that everyone can agree to. For example:

- A safe, comfortable, democratic atmosphere in which everyone can learn and contribute freely
- Everyone is expected to respect and value each other's point of view
- Establish open communication with one another
- Respect each other's culture without judgement
- Have an open mind and willingness to learn from everyone
- Everyone should communicate and listen to one another
- Open mind, open heart

These are just examples; your group has to decide on their own guidelines.

Group Assets

This section of the shared agenda allows you to explore the skills, knowledge and expertise that each participant brings to the group. Spend time thinking about the knowledge, expertise and skills you have, whether they are cultural, artistic, etc. Don't list only academic



Principles

- Necessary to value knowledge, experience of all people. Everybody has knowledge, everybody brings something to the table. Start with what people already have.

Tips

- Allow time and space for all to contribute to the group guidelines
- Keep the guidelines visible at all meetings

References

- The Theory Behind Our Work
- Glossary
- Convening Learning Groups Section

skills, but also knowledge you have gained and expertise you have acquired from your parents, elders and others. Consider the following:

- The main knowledge I hold is...
- I have expertise in...
- I am talented and skillful at...

Building a Shared Agenda: Group Intentions & Talking Points

This tool provides ideas for allowing the learning group to establish goals for being together, from each individual to the entire group.

Groups Intentions

During this session, you will:

- Explore what you hope to achieve individually as part of this group
- Explore what you hope your group will achieve together
- Agree on the group's goals
- Consider how the group's learning activities and other achievements can be evaluated

Spend time thinking about what you'd like to get out of the work you will be doing with the group. If possible, write it down or talk it through with someone else in the group first before getting into a group discussion about it. Try to think in terms of your overall intention and then list anything else you are personally hoping to gain or achieve.

Consider the following:

- My main intention in coming here is to...
- I would also like to...

Talking points

- Do we have similar reasons for being here?
- Do any members feel that their needs or expectations can't be met?
- If we had to agree on our overall aim or goal, what would it be?
- Do we have a shared view of how we intend to get there?
- Can we list any other group objectives or goals?
- How do we intend to achieve them?
- How will we know where we've achieved these aims and objectives?
- How will we evaluate what we've learned or achieved together?
- How can we make sure that we learn from any mistakes as we go along?



Principles

- People are more interested/motivated in organizing around issues that are relevant to them



Tips

- This section is very important, and it's fine if you need more than one meeting; don't rush the process
- When the group is clear from the beginning as to why they came together and what they hope to accomplish, the group will be successful

References

- The Theory Behind Our Work booklet
- Glossary
- Convening Learning Groups Section
- Popular Education Section How to Make it Work I