Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums: Case Studies in Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

The Learning Labs in Libraries and Museums program was launched in 2011 by a public-private partnership between the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in response to President Obama's Educate to Innovate initiative. Through two cycles of national competitions, libraries, museums, and other community partners at 24 sites were funded to create innovative teen spaces that followed the principles of the emerging Connected Learning Framework. Learning Labs often involve partnerships and collaborations between libraries and other community organizations as they create new programs in STEM and the arts. The experiences at these sites document a wave of organizational change in libraries associated with new roles as community education partners.

What Are Learning Labs?

Learning Labs are innovative spaces that prepare youth to meet the challenges of a complex global economy and gain the skills they need to succeed in a rapidly changing world, while allowing them to follow their passions and to inspire one another. These spaces follow the design principles of Connected Learning—learning that is interest-driven, socially relevant, and aimed at expanding educational or economic opportunity (Ito, et al., 2012). Connected Learning is realized when a young person is able to build the skills and knowledge to pursue a personal interest or passion in an environment that provides support from friends and caring adults, and can link this learning and interest to academic or career success or to civic engagement. Learning Labs create this kind of environment for teens, with access to peers and supportive and knowledgeable mentors as well as a combination of digital media and traditional tools.

Learning Labs come in many shapes and sizes, but they all share some common features:
- They are places where youth of diverse backgrounds can connect with one another and with adult mentors to explore topics of personal interest and relevance.
- They provide access to new media, with a mix of digital and traditional tools.
- They emphasize interest-driven and production-centered learning.
- They provide new contexts for youth to build skills and gain knowledge that connect them to future opportunities.
- They capitalize on a community's rich set of resources by forging collaborations among libraries, science centers, museums, community organizations, and other centers of exploration.

The Learning Labs program funded sites for the planning and design of their spaces. The expected result at the end of 18 months was an implementation plan, informed by pilot program development and testing. The first generation of documentation about Learning Labs has focused on the logistics of program development, space design, mentor training, and the experiences of participating youth (Association of Science-Technology Centers and Urban Libraries Council, 2014). This paper will focus on the institutional experiences of libraries as they work in partnership or collaboration with other community organizations to create these new spaces. These observations are drawn from the regular conference calls, site visits, and interviews that were carried out as part of the program management over the three years of the initial MacArthur/IMLS support.

The connective nature of the Learning Labs is reflected by a summary count of the number of organizations involved. Over 60 different organizations were involved in the original proposals of the 24 awarded grantees, including public libraries, library systems, art museums, science centers, public broadcasting affiliates, parks and recreation departments, media production companies, school districts, and others. Additional partners were added at many sites as the Learning Labs extended their reach into their communities. For some of these organizations, the project represented the first time that they worked together. Even for existing partners, this work stimulated new modes of integration as learning spaces were jointly conceived and designed, and as library staff moved from more traditional roles to function as facilitators and mentors.

Organizational Connections and Collaborations

Collaboration theory has described a range of organizational linkages that exist along a continuum of integration (Hogue, 1994). Levels or stages along this continuum can be identified and differentiated based on their purposes, governing structures, and processes of communication and decision-making. **Cooperation** implies information sharing and mutual support between groups that remain largely independent, and sits at the lower end of the integration spectrum. **Coordination** exists when independent entities align their activities and services to support mutually compatible goals; partnerships are a good example of this degree of integration. **Collaboration** involves integration across organizational boundaries to achieve a desired goal; some degree of independence may be sacrificed to realize this collective purpose. A higher level of integration, sometimes called coadunation, implies a unified culture and structure with some loss of autonomy of one or more of the participating organizations (Gajda, 2004).

Examples of all of these levels of integration can be found across the Learning Labs sites. Some teams and organizations have moved through multiple points on this continuum. The paragraphs below include case descriptions abstracted from the full community of sites, with a specific focus on the types of integrative relationships in which libraries have been involved. The identities of the organizations are not revealed in these cases to avoid any static descriptions that could unfairly characterize the entities involved in this dynamic and actively developing network.

Cooperation
Within both cohorts of Learning Labs, there were a number of libraries that were sole applicants, seeking to position themselves as hubs for youth learning within their communities. The very nature of this work, creating open learning spaces for teens with access to digital media and mentors, encouraged these organizations to grow outside of their traditional comfort zones. Some libraries sought other community partners to fulfill needs that posed a challenge to their organizational structure. For example, it was sometimes difficult for public libraries to find and engage mentors. Librarians on staff at some of these sites did not see themselves as educators, particularly if the programs were STEM-based, and job descriptions were often generated at a municipal level that could not accommodate new functions or roles. As a result, some of the first relationships that developed were with organizations that helped to fill these roles. With time and increased contact, many of these cooperative connections that originated with a specific and limited function grew into deeper, collaborative relationships between libraries and community partners.

Coordination
Approximately half of the Learning Labs teams came to the table with organizational partners named in the original application. Most of these were framed as partnerships between two organizations, most commonly libraries and museums (given the funding source), but also including other entities like parks and recreation departments, youth development organizations, media and technology developers. Even when the intent was to design a learning space with the input and contribution of two equal partners, the reality of a grant that allowed only a single fiscal agent sometimes set up an unequal power dynamic and created tension. In general, these partnerships tended to maintain separate and autonomous staff, administration, and programs.

Partners that spent time defining their mutual goals, and that had somewhat differentiated skills and assets to contribute, tended to experience less stress and more success. As the defining attributes of the Connected Learning framework emerged (between the first and second rounds of grant solicitations), they provided additional ways to talk about inter-organizational partnerships and alliances. Using a learner-centered perspective, it is easier to see how the respective contributions of different community partners can be critical to the creation of a space intended to support interest-driven learning in youth. When the frame of reference is set squarely on the target audience, the mutual work becomes more about how to assemble the best set of resources to achieve a common goal, rather than positioning for institutional gain. A coordinated set of community partners with different strengths stands a better chance of meeting the needs of diverse populations of today's teens – digital natives networked in new ways to their peers and interests.

Collaboration

Specific definitions of collaboration vary widely; for purposes of this discussion, collaboration refers to the collective effort of multiple organizations working together to achieve a common goal (Dierking, et al., 1997). A subset of Learning Labs teams applied as collaborations of three or more organizations. As a group, these teams spent a lot of time cultivating the relationships among the constituent organizations. They explicitly talked about organizational cultures and dynamics; they recognized that their potential for success was directly related to the strengths of the connections among their organizations, and the degree to which they all contributed in some unique way to the learning ecosystems in their communities.

These collaborations demonstrate a range of ways in which libraries interact with other community partners, rather than a single model of functional interdependence. In one city, the efforts of the team were directed at designing a Learning Lab housed in a physical space at the library; the other partners were active in piloting programs for youth while the space was under construction and will serve as connecting pathways to the Lab when it opens. In another city, the library is one of a series of networked activity hubs created to serve youth across the community, along with multiple museums and media partners. In yet another example, the team took advantage of the branches in a widely distributed library system to provide pop-up zones for youth, drawing upon their collaborators' expertise in youth development and technology to provide content.

As a set, these Learning Labs exemplify a general benefit of collaborations, namely, that collaboration is an effective means to reach ideal outcomes that would not be possible by individual organizations working alone, especially with limited resources. While each team was grant supported, the investment was relatively modest: $100,000 total over 18 months for planning and design. Multi-organizational collaborations often succeeded in leveraging this investment to the maximum extent, while minimizing risk of failure through the participation of different, resource rich partners.

Coadunation

Coadunation is a term adapted from evolutionary biology to organizational development studies to describe the combination of two or more organizations into a single entity. In this sense, it represents a variation of a partnership or collaboration as described above. The main distinction is that this union materially changes the character and locus of control, similar to a business merger. In the Learning Labs context, it is represented by sites where a new and independent physical space is created, and then co-managed (with staff and other resources) by two or more partners.

There is one clear example of this kind of merger among the Learning Labs, with others possibly emerging. Involving a library and another municipal partner, this Lab was created to inhabit a jointly designed, constructed, and managed community center separate and independent of either of the parent organizations. Staff from both organizations now share overlapping roles and joint professional development. A relationship like this has not only transformed the way these organizations collaborate, but has impacted individual professionals as well. This site, with its mashup of resources and staff, represents a unique adaptive models for transforming traditional municipal and non-profit organizations to meet new community demographics and needs.

Strategies for Successful Collaboration

Because of the collective nature of the program, with the goal of building a national network, Learning Labs have had both incentive and opportunity to continuously share their experiences with each other. Organizational partnerships and collaborations were a topic at all of the community convening's, and many of the monthly calls, held over three years. A number of successful experiences are identified within this community that can inform libraries and other organizations that seek to build strong collaborative relationships. These are discussed below as two sets of practices or strategies: intra-organizational ones that provide internal support, and inter-organizational strategies that strengthen external connections.

Conditions for successful collaboration begin with internal, institutional support. First, organizational leadership needs to be connected to the work. Even if a Learning Lab represents work largely confined to a specific department or division of a library or museum, visibility to the executive director or CEO is crucial for institutional sustainability. An equally important dimension involves lateral buy-in. Involving co-workers from different departments helps to minimize internal frictions when new services (e.g. digital media centers for youth) are added to traditional ones. Collaboration with staff in departments like operations and facilities can be especially critical when physical spaces are repurposed and access provided for different people with new functions. Finally, internal support is always strengthened if the work is explicitly connected to a mission-driven imperative. For example, Learning Labs fit well with institutional missions and visions that include a public service ethic, equity and inclusion policies, and workforce preparation or 21st century skill building (IMLS, 2009).

Strategies for inter-organizational alliances can be built upon a strong internal foundation. A theme heard often from the Learning Lab collaborations is that personal relationships were the key to successful organizational collaborations, and that cultivating these relationships takes time. Regular and frequent meetings are a necessity; they provide the time and the opportunity

to understand the different organizational cultures involved. It is important to clearly and systematically express the needs and expectations of each party, and to codify them through documents like memos of understanding or agreement. Finally, some Learning Labs found it beneficial to invest in collaborative support by hiring a joint program manager – an individual who was one step removed from any of the organizations involved, and could act as an intermediary and facilitator among multiple partners.

Conclusion

Within the theoretical continuum of organizational linkages described above, each Learning Lab can be seen as working toward a level of integration and collaboration that is appropriate for its specific community and cultural setting. While there is not a "one size fits all" solution, there is accumulating documentation that alliances are beneficial in creating these new spaces and in extending the mission of the parent organizations – especially not-for-profit and municipal organizations that exists to serve an increasingly diverse public. However, creating and maintaining these alliances is not always easy. There is real work involved in building both the internal and external relationships that provide a strong foundation for organizational collaboration. Learning Labs, and the expanding network including YOUmedia sites, will continue to provide productive collaborative models for libraries and other community organizations in coming years.

Acknowledgements

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