What Does Working "With" (not "For") Our Communities Look Like?

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What Is the Issue?

Traditionally, programs designed for community audiences are designed by the STEM institution or organization seeking to "serve" a given community. These top-down design processes are framed by the perspectives of the lead organizations, and typically reinforce dominant cultural norms in STEM and therefore marginalize certain audiences. Instead of building on the community's assets, these programs may ignore, discount, or simplify local contexts, and thus deepen divides between organizations and their communities. Co-design offers an approach that can lead to more robust and sustainable results by developing programs that are culturally responsive, respectful, and inclusive. Co-design with community is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor, but rather a continuum consisting of varying degrees of community involvement. What is most important to remember is that all parties involved have strengths, expertise, and insights that, if honored, will benefit the resulting relationship and strengthen its impact.

Things to Consider

A "community" is a place where people work, play, and interact. A community is a group of people with unique shared values, behaviors, and artifacts. It can be small or broad. It can be a neighborhood. It can be a cultural group or a group with particular historical roots, stories of past trauma, or histories of settlement, immigration, and growth. Co-designing community programs with community members can take into account these histories, priorities, and hopes to design programs that are deeply valued and co-owned by all relevant stakeholders.

Why It Matters to You

- **Science communicators** and **STEM educators** can develop more relevant and sustainable programs through co-design with their communities.

- **Funders** can encourage more sustainable efforts by supporting co-design projects with the extra time and funds needed to establish strong and trusting relationships and solid plans.

- **Evaluators** can develop comprehensive approaches by including the values, validation processes, and success indicators of the community partners.

Things to Consider (continued)

Co-design does not happen without careful relationship building and planning, which takes time. It demands a commitment to drawing upon all stakeholders' expertise. These principles can guide the process.

- Parties who initiate a partnership must take care when they open a dialogue on the need, challenge, or opportunity for working together. They may be surprised to learn that their assumptions are not shared.

- Two-way dialogue requires in-person meetings, both at the institution and in the community.

- Trust does not develop automatically. Relationships need to be built. In addition to time, this takes a willingness to see others' perspectives, questioning assumptions about the perceived benefits and challenges of a partnership, listening deeply, and being open to different approaches.

- Defining and articulating a goal or purpose for the relationship should be a shared process. The process takes place with, not for, the community. New shared understanding may alter the focus of the partnership or even reveal a mismatch. A mismatch should not be viewed as a failure, but rather as a reflection of a deep understanding of one another that can be tapped in the future.

- "Equitable" does not mean "equal." Partners can draw on strengths and resources in many ways, and those ways are not the same. This difference is one reason the partnership exists. Care should be taken to support all partners in recognizing and collaboratively deciding how to balance responsibility, respect, acknowledgement, and funding among partners.

- Advocates, allies, and bridge-builders are required in the co-design process. These individuals are valued and trusted community members who can serve as critical intermediaries between partners.

Reflection Questions

+ To what degree do you currently co-design with community groups?

+ How do you see co-design work as valuable or challenging? What are or might be the pros and cons?

+ What strategies does your organization have in place to build trusting relationships with partners in community settings?

Recommended Actions You Can Take

- Identify and work with allies and brokers to build relationships and new understandings.

- Hold meetings at all partner settings.

- Formally articulate each partner's values and goals to clarify expectations.

- Set up leadership and governance models (e.g., MOUs).

- Commit people, resources, and time towards a long-term co-design process.

- Learn the cultural protocols of the communities you wish to partner with.

Tools You Can Use

- The Research-Practice Partnership toolkit from the Research + Practice Collaboratory has tools for surfacing values and solidifying partnerships.

- The book, Building Communities from the Inside Out offers examples and instructions for asset-based approaches to partnerships.

- Cosmic Serpent: Collaboration with Integrity, from the Indigenous Education Institute, addresses deep listening, examination of biases, and careful reflection.

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