

TIPS FOR FOSTERING PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN INFORMAL LEARNING

A Practice Brief



WHY THIS BRIEF?

This brief is for practitioners and researchers in informal learning who want to collaborate in participatory research. While we have learned from similar work (much of which is in formal education or large-scale projects), what we found didn't always apply to us or our contexts. For instance, content (curriculum) and assessment look different in schools versus on a museum floor. While informal educators don't have the pressure of high-stakes testing and accountability, they are often part-time workers and may not have as much theoretical training or professional development as formal educators. While deeply passionate and experienced, museum practitioners don't have a huge body of research in their own languages. While theoretically and methodologically grounded, researchers may not have much practical experience with the contexts of informal learning.

This practice brief thus offers some tips focused on relationships and on shared equity and social justice commitments. These suggestions for collaborating provide touchstones we have returned to as we worked together in a museum-based research-practice collaboration in informal science learning.

Naming is important in research and practice in different ways. For instance, the joint work described here is similar to Research-Practice Partnerships (RPP), long-term collaborations focused on systemic inquiry into problems of practice. However, RPPs have very specific definitions in research literature that don't always fit with our work in informal learning contexts. We have chosen to decide when naming matters for our work and when it does not. Building relationships and working together are more important than following others' definitions.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS: BEFORE A PROJECT OFFICIALLY BEGINS

Define participatory AND research AND practice. Develop shared understandings and language BEFORE beginning a specific project together. Get support from all partners or stakeholders.

- This is particularly important as research has historically been used against communities, caused harm, ignored people, or kept learning from them. Historical mistrust is based in actual harm. Often, there are inherent and already established power imbalances because of this history and different social positionings and credentials. Without specifically acknowledging these realities, we risk replicating oppressive practices and are unable to work toward equitable partnership.
- If existing definitions don't work, make up your own! Acknowledge contexts and histories, but don't let these stop you from doing the work.
- Be specific about the values, commitments, and approaches that underlie what you do. Name these, even if you are doing so for the first time. You might be working from different paradigms and not even know it. For instance, practitioners and researchers on our project had different relationships to written, linear descriptions and models, with some people preferring information in this commonly-used format and others disliking the limitations of this form of presentation. We couldn't develop a model together without understanding this.
- Know that sometimes different parts of a team will speak different languages and have different practices, such as around sharing information (what researchers know as data privacy). Translate for each other. For instance, researchers on our project utilized two versions of research questions: one in research language and one in practice language.
- The uncertainties of funding (particularly grant funding, with its long timelines and very particular constraints), multiple demands on people's time and very different work schedules, and the contingent nature of museum workers seem to be heightened in these new forms of working together.

“Too few educators and researchers are prepared for the work of partnerships—they need opportunities to cultivate the skills and dispositions required to build and maintain them” (Penuel & Gallagher, 2017, p. 146).

AT THE BEGINNING AND FOR ALWAYS

Set up clear processes and roles for communication and accountability. Acknowledge different work styles and cultures, including aspects of power. This setting up will take time, but it is time well spent. Revisit these agreed-upon processes and roles, whether you think changes are needed or not. In other words, build in times and spaces for reflection.

- Specify who will be responsible, particularly for logistics and holding information. Know that whoever takes this on will have less time for their other work.
- Be clear about leadership structures and personnel, particularly in terms of accountability and supervision. Strong and consistent communication from leadership and supervisors is crucial.
- Know that the composition of project leadership and teams may need to change based on what the project and participants need. Consider also how roles might reinforce or challenge existing systems, hierarchies, or work cultures.
- Practice mutual respect and acknowledgment of people's different roles, responsibilities, knowledges, and expectations.
- Explicitly name different participants' self-interests in the work and where these differ and overlap. This is okay! Knowing each other's goals and needs means being able to support each other.
- Consider whether team members bring expertises outside of their current job roles and how those might contribute to the project.
- Practitioners need to share programmatic changes that will affect the project. Researchers need to share their processes and timelines. Communicate with each other about how changes or suggestions impact your joint work.
- Always make "the why" clear in any ask or task.
- Be flexible. Be creative.

TOOL FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Pair up and interview someone from a different role on the project. Ask how they do their work and what constrains their work. Revisit these conversations throughout the project to see what you've learned about each other's responsibilities.

“As part of participatory research, we’re not just going to make a decision and let you know. We want to do it together. And you have to take up some things too, because it is part of the work that we’re doing together.”

~ Project Participant

Think carefully about logistics. The technical and logistical aspects may be harder than you think. Prioritize hospitality.

- People have different work cultures, styles, and schedules. Even finding meeting times can be a challenge. Provide clarity on cultural differences, such as how meetings are run or how people organize their time.
- Snacks help.

Be prepared to address emotions. Strong ones!

- Many of us do this work because we care deeply and are passionately committed.
- And it’s hard work that makes challenging and perhaps new demands on us. On our project, the time spent building relationships, sharing food, and having fun (those silly icebreakers!) helped when frustration and confusion surfaced repeatedly.

“As much as you think you got the right people at the table or people get the work or people aren’t going to take things personally, egos get in the damn way!”

~ Project Participant

ONGOING

Know that there will be constant motion and layers. This may require letting go of what you thought the project would be.

- Be intentional about saying, “We don’t know exactly what our end creation will look like, but here is how we will go about it.” Process is crucial.
- Continually re-clarify how the project intersects with other programmatic priorities. What is clear to leadership or core team members is likely opaque to others. Additionally, the project is only one part of people’s overall work, so aligning efforts can be key to successful participation.
- Think about how other changes and pressures affect the work of team members and the project. In our project, the nature of the youth development field posed special challenges: the research project felt like an add-on for already over-worked (and underpaid) staff. Further, a commitment to being emergent in practice led to the question of “how do you do a project when nothing will ever stay still?” On the other hand, the project provided opportunities, specifically to slow down the pace of work, which meant thinking about working “for next year rather than next week.”
- Bringing new people into the project is challenging; they must both learn their new job as well as this different way of working together.
- Be open to something unexpected being a spark or catalyst.

Celebrate successes! With food, if you can.

- Success often looks like different people taking accountability for the work and collaborating across silos.
- Recognize the array of benefits and opportunities, such as reciprocal learning, professional reflection, capacity-building, and personal growth.
 - Working with quickly turned-around research data can give practitioners a different way of viewing their practices. For instance, our whole team coded researcher observations of programming. This both brought practitioners into contact with each other’s work in new ways and provided an opportunity for professional growth.
 - The project can provide a built-in time and space to think big-picture, rather than mostly about the day-to-day (such as “who has the van?”)
 - The project can build shared narratives and critically interrogate our own narratives, particularly around justice work. This includes developing shared language to talk with multiple audiences.

Addressing Frustration and Confusion

- Participants may feel disrespected or not recognized for the work they are doing. Build in public ways of recognizing all contributions and telling the stories of how all team members are necessary.
- Acknowledge that our positionalities affect how we move through the world and what we experience. We might even be in the same room and having totally different experiences. Point this out. As a researcher on our project said, “I have to listen to that, because they’re experiencing that.”
- Because the project is often being built as it goes, people may lack confidence as they try out new things or get frustrated by frequent changes. Be specific about how each piece builds on what was done before.
- When people pushed back, we asked what the problem was and then rearticulated what we were doing in a new way or made changes until it made sense. This integrates theory, research, and practice.

OTHER RESOURCES

- Sue Allen & Josh P. Gutwil. (2016). Exploring models of research-practice partnership within a single institution: Two kinds of jointly negotiated research. In D. M. Sobel & J. L. Jipson (Eds.), *Cognitive development in museum settings* (pp. 190-208). Routledge.
- William R. Penuel & Daniel J. Gallagher. (2017). *Creating research-practice partnerships in education*. Harvard Education Press.
- Jean J. Ryoo, Michelle Choi, & Emily McLeod. (2015). Building equity in research-practice partnerships. Research + Practice Collaboratory. <http://researchandpractice.org/resource/building-equity/>

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What do practitioners need from researchers to do their jobs? What do researchers need from practitioners to do their jobs?
- Who is responsible for sharing what information? How do we balance amount with necessity—not overloading, but not underwhelming?
- Ask about your current work: “Is this still true? Does it align with the work that we are trying to do? Does it recognize others’ contributions? Does it exclude or work against coalition building?”
- How will we work to address tensions between process and product?



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