

## **Conditions and Guiding Principles: How to produce beneficial CoLAB Planning Series® Workshop results**

**March 18, 2014**

This article is the second in a series describing the workshops and facilitative methods known as CoLABs which are components of the CoLAB Planning Series®. When complete, this group of articles will form the basis of a published guide for those interested in presenting or facilitating similar workshops in libraries, academic institutions, nonprofit or government sponsored organizations.

To gain a better understanding of how and why CoLABs work so well to connect individuals, this article outlines a series of conditions and guiding principles that consistently produce successful workshop results, including: 1) voluntary participation; 2) locally-based focus; 3) face-to-face information exchange; 4) a mixture of widely diverse disciplines; 5) multiple conversations within a short period of time; 6) participant profile questions that focus on their assets, not needs or problems; and 7) an understanding that this information discovery process may or may not have immediate and/or long-term applicability.

Before jumping into these, let's review the concept of asset-based community development described in the first article. This type of work focuses on existing skills, relationships, and knowledge as a means of moving an organization or project forward. Communities and individuals can make meaningful and quick improvements simply by identifying and leveraging existing skills while engaging the contributions of those who have a common interest or passion. Asset-based planning discovers and connects resources; widens and deepens volunteer contributions and commitment; engages and motivates participants based on common interests; and increases capacity to accomplish project goals. In contrast,

methods of community development that use needs-based identification, analysis, planning and problem solving, rely on the acquisition of funds as an essential prerequisite. This approach takes longer to measure progress, doesn't necessarily broaden participation, and often fosters a sense of pessimism--because plans are difficult to execute and require external resources. Need-based planning frequently leads to the questioning of project feasibility.

A CoLAB workshop artificially creates a vibrant café environment for asset-based community development. It's reminiscent of spending an afternoon with other coffee drinkers in a British cafe during the Age of Enlightenment, or a Parisian bar during the Age of Impressionism (i.e. Woody Allen's film, *Midnight in Paris*). Steve Johnson, a creativity researcher, posits that the stimulant coffee sold in European 17<sup>th</sup> century coffeehouses, created a culture, a hub, an information network of the time, where café goers met strangers and colleagues from multiple disciplines and with diverse knowledge who shared ideas and leveraged extant assets that were crucial to fueling innovation. For instance, Johnson claims that the concept of the "insurance business was invented in Lloyd's Coffee House, and later became Lloyd's of London." Imagine if all meetings were CoLABs: safe and engaging places where a topic could be discussed by everyone in the session while at the same time, learning about the hidden assets "owned" by others in the room. People might stop dreading traditional one-person-speaks-at-a-time meetings.

#### Conditions and Guiding Principles Related to CoLAB Methodology

1) All participants must self-select to attend. This is the underlying condition on which all others are dependent. Adopting this principle for presenting CoLABs ensures the experience for all will be an enjoyable one. There have been a few occurrences during past CoLABs where

one person in attendance clearly did not self-select to attend and was not happy about participating. Such a situation can unfold in this way: an executive director (ED) of an organization registers to attend a CoLAB but has a last minute conflict. She is very disappointed and doesn't want to cancel the registration so delegates a staff member to "represent" the ED and the organization at the session. The ED forgets to provide context to the delegate about the potential benefits that might be gained from attending a CoLAB session for the organization's future collaborative efforts. The delegate attends the session, but has no idea why the ED didn't cancel the registration, and coincidentally, has no interest in connecting with "strangers." It has been observed that mandated participation by only one participant in a workshop can taint the experience for each participant with whom the "representative" meets. Because participants meet individually with 12 to 49 "strangers"--all within the space of two to four hours--an unoriented, unprepared or disinterested participant may neither enjoy nor learn from the experience. This mirrors the experience of students in a classroom whose teacher has planned a CoLAB for the purpose of building successful project teams for class assignments. Because no one can opt out of the CoLAB, some of the students feel "forced" to participate. In these situations a majority of students will engage whole-heartedly in the process and in turn, will reap many rewards from those they meet with. But, there will be a few who resent being forced to speak one-on-one to others in the class. It's an unavoidable risk when CoLABs are facilitated within an existing class of students unless an opt-out alternative is offered.

2) CoLAB workshops are most effective when locally-based with the option of including a singular theme or community issue. Having conversations with people who all work or reside within a one-hour commute radius allows for the possibility of more frequent contact, more in-

depth knowledge of community assets, and a higher potential for creatively leveraging these assets. By adding a theme or topic such as literacy or sustainability, the assets and information shared during the session becomes more focused, which in turn allows resources, expertise and knowledge to be rapidly explored. In contrast, when a CoLAB is presented at a conference attracting participants from different parts of the country or from multiple countries, it is effective in creating a sense of community within a conference; however, the lack of proximity dilutes the potential for generating community building benefits experienced when all participants reside and work in the same area.

3) CoLAB workshops use face-to-face communication to initiate relationships in real-time, without the assistance of technology. Developing and practicing interpersonal communication skills, especially for “,” has become imperative. Dr. Gary Small, a UCLA neuroscientist, studies the evolutionary changes being detected in the next tech savvy generation as they “neglect human contact skills and lose the ability to read emotional expressions and body language.” He continues, “The people in the next generation who are really going to have the edge are the ones who master the technological skills and also face-to-face skills. They will know when the best response to an email or instant message is to talk rather than sit and continue to email.”

4) Participation by those engaged in diverse disciplines of study provides for a more enriching CoLAB experience. Generally, people interact with those they know or those in similar fields or pursuits. This supposition has been confirmed by CoLABs participants who acknowledged that the average number of “strangers” they speak to about their projects or interests during a given month is three or less. This response is pervasive among all age groups

and genders. Exceptions are notable: international students studying in the US have many more conversations with strangers throughout their student careers. Students in journalism and communication fields also have many more conversations with strangers, as it is their preference to talk to people, in general.

Creativity experts like Todd Siler describe the most exciting examples of innovation and collaborative efforts as being those that combine two or more drastically different entities: people, places or things. For instance, what connection can be created between a faculty member in a nursing college and a Japanese garden? The answer: Develop a facilitated healing program that reduces stress, anxiety and depression in seniors who regularly visit this type of garden and use guided meditation techniques. By combining existing community assets in innovative ways, a new partnership such as this one that realizes a hidden potential, instantly inspires sponsor support. When exploring the creative process or opportunities for combining forces it's often the connections between widely divergent topics, fields or skills that create the most exciting collaborations.

There also are benefits to sharing information about a program, project, or study that is foreign ground to others during the workshop. Several participants have noted in their feedback about the benefits of repeated practice explaining their interest or area of study.

In post-workshop surveys resulting from two CoLABs at the University of Florida on Sex and Gender Differences in Health, 76% strongly agreed or agreed that as a result of the CoLAB session: "I am more comfortable with people in other disciplines." CoLAB organizers have learned that after each successive speed-meeting conversation many participants consciously work toward honing their message and language. This new ability can have benefits beyond a

CoLAB in reducing a participant's isolation from others who don't share a common vocabulary or research experience. In another instance, the input from other students in non-related fields caused a participant to completely alter her research thesis topic in Criminology.

5) So much more can be learned and leveraged when diverse viewpoints are shared through multiple conversations. Consider the case of a typical meeting, workshop or presentation: usually one person speaks--someone with authority, or a unique expertise or knowledge--who presents information deemed "important" while everyone else in the room is silent. Unfortunately, this transfer of information from one person to a group of 20 to 50 people is highly inefficient and does little to build a sense of community. It prohibits two-way conversation with the speaker and also with all the others attending who likely have valuable information to share. Think back to the last time you attended a group presentation. Did you sit next to someone you knew? Did you have a meaningful conversation with anyone? These moments can often feel awkward and unsettling. As the presentation progresses, one speaker at a time while the entire group listens quietly, shows respect, and occasionally asks a question, you may have sensed that time could have been better spent learning about the people sitting around you. Have you considered that these strangers or those you feel you "know" have important information, interests, skills, or resources—at any given point in time--you might want to learn about?

6) CoLABs use the facilitative methods and philosophy of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to craft questions that prompt participants to share information about their assets. AI questions focus on valuing and recognizing the best in people. According to Charles F. Martinetz, a Cultural Change Consultant with the Federal Aviation Administration, AI processes say, "Let's

look at the best that there is. Let's define and study that, and then use the data to build on what is working." Likewise, CoLAB profile questions appearing on participants' signs always ask for information about their assets: passions, interests, resources, networks, skills. Or questions can ask what participants have direct access to such as projects, research, experts, programs, facilities, equipment, funding, volunteers, etc. Profile questions never request information related to individual beliefs or needs as these would conflict with the principles of asset-based community development, might create barriers between participants, and detract from the positive enthusiasm often generated during a CoLAB.

7) Having the capacity to appreciate ambiguity is important to those working on projects or in organizations that are changing and evolving. To this end, CoLAB sessions are structured to maximize exposure to highly diverse resources -- some but not all of which may be of immediate or future benefit to participants. This makes for a very ambiguous workshop objective. To gain the most benefits when participants begin reading others' profiles and having conversations with strangers, they must refrain from making snap value judgments about what they read, learn or experience. CoLABs are intended to expose resources and potential opportunities; the creation of appropriate connections may occur in an a-ha moment at the workshop or be triggered during reflection.

Bess de Farber is the CoLAB Planning Series® creator, a Certified Professional Facilitator through the International Association of Facilitators, and the Grants Manager for the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida.

## References

Johnson, S. (2009, February 9). *Did Coffee Fuel the Age of Enlightenment?* Retrieved from <http://www.goodreads.com/videos/2789-did-coffee-fuel-the-age-of-enlightenment---steven-johnson>

Goldsmith, B. (2008, October 27) Is surfing the Internet altering your brain? Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/10/27/us-technology-ibrain-tech-net-idUSTRE49Q2YW20081027>

Siler, T. (1997, November) *Think Like A Genius*. New York, NY: Bantam Books

Miller, M.D. (2013) *Collaborating with Strangers Workshop for Sex and Gender Differences in Health*. Retrieved from <http://www.uflib.ufl.edu/communications/CoLAB/evaluations/apr30sep10.pdf>

Cunningham, G. & Mathie, A. (2002 February) *Asset Based Community Development – An Overview*. Retrieved from <http://www.synergos.org/knowledge/02/abcdoverview.htm>

Martinetz, Charles R. (2002, September). *Appreciative Inquiry as an Organizational Development Tool*. Retrieved from <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/uploads/AI%20as%20OD%20Tool-Martinetz.pdf>