

The Learning Community and Evaluation Tango

What is a learning community?

Learning communities are a tool used by grant makers to support ongoing learning and sharing among grantees. Learning communities at The Oregon Community Foundation encourage active and continuous learning among grantees and aim to further the knowledge base for the fields at large.

"A learning community is a group of practitioners who, while sharing a common concern or question, seek to deepen their understanding of a given topic by learning together as they pursue their individual work.... Learning communities are distinct from other learning structures [such as trainings, fellowships, retreats, and summits/conferences], and while learning communities themselves can take many forms, they are defined by three primary characteristics:

- Participants learn in action while grappling with real-life questions
- Participants learn together, generating collective wisdom
- Participants learn on an ongoing basis and over time."

- *Learn and Let Learn*, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations

What do learning communities have to do with evaluation?

Learning communities provide opportunities to collect, discuss, and make meaning of evaluation data as well as serve as vehicles for dissemination of results.

Learning communities, as key features of grant making programs, are worthy subjects of evaluation themselves.

The Oregon Community Foundation is using learning communities to:

Ensure useful and culturally responsive evaluations: The evaluation team using the learning community to vet evaluation plans, collect data, make meaning of results, and disseminate study findings

Build evaluation capacity: Through learning community events, the evaluation team provides training and technical assistance to grantees about logic modeling, evaluation planning, data collection, and use of data.

The Oregon Community Foundation is using evaluation to:

Evaluate the success of learning communities: Initiative learning communities are the subject of evaluation, and OCF has developed a rubric to measure the success of learning communities.