Literacy Action Project

This project from Literacy Works aims to bring thought-provoking ideas that advance social justice and anti-racist principles from discussion to action. Read the article, dive into the resources, and bring the discussion questions with concrete suggestions back to your organization to make movement on these issues.

Fall 2021

Collaboration Over Competition: Working Together for Change

In the United States, the concept of competition is considered sacred. We obsess over sports games, rally for our favorite politicians, and try to have the scariest house on the block for Halloween. We're taught from the very beginning that competition is healthy and boosts creativity and innovation. We propose that by reimagining collaboration as a core value, the nonprofit field can work toward a more inclusive and energized future.

In this paper, we explore how capitalistic influences around competition impact progress and equity in the nonprofit sector, including adult education.

How Competition Shows Up

Adult education, like many nonprofit sectors, is typically funded by a combination of government grants and private foundations. Organizations often must complete long, complicated, time-consuming, annual grant applications that drain resources and morale. Simultaneously, staff often worry that this might be the year their program no longer fits the funder requirements or the program hasn't been "effective" enough by a funder's standards, regardless of the need or the importance of the work being done.

Flashier pitch-based competitions and funding have also become more popular. An extreme example, the CBS show, The Activist, was panned broadly for the premise of pitting 6 activists against each other for a giant prize.

The current systems tacitly prioritize funders over mission while also contributing to a "race to the bottom". Organizations play into this by showing how "cheap" their organization is to run, usually leading to overstretched staff. Sometimes organizations resort to shifting their focus to something a funder might prefer instead of community needs.

Why It Works This Way

The short and sweet answer is capitalism and white supremacy (isn't it always).

When organizations compete against each other for funding, the funders often seek out the best deal.

Funders can put constraints on their grants like forbidding funds to be used for "overhead costs" (i.e. administration, rent, staplers), or require unrealistic goals that encourage nonprofits to cut corners or be overly selective of the participants they serve to ensure they will "successfully" meet the programmatic goals established by the funder.

Examples of principles of white supremacy deeply ingrained in the funding process:

Emphasis on the Written Word
With a great emphasis on overly complicated, repetitive grant applications, redundant and time-consuming grant reports, the field of applicants becomes skewed towards white, middle and upper class-led organizations.

Perfectionism
Instead of real dialogue, many funders create a culture that pits programs against each other. To counter this, Literacy Works began a volunteer coordinator support group that is a funder-free space where program staff can talk openly about challenges without fear of looking "weak" in front of a funder.

Urgency
Trying to meet some funders' unrealistic expectations, processes, and timetables can put excessive and disproportionate burdens on less resourced organizations, which may be more likely to be BIPOC-led. This creates cycles where less-resourced organizations then stay less resourced.

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Radical Resistance to Competition

All of this can seem very scary and unjust - that's because it is. Resistance to competition means a rejection of white supremacist and capitalist assumptions. It requires that we readjust our thinking to recognize how much more we can do together than separately while also realizing that there is plenty of work to go around. And a lot of folx in the nonprofit sector are working hard to change these norms.

We must reject the scarcity mindset and instead look for opportunities for partnership and collaboration. When we actively try to put ourselves out of a job, we can better resist competition and embrace collaboration. Working in a just and equitable way is an act of resistance against these norms.

Regularly ground yourself with the mission of your organization and remember why you're doing what you're doing. Listen to your community and follow their lead. Reestablish a focus on work rather than money. Find the funding to do the work — don't do the work for the funders.

6 Ideas To Move the Conversation to Action

1

shift your mindset

Community Centric Fundraising is a movement developed around making fundraising practices more equitable, offering a series of principles around this philosophy. Principle 2 explores this idea of the sum being greater than the parts:

Individual missions are not as important as the collective community. We have all been trained to prioritize our organization's mission first...but our missions are interrelated, and the community is best served if we see ourselves as part of a larger ecosystem working collectively to build a just society...

Many nonprofit organizations are asking themselves how they can fund their work in ways that better align to their values. At a recent online conference, "Party at the End of the Patriarchy" the keynote speaker, Mazarine Treyz asked attendees to brainstorm strategies for fundraising in a post-capitalist future. People are having these conversations right now – and you can join in and start more conversations at your organization.

In the Adult Education sector, programs must constantly bring in new participants and show marked improvements, and participant numbers and level gains can sometimes feel like all that funders care about. For this reason, program managers might be hesitant to refer a participant to another organization, even if the participant might be better served there. When we prioritize funder needs over participant needs, we are contributing to the status quo, ensuring unjust systems stay in place.

Check out the Design Justice Network's Principles to get inspired about ways to center your work on the needs of the community.

2

center community members

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3

work together

In the last few years, projects like 2020 Census awareness and COVID-19 vaccine education have required massive amounts of effort to ensure the messages reach the right people - far too much work for just one organization. We saw many groups come together around these issues showing that working together does far more good than working alone.

Find an organization whose mission speaks to yours. Maybe you support the same population or work in the same area of the city. Work together to solve a community issue and resist the scarcity myth.

Investigate an important community issue and do a little research to see if any other groups are working on it already. Instead of starting your own project, see if you can add your efforts to one in progress.

5

Learn more about the limited payout requirements of foundations that contribute to the scarcity mindset in the field or write a review of a grant foundation fostering a collaborative environment (or one that's not!)

challenge the status quo

4

share knowledge

Funders often tell programs to work together, but when we hold grant writing workshops, we hear folx lament the "every organization for itself" attitude that becomes the reality when money is at stake.

When a mostly white, mostly middle and upper class nonprofit field gatekeeps knowledge, many organizations led by BIPOC and other marginalized groups might be left out and the status quo upheld - a huge detriment to the field!

Consider sharing some "insider" information with a new group in your community or use your privileged position to mentor those new to the field or create a community of practice to learn from each other.

6

break down the silos

Collaboration **within** our own organizations is important, too! We have so many discussions with organizations in our work about the challenges around internal communication at nonprofits.

Consider organization-wide or cross-department initiatives and projects. Share ideas and knowledge with your colleagues through Communities of Practice. Or start affinity groups to foster creativity and leadership while also emphasizing the value of lived experiences.

To Wrap Up...

Competition is rampant in the US and is perpetuated by unjust funding practices and an ingrained myth of scarcity. Collaboration, on the other hand, is sharing the load, working together, and contributing to the greater good. When we think about our mission statements and why we got into this work in the first place, we'll notice that we didn't choose this path to compete, worry, and hoard our resources and knowledge.

We can do so much more together than we can alone.

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RESOURCES

Why Collaboration Takes Us Further Than Competition
A short article about the how collaboration encourages sustainability among workers

Why I Believe in Collaboration over Competition
A blog entry about the value of working together over working along and competing for the same work

The Nonprofit Hunger Games, and What We Must Do to End Them
A blog post from our favorite, Nonprofit AF, talking about the need to share fundraising strategies and other "insider" knowledge to sustain the field.

5 Tips for Nonprofit Collaborations
Strategies for building collaboration in your work and with others you work with

Building Communities of Practice to Cultivate Organizational Knowledge
Ideas for setting up a Community of Practice among your colleagues to build collaboration in-house

How to Create a Successful Collaboration Between Nonprofit Organizations
Tips for developing collaborative relationships with organizations you might have competed with before

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Think about the "scarcity" of funding for our work. Discuss where the "scarcity" idea came from and how it infiltrates how we think about funding.

- Discuss projects you did alone and as a group. Compare outcomes from both and consider which way would is more effective for your work.

- Imagine a staff member at another organization asks you for advice about fundraising. What is your first reaction to this question? Why do you think that is?

- Review your organization's policies (formal or informal) about "sharing participants". Consider the motivation behind such policies. Are they doing the most for the participant or for your organization? What does that mean?

- How much do you consider participant input when creating new programming or offerings? Why do you think that is?

- Can you think of another group that is doing similar work to yours? If so, have you considered collaborating? Why or why not? What might happen if you did?

ACTION STEPS
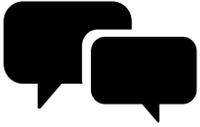
Have a discussion centered on these themes with your staff and identify where improvement is needed. You can use the **Discussion Questions** above to get started.

Check out the **resources** included above about collaboration in nonprofit work and find out whether or not your organization is open to more collaboration (if not, find out why!)

Investigate who is funding your program and learn about how much and to whom they are giving funds. Check out ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer to learn about their financials. Consider writing a review of a funder for doing a good job or call them in if they need improvement
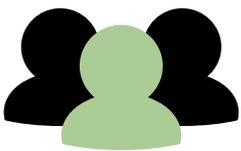
Start a Community of Practice in your organization to promote collaboration within your group. Watch this video to learn more about how to go about starting a Community of Practice and learn how to keep it sustainable and effective.

Questions?

Keighty Ward
Community Literacy Program Director
keighty@litworks.org

Melanie Sampson
Clear Language Lab Program Director
melanie@litworks.org