

Shared Inquiry: A Means to Building Sustainable Partnerships between Organizations
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Boise State Writing Project and Discovery Center Idaho share lessons learned from their Intersections partnership development. Embedded, readers will find a set of questions they may find useful in beginning new partnerships.

Four of us sat at a table in Denver, Colorado, unsure how to continue. A team of Boiseans from our local Writing Project site and science museum, we were tasked with working together as part of the National Science Foundation's *Intersections* grant, an investigation into the overlap between science and literacy. We had just embarked on this partnership--or so we thought--at this planning meeting and were already experiencing nuclear fallout. Our exciting idea for a joint venture was in shambles.

Earlier that day, we enthusiastically jumped into planning a specific event: GameFort. The idea was solid; we knew where and when it would take place and how it would enhance Boise, Idaho's wildly popular TreeFort festival. We even mocked up a logo. Then with a stroke of luck, which at the time felt demoralizing, our grant team's thinking partner asked us some tough questions and everything fell apart. We had become so engaged in co-planning a specific project that we didn't recognize it was holding us back from the real work of the grant: building a sustainable partnership. What now?

We had put the cart before the horse. Starting a partnership by focusing on a specific project is attractive and "easy" because it engages you in something concrete and feels productive. However, this approach is limiting and misses the real purposes for collaborating. Eventually, questions arise (or go completely unnoticed) about sustainability, long-term goals, and how your organizations might develop a true mutually-beneficial partnership and grow together through shared inquiries.

As we sat around the conference table trying to regroup, we realized that we had neglected to build a foundation for our working relationship. It was game over for GameFort, and we ventured into the abstract by asking ourselves some essential questions. Who are we as organizations? What are our values? Who do we serve? What do we want to learn together? We grabbed markers and chart paper and started mapping this conversation. In this moment we



began making the crucial shift from the tangibles of project planning to the more intangible and meaningful: a sustainable partnership.

Back in Boise we continued by learning more about one another's contexts, which influences so much of what anyone does and how they do it. Typically we planned at the science museum, the Discovery Center of Idaho (DCI), where we staged our programs for teens and teachers. By spending time where the event took place, we could see for ourselves how an activity would play out and keep abreast of DCI's ongoing remodeling project. If there was a centrally located school or classroom available, we would have also planned there to better consider teacher and student experiences in formal learning spaces.

Another interesting factor that contributed to the developing partnership was a change in personnel for DCI and the Boise State Writing Project (BSWP). Between the first and second year of our partnership, both organizations incorporated new members into the grant team. We inquired about ourselves and the intersections between our organizations by revisiting some of the questions below. This served the immediate purpose of orienting the new team members, and also helped everyone reach deeper shared understandings about the nature of our partnership.

- What is your organization's mission? If your organization already has a mission statement, what would it be in your own words?
- What are your organization's most important values?
- What are your organization's goals? What actions help you meet those goals?
- Who does your organization serve?
- Who does your organization want to serve or know more about?
- What is a story of your organization's work that your partner needs to know?
- How could this partnership support your organization's goals?
- What expertise or resources do you bring to the partnership?
- What do you think your partner expects to receive or gain?
- What would happen if you were not partnered together?

Sustainable partnerships work when organizations are interdependent and pursue common interests. In year one of our Intersections grant work, we conducted a week-long inquiry into the needs of teens and science teachers--two groups we want to better understand and serve. Our teen participants generated innovative ideas that resulted in exhibit changes at DCI. Our teachers primarily served the teens. Consequently we yearned to learn more about their needs. Pursuing those shared questions about groups that we want to serve helped both organizations learn things they would not have learned in isolation.

In the second year we made a conscious decision to shift the focus of our inquiry and designed a year-long fellowship program specifically for teachers. This inquiry not only served our teacher fellows, but inspired the staff at DCI to redesign their approach to field trips and to working with teachers in general. Teacher Consultants with BSWP drew from the resources created during the second year of the Intersections partnership to inform professional development with teacher leadership initiatives the following summer. These kinds of shifts in direction are only possible when there is a clear understanding and empathy between organizations because we were keenly aware of one another's strengths and interests.

Beyond the formal work of the Intersections grant, BSWP and DCI have collaborated on other professional development projects, continue to meet and learn in each other's spaces, recently presented at a statewide conference, and share announcements and promote initiatives for each other. We attend each other's events and regularly meet to plan for the future. We wonder about how best to meet the ongoing professional development needs of science teachers and finding new ways to explore the intersections of formal and informal learning spaces. Our organizations continue to pursue important questions collaboratively because we are invested in our partnership and in growing together.

