Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning, and Adaptation – With 2024 Prologue

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Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning, and Adaptation – With 2024 Prologue

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Note: *At the time of publication in 2016, Emergent Learning was led by its creators, the partners of Fourth Quadrant Partners, LLC. It has been replaced by the nonprofit Emergent Learning Community Project.*

Prologue
by Marilyn J. Darling, M.A.

Many people downloaded our 2016 article for the Emergent Learning "tools" we described in the second half. As I mentioned in our Author Roundtable discussions, I think the article's popularity, to a great degree, came from word of mouth among people who were using Emergent Learning — and noticing different results.

But it is the first part of the article that has held the most power for us over the last eight years.

In 2016, we talked about Emergent Learning as a "framework." But it is actually not a framework. Frameworks offer a useful structure for thinking about a particular situation or problem. Emergent Learning is more a way of thinking and being in any situation — and the form it takes can look different from situation to situation. Emergent Learning is about understanding the difference between an adaptive strategy and an emergent one — what it takes to create a whole that is greater and more sustainable than the sum of its parts. It is about shifting from seeing ourselves as chess players — essentially seeing ourselves as outside of the system we want to influence, to seeing ourselves as part of the system — more like a member of a soccer team. That shift fundamentally affects how we understand what it takes to influence a system.

As for the second part, we still stand by and use what we described. But we've stopped

Key Points

- The field of philanthropy is exploring what it takes to achieve impact in complex environments. The terms "adaptive" and "emergent" are beginning to be used, often interchangeably, to describe strategies by which funders can tackle complexity. This article proposes distinguishing between the two and explores more deeply how the research into complexity can inform philanthropic practice.

- While approaches like systems mapping, scenario planning, and appreciative inquiry have been put forward as useful approaches to expanding perspectives and seeing whole systems, the field needs a framework for going beyond these planning tools in order to actually create the conditions in which emergence can happen — by expanding agency beyond the walls of the funder, distinguishing between goals and strategies, encouraging experimentation around strategies, and supporting whole-system learning, which requires shorter, faster, more rigorous real-time learning and more cross-pollination among peers.

- This article offers Emergent Learning as a framework to support the creation of these conditions and describes how the tools help make thinking visible and support real-time and peer learning. It looks at two organizations that have embraced Emergent Learning to support a more emergent approach to achieving a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

talking about Before- and After-Action Reviews, Emergent Learning Tables, and the like as tools. They are practices. Tools are something you can take out when you need them. Practices are about building a muscle over time; about creating the conditions for something more to emerge — something that can't be designed in advance or managed. What we described in 2016 still resonates for us today:

> What emerges, as people experiment in small ways to solve immediate problems and compare their results, are ideas and solutions that no single expert could have designed in advance, and which continue to evolve without external direction because of the agency that has been created within the community.

Which brings us to the two biggest changes since 2016: First, the community of Emergent Learning practitioners has grown seven-fold and is bringing what they are doing, seeing, and learning back to the community, so that we continue to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Second, since 2016 we have described a set of principles that underlie these practices and have explicitly chosen to focus on them. Over 60 community members recently came together to write a *Guide to the Principles of Emergent Learning*[1] — a material example of what can happen when we bring these ideas to life.

In the next issue of *The Foundation Review,* we will describe what members of the EL community are learning about what it takes to use Emergent Learning to foster the conditions for emergence — growing agency within our organizations and in the communities we serve. How and when our practices result in emergence — or don't. "What does it take?" is always our first question.

We are honored to be part of this journal's 15th anniversary celebration.

Introduction

The field of philanthropy is thinking seriously about the implications of pursuing big, challenging goals in complex environments. Thought leaders are recognizing that linear, top-down approaches to systems change are neither fast enough nor sustainable enough to address the kinds of problems they aspire to solve (Fulton et al., 2010; Kania et al., 2014).

Borrowing from Snowden and Boone (2007), some strategists now distinguish between simple, complicated, and complex problems, and propose that traditional top-down strategic approaches are only appropriate for simple and complicated problems where there is a solution that can be discovered, refined, evaluated, and scaled. They propose that a more emergent approach to strategy is required for addressing complex problems, which are dynamic, nonlinear, and counterintuitive (Kania et al., 2014; Patrizi et al., 2013; Patton, 2010). In fact, Henry Mintzberg (1978) has long argued that deliberate strategy that is completed in advance of decision-making needs to give way to a more emergent approach.

Funders are starting to map out what it would look like if we take these ideas seriously. Evaluators have acknowledged that evaluation frameworks need to change to support work in complex environments, leading to the evolution of developmental evaluation (Patton, 2010). Learning has become a more important component of strategy (Patrizi et al., 2013; Darling, 2009). Systems mapping, scenario planning, appreciative inquiry, more adaptive funding models, and other approaches have been put forward as ways to build a systemic perspective and the capacity to adapt to very dynamic environments (Snow et al., 2015).

But there is more to do, both in the way the sector conceptualizes emergent strategy and how it approaches achieving complex goals in unpredictable environments. The terms "adaptive" and "emergent" are frequently used

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[1] See https://emergentlearning.org/publications/

Emergence is a process by which, through many interactions, individual entities or "agents" create patterns that are more sophisticated than what could have been created by an individual entity. And, as a corollary, no one entity (e.g., funder, grantee, or expert) could have envisioned the entire solution a priori.

interchangeably to describe this shift. This article proposes that the field would benefit by distinguishing between "adaptive strategy" and "emergent strategy," and that funders would benefit from considering the implications resulting from this distinction for how they approach strategy, learning, and evaluation. The authors propose that emergent strategy requires more than a collection of strategy and planning tools, and offer "Emergent Learning" as a framework to operationalize it.

Emergence and Complexity

Emergence, from the perspective of complexity science, is about more than simply finding adaptable solutions or correcting course based on evidence. Emergence is a process by which, through many interactions, individual entities or "agents" create patterns that are more sophisticated than what could have been created by an individual entity. And, as a corollary, no one entity (e.g., funder, grantee, or expert) could have envisioned the entire solution a priori (Holland, 1995).

Think of the iPhone. It would not be what it is today if Apple had not allowed outside developers to design apps for it. What has made mobile technology so powerful is the ecosystem of developers and users who, together, have created a vital marketplace in which they continue to discover ever more creative uses for it. No one today can predict with any confidence what mobile technology will be capable of doing for us five years from now, and we are all part of the story about how it will evolve. Funders often have the goal of being developmental long enough to develop a complete solution that can then be validated through summative evaluation (Preskill & Beer, 2012). Emergence is different. Once it starts, it doesn't just stop when the initial impetus (e.g., funding) is completed. In his popular book *Emergence,* Steven Johnson (2002) describes emergent solutions as "getting smarter over time" (p. 20).

John Holland spent his career at the University of Michigan studying how complex systems adapt. He studied both natural and social systems, and developed computer models to test researchers' understanding about how adaptation happens. He discovered that the complex systems that produce emergence have some core elements in common (Holland, 1995, 1998):

- They are composed of large numbers of independently acting agents.

- They have a shared, recognizable outcome.

- Through experience, individual agents develop, test, and refine hypotheses about how to achieve success in the different kinds of situations they face.

- The more often individual agents interact, the faster the whole system adapts.

"Knowledge" in the world of complex adaptive systems, then, is not about publishing lessons learned from individual successes or failures, but instead by experimenting with a constantly evolving set of hypotheses about how to succeed in a dynamic environment. As Holland observes, systems that can accommodate many hypotheses and deliberately test them can adapt at a rate "orders of magnitude faster" than systems lacking this ability (1995, p. 37).

Adaptive Strategy and Emergent Strategy

If adaptive strategy is about recognizing that strategies cannot be defined completely in advance and that funders need to develop strategies that are able to adapt or evolve as the environment changes, what happens when we look at this process through the lens of complexity? Making these adaptations involves input from partners and grantees, but it is still possible for the locus of strategy to reside with the funder. Given the definition of emergence, this article proposes that strategy shifts from simply adaptive to fully emergent when the locus of strategy changes — from driving results to creating the conditions where the whole community can participate in developing solutions that continue to adapt (Senge et al., 2015).

Complexity scientists talk about "agents" intentionally. Agents have agency. They are capable of acting independently and making their own choices, based on their own hypotheses about what will make them more successful. In a chess game, there are only two agents: the chess players. The chess pieces don't get a vote. In a team sport like football or soccer, there are many agents on the field. While their goal is to work toward a shared outcome, each player has a point of view and is capable of making decisions of their own volition, based on what they are seeing in the unfolding environment. The more the team plays, the better individuals become at recognizing patterns in their very dynamic environment, and the smarter their individual decisions become. The more they talk about and practice with each other using what they are discovering, the more successful they become as a whole team.

The system in which any given social-sector solution gets enacted is a lot more like a team sport than a chessboard. It is filled with many moving parts and many partners — joint funders, grantees, government agencies, community activists — all of whom are an important part of the solution, and all of whom are capable of bringing their own perspective and experience to their decisions and actions. As

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Snow et al. describe it, "we don't just design a strategy, we do a strategy" (2015, p. 6).

The main difference, then, between thinking about adaptive strategy and emergent strategy lies in this notion of agency. How far does the circle of agency extend? As soon as agency extends beyond the walls of the foundation (or beyond the executive floor in large organizations), it begins to move into emergent territory where adaptation has the potential, as Holland (1995) described, to become "orders of magnitude faster," and to produce results that continue to get smarter — even after the funder has left the building.

To enable this kind of environment, agents must share a common understanding of the goal they seek but also have the freedom to experiment with the best pathways to get there. And, finally, they need to learn by interacting with one another, the more the better, like ants finding their collective way to a new food source, or app developers and users discovering a completely new capability by mashing up what came before.

Expanding the Circle of Agency

Emergent strategy recognizes that the funder's best thinking is only a starting point, that the most powerful elements of a solution could arise from somewhere outside of the foundation's walls. Some question whether emergent strategy is strategic at all (Speich, 2014). How is

To create the conditions for emergence, funders need to distinguish between the goal (the "what") and strategies (the "how") and allow grantees the freedom to bring their own best thinking to how to achieve their shared goal. This suggests the need to minimize the number of rules or expectations imposed on grantees, in order to maximize their freedom of movement.

it different from responsive grantmaking? One difference is that, in responsive grantmaking, there is no aspiration to make a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. For funders, an emergent strategy works at a higher level to create an emergent ecosystem by establishing a clear, shared goal and encouraging experimentation and cross-fertilization.

Explicitly or implicitly, top-down foundation strategy tends to have a corporate orientation. It maintains agency in the equivalent of the executive suite. At the extreme, funders control strategy design, implementation, and revision. Grantees are treated like employees who are hired to implement a predetermined strategy. The reality for most foundations is not this extreme, but the chess-player mindset can be persistent, and shows up in the way funders make decisions and evaluate their work.

In fact, it is entirely possible to do systems mapping, scenario planning, appreciative inquiry, and any number of other planning processes intended to open planners' eyes to the complexity of a system and the voices of its participants

and still hold the perspective of the chess player. The stress of recognizing how complex these environments are can lead to the natural reaction of wanting more control, which leads to investing more in planning (Patrizi et al., 2013). Paradoxically, over-investing in these planning processes without tackling the issue of agency can lead funders to become even more invested in the rightness of the strategies they produce as a result, which can dampen their ability to recognize when contrary data (e.g., pushback from confused or frustrated grantees) suggest the need to adjust course.

Sharing a Goal and Maximizing Experimentation

To create the conditions for emergence, funders need to distinguish between the goal (the "what") and strategies (the "how") and allow grantees the freedom to bring their own best thinking to how to achieve their shared goal. This suggests the need to minimize the number of rules or expectations imposed on grantees, in order to maximize their freedom of movement. The contract involves both freedom and accountability — the freedom to choose one's own hypothesis, but also, importantly, the accountability to rigorously test and refine it. Funders seeking to support emergence can pose their own thinking as long as they treat it as a hypothesis — one among several.

In practice, funders commonly conflate the "what" and the "how." Funders hold grantees accountable for faithfully implementing a set of strategies that reflect the funder's hypothesis. Grants come with an expectation that grantees will strengthen community engagement, develop cross-sector partnerships, develop a certain set of competencies, and so on. All these requirements make it more difficult for grantees to bring their own experience and wisdom to the table and, ultimately, may cause grantees to lose line-of-sight to their own goal, as they invest in meeting the obligations of several grants. When the what and how are conflated, funders may be perceived as being inconsistent. If they choose to adapt their strategies mid-course, and grantees are being assessed based on their

adoption of those strategies, it can leave grantees feeling whipsawed (Snow et al., 2015).

There will always be a power dynamic between grantmakers and grantees, but being deliberate about keeping the what and the how separate, and holding grantees accountable for the what and explicitly asking them to contribute to collective learning about the how, can contribute to shifting that dynamic in productive ways.

Enabling the Whole System to Learn

The field now recognizes the need for rapid-cycle, real-time learning in complex environments, but complexity science would suggest that both the volume and the rigor of this learning from successes and failures need to be increased. Additionally, to make emergence happen, to make a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts, the community needs to cross-pollinate more often. What gets learned by all of this experimentation needs to come back to the whole community; to create a "marketplace" where ideas about what works and what doesn't, and in which contexts, can be explored.

In common foundation practice today, learning is too often funder-centric and collapsed into long cycles, driven by grantmaking and evaluation (Darling, 2009). This is valid and important from the funder's perspective, but it is a chess player's approach to learning. Emergent strategy should rely on more and much shorter, agent-driven learning cycles and many opportunities for two-way sharing with peers about what gets learned in them.

And for that, funders could learn something from ant colonies — a great example of emergence. The more they interact, the faster ant colonies learn where the best food sources are. As much as grantees ask for opportunities to engage with their colleagues, grantmakers are reticent to intrude too much on their time. Funder-driven learning communities that are built into the design of initiatives are infrequent and expensive in time and resources, and very often treated as opportunities to bring in experts to educate grantees about elements of the theory of change that funders see as being

It would be worth considering whether the problem is not about the quantity of time funders ask for of grantees, but the focus of the learning, which is on things that matter to the foundation more than to the grantee. To encourage emergence, funders need to provide more flexible opportunities for grantees to compare experiences around questions that matter to the grantees.

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This is a place where funders can play a unique role because of their perspective and their ability to work across boundaries (Patrizi et al., 2013). They can use their ability to see patterns and their relationships to broker opportunities for peers to learn from one another more frequently, in formal and informal ways, and to raise up the patterns they are seeing for consideration by everyone in the system.

Emergent Learning

While a number of tools have been proposed to support planning in a way that fosters a wider perspective, the field is in need of a framework to operationalize emergent strategy — to help

An Emergent Learning design focuses on posing questions that invite a wider circle into the thinking process, making thinking visible to encourage a learning dialogue, deliberately testing out hypotheses in the work itself, and sharing insights across the community.

funders put down the chess pieces and join the team on the field. The field needs tools that expand agency, support rapid experimentation, and enable the whole system — including funders — to learn from one another's experiments.
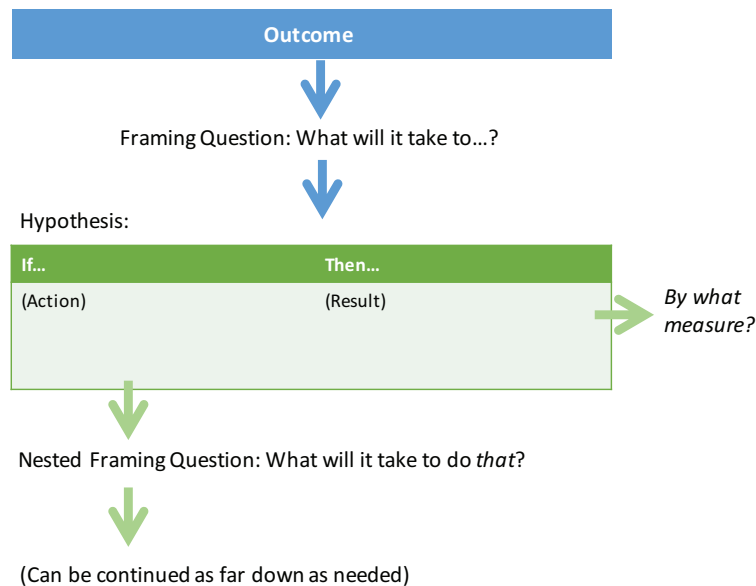
Emergent Learning can be used to support both adaptive and emergent strategy, but it is designed specifically to expand agency and create the potential for emergence. None of the tools of emergent learning are especially unique. They are designed intentionally to be simple and intuitive for three reasons: to minimize the time investment it takes to learn them; to make them useful in as many situations as possible; and to expand agency by making it possible for members across a network to use the same simple tools in their contexts. They are designed to be used together to create a platform that invites partners to make their thinking visible to one another and to learn together.

An Emergent Learning design focuses on posing questions that invite a wider circle into the thinking process, making thinking visible to encourage a learning dialogue, deliberately testing out hypotheses in the work itself, and sharing insights across the community. From an Emergent Learning perspective, a group has learned only when people are conscious of their thinking, notice their results, reflect on those results, change their thinking and actions — and

when their new thinking and actions produce better results, even as circumstances change. What emerges, as people experiment in small ways to solve immediate problems and compare their results, are ideas and solutions that no single expert could have designed in advance and which continue to evolve without external direction because of the agency that has been created within the community.

Moonshot Moment is a third-grade literacy initiative in Florida's Indian River County, an economically and racially diverse community of 142,000 people, launched by the Learning Alliance. Over the past few years, Moonshot Moment has grown to involve 17,000 students in 22 schools. The alliance's initial thinking was that better teaching in kindergarten through third grade would lead to higher literacy. As it began to realize the true complexity of the goal it had taken on, the alliance realized that it needed to involve the entire community and embraced an Emergent Learning approach. Rather than identifying and advocating for their own theory of change, the organizers asked a question: "What will it take to have at least 90% of our students reading at grade level by the end of grade three in five years?"

The alliance engaged the community in reverse visioning: "It's 2018: We've succeeded. Indian River County is a U.S. leader in grade-level literacy, with all the benefits that bestows. How did we get there?" Every community stakeholder — teachers, principals, police, parents, faith-based leaders, sports coaches, doctors, real estate agents — was invited to think about the challenge from their perspective, and each was given the opportunity to envision what it would take to make this ambitious goal a reality. Involving the whole community helped both expand and personalize the view of the problem. Members of the community have been encouraged by the alliance to test emerging hypotheses, using a portfolio of flexible funding, so that the entire community learns its way to solutions that would work in the long run. The alliance has propagated the use of Emergent Learning tools like Before and After Action Reviews across the community to support this

FIGURE 1 Making Thinking Visible

Outcome

Framing Question: What will it take to…?

Hypothesis:

If…	Then…
(Action)	(Result)

By what measure?

Nested Framing Question: What will it take to do *that*?

(Can be continued as far down as needed)

real-time experimentation. Organizers have also held periodic learning summits to coalesce the ideas and the learning that is emerging.

This approach has led to broad and sustained commitment to the Moonshot Moment across the community and the birth of a number of self-organized supporting initiatives. When a new superintendent was hired, the whole community rallied behind preserving the initiative. The new superintendent said he had never seen anything like that level of unity around a goal.

As this story suggests, it requires a degree of humility on the part of a funder to engage in an emergent strategy. But the promise of emergent solutions that "get smarter over time," as Johnson (2002) proposed, is compelling compared to the "capture, validate, replicate" model of social change. If funders are willing to let go of complete ownership over the specifics of an implementation strategy and, instead, see their own higher-order strategy as creating a platform on which a larger community or network can test innovative solutions, they increase the potential for growing ownership and, ultimately, for cocreating a strategy that is "orders of magnitude" more adaptive (Holland, 1995).

Some Tools of Emergent Learning

Though they can be used to facilitate one-off events, the tools of Emergent Learning are not intended for that purpose. They are not designed to be owned by the foundation. Their power to support emergence comes from the relationship between the tools and how they are used to expand agency, experimentation, and interaction. "Framing questions" help shift from advocating for specific strategies to encouraging everyone to contribute to solving a problem that matters to them. Rather than talking about strategies that are seen as a given, Emergent Learning encourages everyone to think in terms of hypotheses that need to be tested and refined. Before and After Action Reviews and learning logs support fast-cycle, real-time learning, and Emergent Learning Tables provide a framework to help peers learn from one another's work.

Building Blocks That Make Thinking Visible

To expand agency, members of a community need to be invited into the strategy process. Emergent Learning combines simple tools to help groups build a shared aspiration, surface implicit assumptions, and test for understanding around big ideas. It focuses on teasing apart words like "equity," "collaboration," "systems

FIGURE 2 An Example of Making Thinking Visible in a Social Initiative
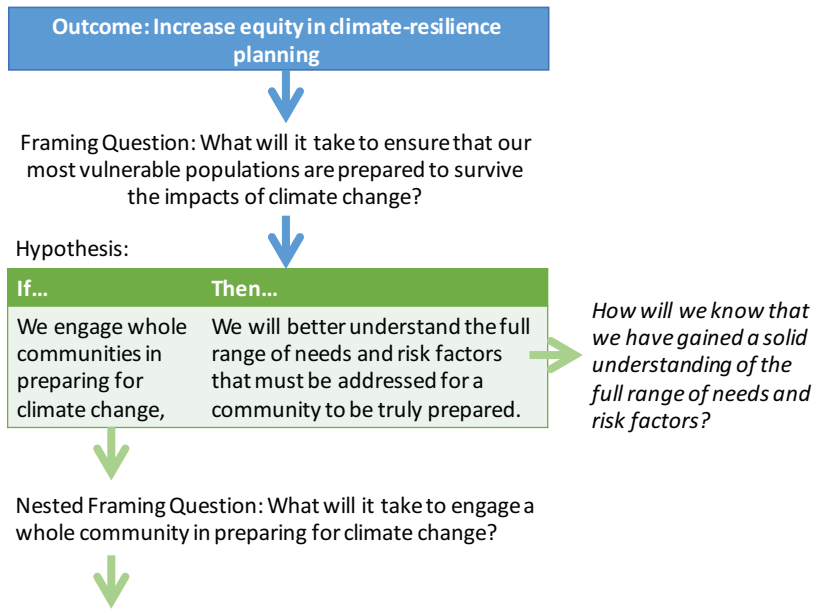
change," and the other big, fuzzy concepts that make thinking less transparent. For example, "to increase equity in climate resilience planning"[2] is a worthy goal, but what does that mean and what would it look like? Emergent Learning turns that large, somewhat vague goal into a forward-focused "What will it take to …?" framing question. For example: "What will it take to ensure that our most vulnerable populations are prepared to survive the impacts of climate change?" Posing a question like this in grant RFPs or convening agendas engages the thinking of the community and invites it into a conversation with the funder.
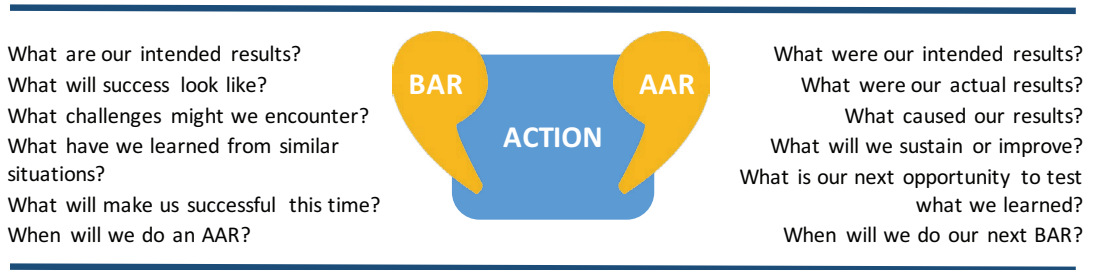
The community works to answer that question together, generating hypotheses — possible answers to that question. A hypothesis uses "if/then" language designed to express a whole thought. Rather than saying, "We must engage whole communities in preparing for climate change," emergent learning asks us to say why. What will that help us accomplish?

The complete thought is a hypothesis: "If we engage whole communities in preparing for climate change, then we will understand the full range of needs and risk factors that have to be addressed for a community to be truly prepared." Listeners may agree or disagree. But by making thinking visible, the funder is inviting them to engage more deeply.[3]

While hypotheses are fundamental to science, they are not commonly applied to tease apart the complexities involved in social change. Deliberately expressing hypotheses brings more rigor to how we think and learn about these complexities. This simple building block of thinking can be used in any number of places, not just in purposeful learning conversations. In fact, every time a decision is made, whether it is part of an annual planning process or designing the layout of a room for a conference session, it is explicitly or implicitly based on a hypothesis. Groups can learn to make that thinking visible by asking line-of-sight questions:

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[2] While this is a real goal for foundation initiatives with which the authors are involved, the remainder of this simplified example is composed to illustrate how Emergent Learning tools are used to make thinking visible.

[3] While a hypothesis uses cause–effect logic, we should not understand it as implying linear thinking. Any systems model maps out cause–effect connections, but not in a mechanistic way. Bearing in mind that in complex systems there is always an "attribution/contribution" distinction to be made, it is still important to recognize that all thinking associated with action involves some cause–effect logic. Explicitly defining one's hypotheses simply makes that thinking visible.

FIGURE 3 Before and After Action Reviews

What are our intended results?
What will success look like?
What challenges might we encounter?
What have we learned from similar situations?
What will make us successful this time?
When will we do an AAR?

BAR — **ACTION** — **AAR**

What were our intended results?
What were our actual results?
What caused our results?
What will we sustain or improve?
What is our next opportunity to test what we learned?
When will we do our next BAR?

- "What will that help us accomplish?" connects an idea to a group's larger goal.

- "What will it take to do that?" connects an idea to practical actions on the ground.

These questions create a line of sight between a group's largest goals and tactical implementation decisions. They reduce the chance that groups will get lost in the weeds on one hand or live in the land of theory on the other. Making everyday thinking visible in this way can expand agency by helping members of a group develop and test their logic model in real time and develop practical measures or indicators. (See Figure 1 and Figure 2.) Working with this structure helps avoid conflating levels of learning into a single perspective — often the funder's. The structure can invite grantees and other partners to articulate and test alternative hypotheses — different pathways to the same goal. Hypotheses can also be nested (see Figures 1 and 2), so that groups can focus on thinking, doing, and learning around their own work and still see the link between their work and a larger whole.

Frameworks That Support Learning Within and Across Organizations

Emergent strategy requires not just rigorous experimentation, but also a higher volume of it and more opportunities to compare notes across a system than is common in social-sector work. Emergent Learning provides a simple framework for building more, and more localized,

learning into the way the work gets done — not dependent on external design or facilitation and not dependent on evaluation cycles. The same framework that works for an annual planning cycle works for thinking at a very tactical level. The same framework that is used by a funder can be used by its grantees and other partners.

The core tool used in Emergent Learning to do real-time learning is the combination of the Before-Action Review and the After-Action Review[4] to bookend action — to turn activities and events into opportunities to test and refine thinking. (See Figure 3.) In 30-minute conversations before and after key pieces of work, groups clarify goals, predict challenges related to the situation, express hypotheses, and test them against actual results in order to strengthen both their thinking and their results. This simple process can be repeated in any number of situations and at different levels — from planning a staff meeting to refining grantmaking strategies. It can be used to "localize" research and evaluation data – to find opportunities in people's calendars to deliberately test out the relevance and validity of recommendations that might otherwise be underutilized. It helps groups see their progress and understand what made it possible, which builds their capacity to tackle new challenges.

Funder-driven learning communities often err on the side of using precious time with peers to conduct training, provide presentations by

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[4] The After-Action Review was developed by the U.S. Army to prepare units to succeed in their next deployment. The Before-Action Review was added to reflect some of what the authors learned from research into the underlying structure of the Army's best practice (Darling et al., 2005).

FIGURE 4 Emergent Learning Table
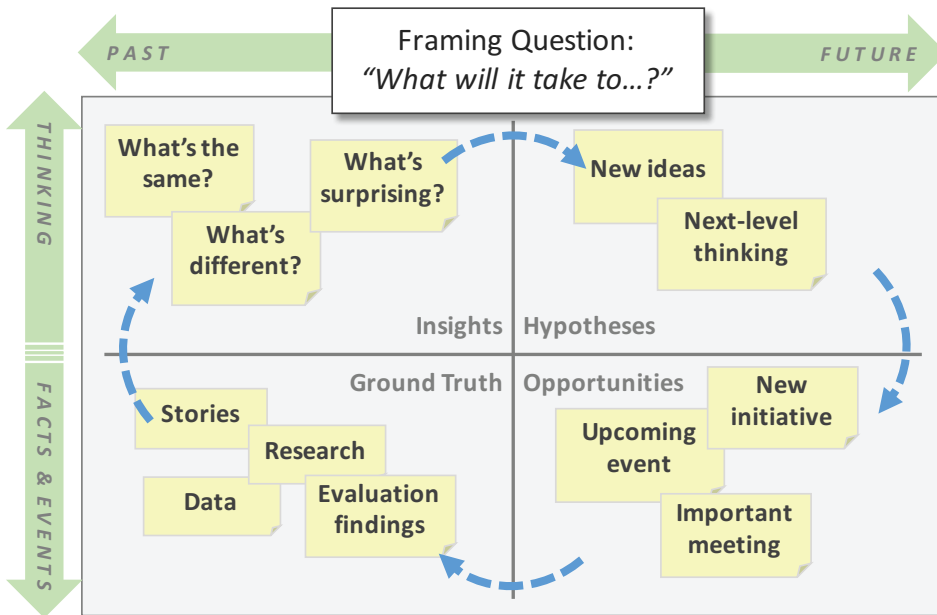
experts, or even to deliver a full curriculum. Emergent Learning Tables support emergent strategy by bringing members of the system together to ask, "What do we know so far?" (See Figure 4.) They help groups step through their thinking process, grounded in their collective experiences. Those who get stuck thinking abstractly are asked to link their thinking to action. Those who jump right into problem solving are asked to step back and reflect on what might be driving a problem. They give everyone in the room a chance to benefit from one another's experience and best thinking, while maintaining individual agency to decide what to do next. They can also be used to reflect on the history of an initiative, identify and reflect on the importance of defining moments, and capture how thinking has evolved over time. New participants who sit in on EL Table conversations often comment on how much it helps them learn about the history and thinking of the organization or community they have just joined.

To support emergent strategy, EL Tables, like other Emergent Learning tools, are intended

to be adaptable to a wide variety of situations. Insights generated can be deepened by integrating systems mapping or appreciative inquiry into the EL Table process. The structure of an EL Table helps groups bring more, and more types of, data to the conversation — experiences from several different contexts, research and evaluation data – to accelerate learning.

Sometimes EL Tables are used in a formal way, organized around a visual table posted on a wall; at other times, the framework is used to facilitate informal conversations without a visual aid but in a way that promotes more rigorous learning. Using it informally may encourage groups to get together more often to cross-pollinate.

EL Tables can be used to capture the evolution of an initiative, but Emergent Learning also uses learning logs to track key events and insights, with a link to BAR/AAR forms or EL Table notes for more detail.

Together, these tools can be used to support the kind of learning ecosystem that is called for by complexity science to increase the adaptability

FIGURE 5 How Funders Can Use Emergent Learning Tools to Support a Learning Ecosystem
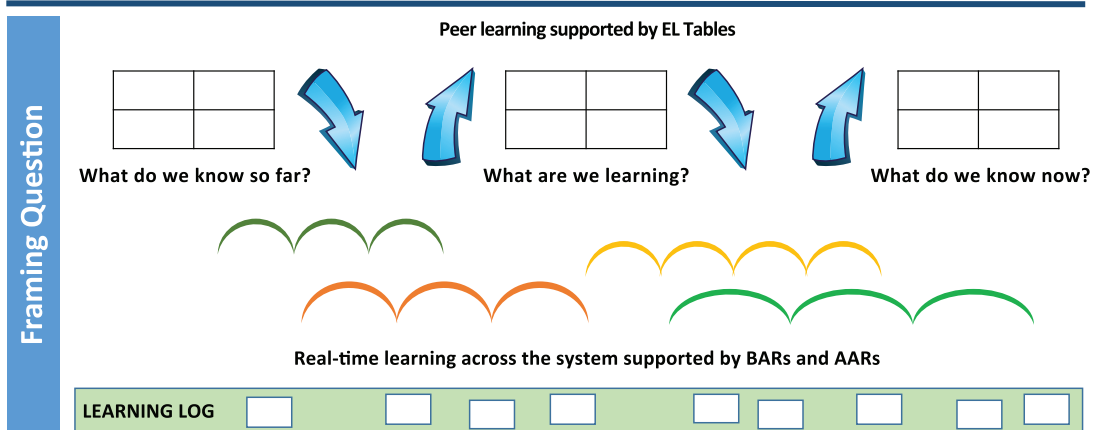
of the whole system. (See Figure 5.) Hypotheses from an EL Table around a framing question translate into experiments, supported by BARs and AARs, which generate data and insights that are captured in a learning log and become fodder for the next EL Table conversation. This whole-learning process can be conducted by members of the community, but it benefits from a facilitator or network weaver who can keep sight of the larger system and the core framing questions that people have identified. Given the level of turnover in the social sector, capturing the history not just of results, but also of how the thinking of a group has evolved, can be a powerful onboarding tool.

"Building Strategic Muscle" at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy

The mission of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, an operating foundation, is to tackle important economic, social, and environmental challenges through land policy — the effective use, taxation, and stewardship of land.

The new chief executive officer, George McCarthy, arrived in August 2014. At the time, the institute's planning and accountability structures were activity-based and siloed in departments. McCarthy wanted to change that, but was determined not to conduct a typical top-down strategy refresh, working with the board and his advisors to chart a course for the institution. Rather, he wanted to "build the strategic muscle" of the whole organization — to shift from seeing strategy as something that gets done once every few years to being how everyone on the staff makes decisions every day. He wanted to encourage staff members to strengthen their thinking about how their work contributes to society's big issues that land policy can help address: increasing the fiscal health of cities, reducing urban poverty, mitigating climate change.

This led McCarthy to embrace Emergent Learning as a platform for everything from strategic planning to tactical course corrections. He started by holding several strategy sessions in which he asked the staff to begin to build a line of sight from their work to the institute's potential long-term impact. Staff members were encouraged to identify their own long-term outcomes and their best hypotheses about how to get there. Through this work, they evolved a theory of change (which they refer to as "pathways to impact") that reflected their own thinking, not an externally imposed construct. They began to use BARs and AARs to test these hypotheses against their day-to-day work: managing partnerships, supporting their networks of researchers, creating and disseminating land-policy tools.

They continue to use the same simple tools for everything from strategizing how to change the

policy dialogue about municipal fiscal health to preparing for and learning from conference presentations. They are beginning to propagate this approach with the board and some of their strategic partners, using Emergent Learning questions, for example, to improve the quality of engagement with important expert partners in Latin America. Not every event warrants this level of attention, but in those areas where they have focused, they are asking more strategic questions and growing knowledge within and across departments about how to increase their impact. They take simple notes on each short conversation and, with the help of developmental evaluation, are using those notes to track how their thinking and results have evolved, which feeds back into their annual planning process.

Having this emergence-friendly leadership and framework in place has helped the institute take advantage of opportunities outside its traditional boundaries. Habitat III, the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development, takes place only once every 20 years and plays an important role in shaping the urban agenda for the next two decades. McCarthy proposed the audacious goal of having the Lincoln Institute play a role in shaping the agenda for this important international conference in order to create a global platform to improve the dialogue around the world about important land-policy issues.

In November 2014, McCarthy and his senior team held an initial BAR. They acknowledged that it was a long shot and unclear even how to become a part of this very political, nation-centric process. He encouraged everyone on the program team to participate in answering the framing question: What will it take for us to use Habitat III as a platform for a global conversation about land policy? Program staff brainstormed a number of tactical steps they could take to try to get involved in the governmental processes in the U.S. and Latin America, and in the peripheral civil-society and research-community planning efforts. Their hypothesis was that, by being involved on multiple fronts and delivering a consistent set of messages, the Lincoln Institute

would begin to be seen as a player — not only in relation to Habitat III, but also in the larger realm of experts involved in urban issues on a global scale.

Much of the early work happened informally, by program and public affairs staff members putting out feelers and attending events to understand what was possible, supported by additional BAR/AAR conversations. Without having to mandate it, the work naturally evolved as a collaboration across departmental boundaries. No one was put in charge of the effort. Staff members ran into some dead ends, but their hypothesis proved out. In April 2015, the U.N. awarded the institute special status to participate in the preparatory process. In September, 10 months after identifying this unlikely goal, the institute was designated a co-lead with the World Bank for the policy unit on municipal finance for Habitat III.

There is much more work to do to create the global platform to which the Lincoln Institute aspires, but it is worth considering the difference between what it has been able to accomplish using an approach that expanded agency in the 18 months since McCarthy arrived and the costs involved versus the time and cost that would have been involved in a traditional strategy-change process, including the stress and reduced productivity that is typical of such efforts.

It Takes a Village

As with all of the tools and techniques proffered in recent literature to support emergent strategy, Emergent Learning is not a complete solution in itself. We are all blind men and women describing this elephant. Emergent Learning provides a framework, but benefits from tools that support a deeper understanding of the system, more voices at the table, and rigorous evaluation data to break through funder blind spots.

Funders can test the waters of emergent strategy by experimenting with components of larger traditional strategies — for example, by using an emergent strategy to do field building around a larger initiative, or even simply experimenting

with being deliberately emergent in the design of a convening or learning community. What difference would it make if, rather than receiving a detailed agenda filled with expert presentations, potential participants received an invitation that posed a framing question that participants care about, with an agenda that involved a lot of sharing of experiences and a goal of growing the knowledge of the whole community?

There are more challenges than we can name here to implementing this kind of learning framework to support emergent strategy. It should come as no surprise that Emergent Learning does not lend itself to top-down implementation. A core principle is that the group's own work should be the central focus — Emergent Learning cannot become an end in itself. Grantees will do what a grantmaker tells them to do to gain funding. But mandating that groups do BARs and AARs or pushing a learning focus that is not immediately relevant to those doing the work is more likely to produce resistance than to produce sustainable solutions to complex problems.

Emergent strategy is more likely to make sense and take root when a program team or a multifunder initiative has identified a challenging goal or seemingly impenetrable barrier and is highly motivated to try something new; when the delta between the system's aspiration and the resources available to scale a solution is high. The impetus for it may come from a significant failure. To get to truly emergent results ultimately requires a willingness to look critically at one's own thinking and learn from disappointing results. Bringing everyone's best thinking to the table means that everyone from the CEO to program staff to board members will have to be willing to have their best thinking challenged.

Conclusion

There is much more to understand about what it takes to make an emergent strategy actually produce emergent results, what it takes to lay the groundwork and deal with funder–grantee

power dynamics, and what unanticipated benefits and challenges it produces. With generous support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the authors have launched a 15-month research project to study emergence in complex social-sector initiatives.[5]

We can't afford to have the pace of the solutions we produce not match the pace of the important social problems we are trying to solve. There is too much to do and too much at stake. Emergent strategy is not easy and, to be sure, it means giving up a degree of control. But in truly complex and very dynamic environments, emergence holds the promise of a radically different kind of efficiency compared to the replicate-and-scale model of social change, if we can only figure out how to get it started. Holland characterized the benefits from emergence as "much coming from little" (1998, p. 1).

The lessons of complexity theory suggest that funders should think of their work as a team sport, not a chess game. It suggests less top-down design for social initiatives and increasing opportunities to experiment. It calls for funders to have the humility to recognize that the people doing the work are likely to have ideas that are most fit to their environments, and to create more opportunities for everyone to bring their best thinking to the table, so that solutions that emerge will continue to be adaptive. None of us can ever know enough to guide us into the future without the help of all of the wisdom in the room.

The tools and principles of Emergent Learning were designed to support the possibility of emergence. At its foundation is the principle that we are all experts in equal measure. And there is more we all need to do and learn. Always.

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[5] Information on the research project can be found at https://emergentlearning.org/publications.

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