

The Foundation Review

a publication of the Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University

Volume 16
Issue 2 *Democracy, Equity, and Power*

10-2024

Seeding Impact: Shifting From Orchestration to Emergence

Marilyn Darling
The Emergent Learning Community Project

Veena Pankaj
Eval4Learning

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>



Part of the [Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons](#), [Public Administration Commons](#), [Public Affairs Commons](#), and the [Public Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Darling, M., & Pankaj, V. (2024). Seeding Impact: Shifting From Orchestration to Emergence. *The Foundation Review*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1709>

Copyright © Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy at Grand Valley State University. The Foundation Review is reproduced electronically by ScholarWorks@GVSU. <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>

Seeding Impact: Shifting From Orchestration to Emergence

Marilyn Darling, M.A., The Emergent Learning Community Project, and Veena Pankaj, M.A., Eval4Learning

Keywords: *Emergent Learning, Emergent Learning Community; foundation learning; impact; systems change*

Introduction

The field of philanthropy has long recognized that entrenched power, shifting political landscapes, economic pressures, and other system-buffeting dynamics make the work of change more complex than any single organization can “mastermind,” regardless of the resources they have to deploy (Coffman et al., 2023; Kramer et al., 2014; Patton, 2011). Whatever a foundation’s strategic orientation or theory of change, making sustainable change happen in these dynamic environments requires the thoughtful and active engagement of diverse actors across the system who can view the problem from different vantage points and bring their perspective, experience, and ideas to the table, experiment with different approaches, and learn together about what works, when, and where.

But that poses another challenge: There are many actors in the systems we are trying to influence — grantees, community advocates, policymakers, public-sector institutions, journalists, and our own internal leaders, teams, and boards. The diversity of these actors and their valuable, yet different, vantage points means that they all have their own story about what is unfolding and how change happens, and they have the agency to make decisions and act independently. As Tanya Beer (2019) observes, operating in this type of “dynamic and emergent” context requires “ongoing navigation and sensing of what’s happening ..., getting feedback from partners and other actors in the system, and adjusting accordingly” (p. 6). And that requires that foundations take a very intentional approach to learning with this diverse set of actors.

Key Points

- The 2016 *Foundation Review* article “Emergent Learning: A Framework for Whole-System Strategy, Learning and Adaptation” talked about what an emergent strategy promises — to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Has this prediction played out in practice? Since it appeared in 2016, what has the growing community of Emergent Learning practitioners learned about what it takes to seed and grow impact?
- This article addresses those questions, drawing on interviews with Emergent Learning Community members to illustrate what EL looks like in practice and how it is producing results that are emergent in nature. It describes insights that have surfaced since 2016, including the articulation of a set of principles that underlie Emergent Learning practices. These principles emerged from the community’s practice, but they also inform that practice.
- In the fall of 2022, the authors partnered to launch a learning inquiry designed to explore how Emergent Learning becomes integrated into practitioners’ work, factors that contribute to and detract from integrating this approach, and what impact it is having. As we collected examples of practitioners creating the conditions that make it possible for other things to happen that they could not necessarily orchestrate in advance, we defined impact in a very local and immediate way as observable changes or results that could be attributed to a particular, often very small, action — a “micromove.” Twenty-four interviews gathered data around these

(continued on next page)

But foundation culture is famously not conducive to learning, starting with the relationship between foundation staff and their boards. “What happens in that space tends to disincentivize things like sharing uncertainties or disappointing results, or being clear about how thinking is beginning to transform” (Beer, 2019, p. 1). As a result, many foundations have gotten into the practice of making predictions about how the strategies they fund will lead to the results that are desired (Coffman et al., 2023). Staff get rewarded based on their ability to predict and hit their desired targets. This disincentivizes learning and adapting strategy along the way.

Given the growing complexity of what philanthropy is attempting to tackle — systems change, changing narratives, centering on equity, building power among marginalized populations — what will it take for the many diverse actors within a system to learn together in a way that supports tangible impact?

The Purpose Behind the 2016 Article on Emergent Learning

The goal for the 2016 *Foundation Review* article on Emergent Learning was quite simply to give people in the social sector an overview of this nascent body of work. It described Emergent Learning as a way to “expand agency, support rapid experimentation, and enable the whole system — including funders — to learn from one another’s experiments” (Darling et al., 2016, p. 64). The authors of that article described their hypothesis about how this work contributes to creating emergent results and impact, and shared a few clear, simple core practices to encourage the kind of learning that is called for to support emergence.

The 2016 article gained traction among *The Foundation Review* readers and readership continues to grow, perhaps for the simple reason that the second half of the article “gave away the store,” so that people could practice on their own. This was deliberate on the authors’ part. Emergent Learning is not and should not be

Key Points (continued)

questions and explored key themes through three sensemaking sessions with EL Community members. In addition, a set of small stories of impact from community members were collected to illustrate how practitioners are working to make change within their own organizations — not only in the way they engage with each other and make decisions, but also in ways that create the potential to have impacts both across their own organizations and in their relationships with external partners as they tackle complex social change goals and work in cultures that are often not conducive to learning.

- What does it take to shift from thinking and acting like chess players to acting like part of a dynamic soccer team — to succeed together; to shift from seeing ourselves as outside of the system we are trying to influence to seeing ourselves as part of that system? What does it take to hold a more emergent stance, where success is measured not by our individual expertise, but instead by our ability to work together to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts? This idea has become foundational to the practice of Emergent Learning today.

proprietary. Because the intention of Emergent Learning is to grow agency and learning across whole and diverse systems of actors, offering a simple set of practices and a shared language that can be used across boundaries was essential.

But it is the first half of the article that forecasted what has happened since. It made the case for distinguishing between adaptive and emergent strategy,¹ which the authors likened to the distinction between thinking and acting like a chess player or like a member of a soccer team:

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

¹ Readers are encouraged to read adrienne maree brown’s 2017 book, *Emergent Strategy*, for a deeper exploration of how exploring our human relationship to change can help us shape the futures we want to live.

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. (Darling et al., 2016, p. 61)

But what does it take to shift from thinking like a chess player to recognizing the complexity these many actors face and preparing a whole team — or ecosystem — to succeed together; to shift from seeing ourselves as outside of the system we are trying to influence to seeing ourselves as part of that system? What does it take to hold a more emergent stance, where success is measured not by our individual expertise, but instead by our ability to work together to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts? This idea has become foundational to the practice of Emergent Learning today.

Since then, the number of trained EL practitioners has been growing and forming as a community. In 2016, the nascent community consisted of 55 practitioners. As of 2024, the EL Community consists of nearly 500 practitioners and is supported by a nonprofit project.² Roughly 43% of community members work for foundations. Of that, 28% describe themselves as program officers, 39% work in learning and evaluation, and 6% work in operations. Community members meet regularly to share what they are learning around social sector challenges through their successes and failures. In the process, as this article illustrates, they have created a whole that is greater than its parts. One community member noted that while the training they received gave them a foundation in Emergent Learning, it has been interacting with other practitioners that has deepened their practice and opened their eyes about what’s possible.

This article explores what has been learned since 2016, drawing on interviews with EL Community members to illustrate what Emergent Learning looks like in practice and how it is producing results that are emergent in nature. It describes insights that have surfaced since 2016 and how Emergent Learning has evolved, and offers some practical steps

SIDEBAR 1

Leading With the Principles of Emergent Learning

One of the biggest changes since 2016 is the articulation of a set of principles that underlie Emergent Learning practices. These principles emerged from the community’s practice, but they also inform that practice:

- Strengthening Line of Sight
- Making Thinking Visible
- Asking Powerful Questions
- Maximizing Freedom to Experiment
- Keeping Work at the Center
- Inviting Diverse Voices to the Table
- Holding Expertise in Equal Measure
- Stewarding Learning Through Time
- Returning Learning to the System

These principles speak to creating the conditions that nurture a learning culture. Many EL practitioners find it easier to gain support by asking people to “make our thinking visible so that we can have more freedom to experiment” than by asking people to buy into a practice (e.g., “let’s do a BAR.”) Practitioners talk about focusing first on the principles and intent of Emergent Learning and holding the practices lightly. This helps practitioners and teams center their work and stay focused on learning and creating cultures that support learning, rather than asking them to commit to a framework and set of tools.

Over 60 community members recently came together to create a Guide to the Principles of Emergent Learning — a material example of what can happen when we bring these ideas to life.

foundations can take to create the conditions for this quality of thinking and learning within their walls and in relationship with their grantees and other external partners. (See Sidebar 1.)

² The Emergent Learning Community Project is a project of Global Philanthropy Partnership.

SIDEBAR 2**An Emergent Learning Hypothesis**

If foundation staff embrace a more emergent approach — creating the conditions to unleash the agency and experimentation of everyone in the system rather than relying on their own expertise and measurement against predetermined outcomes, they can create results beyond what could be designed or anticipated — a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. In the process, the ripples created by these micromoves made within their own spheres of influence will begin to shift foundation culture to support learning and adaptation.

Seeding Impact: A Learning Inquiry

In the fall of 2022, the authors partnered to launch a learning inquiry designed to explore how Emergent Learning becomes integrated into practitioners' work, factors that contribute to and detract from integrating this approach, and what impact it is having. Our interest was in looking for examples of practitioners creating the conditions that make it possible for other things to happen that they could not necessarily orchestrate in advance. We defined impact, therefore, in a very local and immediate way as observable changes or results — small ripples — that could be attributed to a particular, often very small, action. We called these "micromoves." As part of this learning inquiry, we conducted 24 interviews between November 2022 and May 2023 to gather data around these questions and explored key themes through three sensemaking sessions with EL Community members. We also collected and published 26 small stories of impact from community members and continue to add to this library of stories.

The 2016 article described how living by the idea of emergence creates the potential for impacts practitioners could not have predicted or planned, and at a pace they could not have achieved by linear, chess-like orchestration. It likened this emergence to what has made mobile

phone technology so powerful — 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. This suggests that an Emergent Learning approach should produce results that go beyond anything practitioners were explicitly trained to do. (See Sidebar 2.)

Has this prediction played out in practice? As part of our learning inquiry, we gathered stories from many practitioners about the micromoves they have made — small EL-informed actions, what they observed happened as a result, and what insights they draw from this.

These micromoves are often seemingly small first steps — seeds that hold the potential to create transformative impact, both inside and outside of the foundation. But they are producing cascading results. Practitioners report, for example, that using Emergent Learning practices has led to more authentic, creative learning conversations that challenge the status quo, begin to break down silos, challenge power dynamics that impede equity, and build trust; they have resulted in faster-cycle learning, brought more voices to the table, and grounded conversations in their communities' work. Importantly, they are contributing to a wide range of situations — strengthening strategic thinking and grantmaking decisions, energizing external partnerships, improving utilization of evaluation data, growing the agency of marginalized communities, informing better board conversations, and nourishing the learning culture in practitioners' organizations.

These results were not orchestrated. Practitioners receive no instruction within Emergent Learning training programs about how to address any of these situations directly. These expanding results are happening because a community of practitioners experiment in their own work and come together on a regular basis to "Return Learning to the System" — a principle of Emergent Learning — by sharing and reflecting on their experiences. In so doing, they have created a marketplace of insights and ideas (akin to what happened in the mobile phone industry)

that is accelerating their collective learning about how to change their cultures and improve their results.

Examples of Practice

We offer a few examples that illustrate the range of applications practitioners have made using EL principles and practices. They illustrate practitioners working to make change within their own organizations — not only in the way they engage with each other and make decisions, but also in ways that create the potential to have impacts both across their own organizations and in their relationships with external partners.

Caring for Denver Foundation

Rebecca Ochtera of Caring for Denver Foundation was conducting monthly After Action Reviews³ with individual teams to support them in sharing what they were doing and learning with the full staff. For a while, staff was engaged in these full-team sharing conversations, but eventually it lost momentum. She started to recognize that this exercise helped teams understand the “what” of their work, but not how each team’s work was contributing to a larger whole: “We needed to move from information sharing to co-constructing strategy.” Rebecca started using Emergent Learning to facilitate Line of Sight conversations⁴ where diverse staff and leaders came together to co-create a vision for organizational initiatives. Developing a shared, visible line of sight has helped them leverage the knowledge, experience, and thinking of everyone involved around a common objective.

This line of sight is helping foundation staff hold each other more accountable and helping the foundation evolve its grantmaking. When challenges or differences of opinion arise, the team can draw on the Line of Sight work to slow down, connect the strategy to the larger vision, gather more data, and unpack their thinking to come up with a solution that is effective and

When challenges or differences of opinion arise, the team can draw on the Line of Sight work to slow down, connect the strategy to the larger vision, gather more data, and unpack their thinking to come up with a solution that is effective and sustainable. This approach is helping them to tell a systems-level story to the board and the community.

sustainable. This approach is helping them to tell a systems-level story to the board and the community.

McGregor Fund

Vanessa Samuelson of the McGregor Fund draws on the principles of Emergent Learning, along with the principles of trust-based philanthropy and other frameworks, to evolve their learning and reporting approach to center the experience and wisdom of grant partners and their communities. This started as an internal reflection process, which aimed to authentically meet grantee partners in the fullness of their work. Using Before and After Action Reviews and the principles of making thinking visible and holding expertise in equal measure helped provide a throughline that sustained the momentum of this internal work.

Over time, this has shifted the level of trust and the quality of conversations they have with their grantee partners. Vanessa observed,

³ Before Action Reviews and After Action Reviews (BARs and AARs) are sets of simple questions asked before and after a piece of work to help teams to clarify their thinking, reflect on their results, and adjust their thinking for next time.

⁴ Practitioners use EL questions to help teams make visible and keep in mind the connection between what they are doing and their larger goals.

It doesn't happen all at once and focuses on shifting how we engage with our grantee partners over time. We think of it as a reciprocal exchange where we make our thinking visible to them and they make their thinking visible to us.

Those exchanges inform how the McGregor Fund evolves its work. Grant partners reach out to Fund staff when they want to talk through their ideas. "They don't feel like they have to have it all baked before they engage with us..." Vanessa said. "It's much more of an exchange of ideas and questions than formal reporting." The deepened relationships with grant partners have allowed McGregor to evolve its work in a way that's relevant and aligned with the knowledge and needs of the community.

McKnight Foundation

Neeraj Mehta joined McKnight Foundation as their inaugural director of learning during a period of significant transformation. He was able to place learning at the center of the foundation's work at an institutional level from the start, introducing EL Tables⁵ to help staff develop the habit of making their thinking for each strategy visible during a strategy review. These conversations led to more thoughtful grantmaking, being able to make their case to stakeholders, and staff asking EL questions of each other to critique and contest their strategies and sharpen their thinking about how to create change. Neeraj remarked:

Making our thinking visible hasn't always been easy, but it helped us break through our fuzzy language and sharpen our thinking. It made it possible for us to really wrestle with questions like, what do these hypotheses say about how we believe change happens?

This helped them pave the way to creating a learning and accountability framework at an institutional level. He continued,

I think people at McKnight see EL Tables as a really useful way to make their thinking visible.

I think they also see them as a way to help make the case for their idea to stakeholders who are not as involved in the work as they are, or to ask for consultation and advice from peers internally and externally. It also helps them get ahead of the questions they know people will ask.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Monica Hall, a program associate with the Leadership for Better Health focus area at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, has used EL Tables to help strategic workgroups pause within and after a body of work or grant to reflect on what they have learned and think through where they might go in the future. The structure of EL Tables encourages participants to share their stories, Monica said:

It's like telling a really strong story grounded in learning. Program staff can talk — I mean really talk — around a question. It also requires us to keep the work at the center and really focus our thinking to shape the types of generative conversations we want to have.

The impact of these conversations has been substantial and noticeable. Deborah Bae, managing director of Leadership for Better Health, described how these conversations help program officers give better feedback to grantees, especially about negative decisions, which is a huge challenge. "I think the No. 1 reason why our program officers have a hard time turning someone down is because it feels arbitrary or they don't have a good reason," Deborah said. These conversations have also helped other people understand a grant they were not involved in. She observed that before the EL Table was introduced, strategy conversations had been flat:

None of our documents say "write a story." I think program officers like being able to tell a story that really encompasses what that grant was able to achieve. ... We're really siloed and I think the learning table has helped people feel more connected across program officers and the grants they oversee.

⁵ An EL Table starts with a framing question ("What will it take to ...?") and invites people to compare relevant data and stories, tease out insights, think forward, and express their best thinking about how to address this question in the work ahead. EL Tables can be done explicitly or used informally to guide a learning conversation.

And because it is being supported by program associates, Deborah said, it has lessened the work of program officers, which has contributed to “making it sticky.”

Together, these stories offer just a taste of the range of ways Emergent Learning has planted seeds and started to shift foundation culture. Rebecca’s work to strengthen line of sight at Caring for Denver has created the potential for greater impact through leveraging the knowledge and resources of the entire foundation in ways that would not have been possible through the siloed funding strategies it employed previously. The work Vanessa supports at McGregor Fund is unleashing the agency and experimentation of its grantees.

Neeraj was able to take advantage of an opportunity to kickstart culture change at McKnight Foundation. The EL Tables he seeded into the foundation’s strategy review process not only helped program staff test their thinking, but they also contributed to returning learning to the system. Monica’s EL Tables transformed “flat” strategy conversations at Robert Wood Johnson Foundation into more generative interactions that created many unpredictable, noticeable ripples — more focused thinking, better feedback to grantees, more connection and understanding across programs.

Each of these stories was shared with much humility, and they continue to unfold. Over time, we anticipate that they will produce results far greater than could have been orchestrated. In the process, these small shifts are creating a culture for team members to learn and engage with each other; to break through the perfectionism that binds so many foundations to their status quo assumptions.

Growing Impact in the Face of Cultural Challenges

The argument we are making here is that it is not possible for one program officer or team or foundation to know enough in advance to orchestrate a sustainable result a priori in a complex system, despite board expectations. And by trying to do so, they leave many other

[I]t is not possible for one program officer or team or foundation to know enough in advance to orchestrate a sustainable result a priori in a complex system, despite board expectations.

potential but unpredictable results on the table. It takes shifting from seeing the world like a chess player — seeing ourselves outside of the systems we hope to change — to recognizing what’s possible when we unleash the wisdom and agency of everyone on the team to begin to shift complex social environments, as Rebecca Ochtera did by helping Caring for Denver Foundation staff co-create their line of sight or as Vanessa Samuelson and her McGregor Fund colleagues did in helping to shift the nature of the funder–grantee conversation. As these examples illustrate, the proliferation of results we discovered in a range of situations within the EL Community illustrates what this shift makes possible — by planting small seeds and focusing on creating the conditions for them to grow and ripple out.

As described above, foundation culture is famously not conducive to learning, starting with the relationship between foundation staff and their boards and shaping the relationship funders have with their grantee partners. Many of the EL practitioners interviewed as part of our learning inquiry experienced their cultures as driven by a sense of urgency and a focus on meeting funding targets. They experienced their cultures as under-prioritizing learning and over-prioritizing expertise and expecting staff to have polished answers a priori. They experienced this as being at odds with the idea of experimentation, testing multiple pathways to sharpen strategy over time and the pauses needed to reflect. They described how learning gets perceived as an add-on. Not all practitioners

[I]n keeping with the notion of emergence, we observed that EL practitioners and their partners were able to make micromoves that began to plant the seeds for a learning culture to emerge, even within constraints.

reported being able to break through these cultural barriers. Others, like Rebecca, felt like they were failing at times, because change is slow and doesn't happen in a straight line.

What have our practitioners learned about what it takes for them and the foundations they work for to change this deeply entrenched way of working? To shift from thinking like a chess player to preparing a whole team to succeed together?

Start Small

Too often, in service of "fixing" flaws in the philanthropic culture, the message foundations receive is that they need to commit to a radical transformation. We believe that it is unrealistic (and chess-player like) to expect foundations to radically transform from the top down how they think about strategy and decision-making in order to begin to encourage learning, adaptation, and emergence. Rather, in keeping with the notion of emergence, we observed that EL practitioners and their partners were able to make micromoves that began to plant the seeds for a learning culture to emerge, even within constraints.

Kelley Adcock of Interact for Health shared how when she first started practicing Emergent Learning, the foundation's more traditional leadership style did not create the right

conditions for foundationwide learning. She started by experimenting with a specific team. In retrospect, she highlighted the importance of building trust and strengthening relationships. This provided a test case for the value of the EL approach. When the foundation went through a significant change in leadership, values, and strategy, the window of opportunity to bring EL practices organizationwide emerged. "Even under these more fruitful conditions," Kelley reflected, "incorporating EL requires intentionally fostering a learning culture, meeting people where they are, and integrating it into existing practices and processes."

Practitioners can keep their eye out for these windows of opportunity. Occasionally, opportunities to bake in Emergent Learning more broadly exist within a practitioner's own sphere of control and influence, as was the case with Neeraj Mehta's "greenfield" opportunity. In other cases, as Monica Hall shared, the opening comes from a felt need or gap within a larger system. Rebecca Ochtera started by holding monthly AARs with individual teams. That helped her recognize how siloed individual teams were and created the opportunity to do foundationwide Line of Sight work.

Ask a Question

Having identified an opportunity to make a micromove, practitioners can start by thinking with partners about what's possible and then asking everyone to think about what it will take to achieve it. It could start with something as simple as a single meeting: What will it take to engage everyone's best thinking around what we are trying to accomplish today? Or some aspect of an existing program: What will it take to turn this one-stop shop for services into a place where we (the community it is meant to serve) can bring our needs, our ideas, our whole selves to creating our best future?⁶ Or focusing on how we approach our work: What will it take to create a brave space where we can talk honestly about power and racial equity?

⁶A 2018 case study of the East Scarborough Storefront describes how a grantee used an emergent approach to turn a prescriptive funder-driven initiative into a sustainable, community-driven neighborhood center. (Darling, et al., 2018).

One question can completely transform our approach to solving a complex problem. Connie Stewart of California Polytechnic State University at Humboldt helped local hospitals and county staff to reframe a mental health crisis by offering a better framing question. Instead of asking, “How do we get behavioral health people out of the emergency room?” — a question that was leading the hospital and the county to adopt a heavy-handed solution that she knew would not stick, she proposed that they ask: “How do we address families in acute crisis with dignity?” This question inspired everyone involved to identify and fund a more community-centered, organic, and sustainable solution. Her takeaway: “A good framing question can ignite community support.”

One practice that helped grow impact was practitioners staying focused on stewarding one learning question over time. Doing so helped them step back and notice small ripples and act on them. EL practitioner Malia Xie of Women of the World Endowment described the results of a culture survey that led her to take on the question: What will it take for people in this organization to understand their roles and contributions? They were able to develop a clear, unobstructed line of sight toward their shared goals for different areas of their work, which led to more productive strategy discussions between the CEO and staff and helped staff better understand their contribution. The next year, Malia was able to take on a new question: What will it take to simplify our strategy and be more disciplined about it? By simply holding these learning questions in mind and noticing opportunities to experiment and what happened as a result, she could observe and nurture these small seeds she planted.

Keep the Work at the Center

A number of foundation-based EL Community members serve in roles that have learning in their title. It is easy for these practitioners and the people to whom they report to get caught in a chess-player mental model trap. If learning is viewed as a function to manage, asking for an institutional learning plan or agenda as the first task is a natural request intended to serve

Practitioners have reflected that for a learning plan or agenda to be relevant, it needs to be connected to the work itself; it needs to reflect questions that matter to the people who are being asked to do the learning.

the reporting structure and to mitigate risk, especially when learning is a new function and role. But, depending on how it is framed, this top-down orientation can silo learning and create a bind for EL practitioners that impedes their ability to support emergence.

Practitioners have reflected that for a learning plan or agenda to be relevant, it needs to be connected to the work itself; it needs to reflect questions that matter to the people who are being asked to do the learning. And it needs to be able to evolve and keep pace with strategy and what’s emerging. When learning is seen as its own activity — essentially centering on itself, rather than centering on the work at hand — it becomes something people have to set aside their work to engage in. Jeffrey Poirier of the Annie E. Casey Foundation observed that

When we try to learn about something that’s not integral to what a group does, it can sometimes be challenging because of time constraints, competing priorities, or an expert culture where participants are hesitant to show vulnerability. Learning topics that are more central to the actual role/work of individuals, though, can accelerate learning.

In Emergent Learning, learning is viewed as a means to an end, not an end in itself. During our learning inquiry, Tanya Beer reflected that

when I’m successful with a group in keeping work at the center, it lets them focus on what really

A board member recently reflected that he saw and felt our shift toward an adaptive strategy, after foundation staff and leadership had spent significant time over the course of a year making the thinking behind our strategies visible to one another.

matters, much faster and in more depth than when I'm overly wedded to a technocratic idea about a product or a solution. The attention to keeping what you're trying to make happen at the center helps to peel away our tendency to get lost in technique or process.

Make Results Visible

Being able to notice and make results visible also helped nurture these seeds, which is hard to do if we don't notice that they are sprouting. Because learning practitioners were getting caught on the same flywheel as everyone else in their organizations, some have found it helpful to track their results using a learning log to record what is happening and look back over time to see what has changed. "It was just good to remind me of the things I did and the results of what I did, so I wouldn't keep repeating the same thing over and over," observed Tracy Costigan of Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "I would know when and how to tweak [my approach]."

An even more powerful reinforcement for investing in learning came from people outside of the immediate team noticing and talking about a visible difference in how people on the team were thinking and talking about their work.

As Kelley Adcock observed,

A board member recently reflected that he saw and felt our shift toward an adaptive strategy, after foundation staff and leadership had spent

significant time over the course of a year making the thinking behind our strategies visible to one another. It helped us hold up strategies as hypotheses to be tested, rather than rigid strategies to implement and changed how we show up in our work and with each other.

This kind of shift opens the door to break through the board–staff focus on meeting predetermined targets that disincentivize learning and adaptation. It suggests that one path to changing board behavior might be to first change our own way of working.

Create the Conditions

Change does not happen in the abstract. It happens in this moment and the next and the one after that, which is why we attend to micro-moves and the ripples they create. Any large transformational vision that involves human beings needs to recognize that it is the actors on the ground adapting in the moment to what is in front of them that will make that vision come to life. The locus of agency in Emergent Learning is in the moment and place that you find yourself. "We don't have to understand the whole thing. We don't have to have all the answers," observed Marian Urquilla of Strategy Lift. "We can allow the system to reveal itself through our work."

Creating the conditions for change to ripple out is about leading by example, so that those around you start to imagine what's possible in their own sphere of control and influence. This is how staff members, regardless of their positional authority, can become agents of change in teams willing to experiment, as illustrated by how Monica Hall shifted her team's practices by focusing on program strategy conversations. Emergent Learning practitioners in a variety of roles have learned how modeling new behaviors — asking powerful questions and making their own thinking visible — helps others see what difference it makes and become curious about what difference they might be able to make in their own contexts.

Practitioners have described how having Emergent Learning "in your bones" — which

comes from practice — helps them know what questions to ask and why when opportunities present themselves, rather than just pulling out a prescribed tool or process to use when they have been taught to do them.⁷ This, paired with holding a learning question over time, helps them bring Emergent Learning into time-constrained environments in a just-in-time and fit-for-purpose way. Experienced practitioners often adamantly describe Emergent Learning as an attitude; a mindset — a “way of being,” as Cheryl Francisconi observed. As madeleine kennedy-macfoy describes it, “same conference, same colleagues, different me” (Smith & Foster, 2023, p. 78).

The 2016 article proposed that if foundation staff shifted from trying to orchestrate change to thinking of the whole ecosystem of actors as a soccer team — growing agency and encouraging experimentation, learning, and adaptation, then they could create results that are far greater than what they could have anticipated in advance. In our learning inquiry, our practitioners told us that starting small by focusing on and keeping the work at the center helped build support for learning through small but meaningful wins. Asking questions engaged the creative energy of the whole team. Making results visible both made it possible to learn from disappointments and be encouraged by growing success. Modeling what’s possible in their own spheres of control and influence created ripples of change. All of these together contributed to planting the seeds for shifting foundation culture and growing impact.

Conclusion

Though some foundations have made significant changes to how they think about change as a result of their Emergent Learning practice, this article is not another call for foundations to radically transform their fundamental grantmaking approach. It is a call for creating the space and the conditions for emergence. Practitioners in foundations large and small have been using

[M]odeling new behaviors — asking powerful questions and making their own thinking visible — helps others see what difference it makes and become curious about what difference they might be able to make in their own contexts.

Emergent Learning to make change where change wants to happen; to introduce very simple, practical practices where learning is called for and needed. In the process, the seeds they have planted have helped their organizations and external partners begin to develop cultures that support learning and adaptation.

In this article, we have shared just a few examples since the publication of the 2016 Foundation Review article of the actions EL practitioners have taken to seed and nurture learning and impact inside of foundations and with external partners. It is our hope that, as we continue to experiment and share what we are learning as a community, these small seeds of impact will become more visible and continue to grow and expand beyond foundation walls, as Vanessa Samuelson’s story illustrates. But these larger shifts will take time.

As we said at the beginning of this article, the practices of Emergent Learning are deliberately simple and intended to be shared across ecosystems. Since 2016, a growing number of nonprofits and external consultants have also been planting seeds in the larger ecosystem. We propose that all of these small shifts inside and between organizations and the ripples they are creating will begin to become visible in the larger ecosystem, creating more space for

⁷ Members of the EL Community have begun to distinguish between “tool” and “practice” and to refer to methods like BARs, AARs, and EL Tables as practices that require practice in order to build our skills at using them, rather than pulling them out of a toolbox to use in a prescribed way.

thinking together, experimenting together, and adapting strategies to match the challenges we face together.

The EL Community will continue to track and make visible the results that are being created. We hope that what we can report in another few years validates this hypothesis.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Jessica Kiessel for helping to conceptualize this article and members of the EL Community for their commitment to deepening our collective understanding and practice.

References

- BEER, T. (2019, May 30). *Realigning foundation trustees to incentivize learning* [Conference session]. Grantmakers for Effective Organizations Learning Conference, Seattle, WA, United States. <https://www.evaluationinnovation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Beer-GEO-Board-Talk-1.pdf>
- COFFMAN, J., BEER, T., STID, D., & ARMSTRONG, K. (2023). Using developmental evaluation to support adaptive strategies: An application from a social change initiative. In A. Rangarajan (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of program design and implementation evaluation* (pp. 151–171). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190059668.001.0001>
- BROWN, A.M. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds*. AK Press.
- DARLING, M., GUBER, H., SMITH, J., & STILES, J. (2016). Emergent learning: A framework for whole-system strategy, learning, and adaptation. *The Foundation Review*, 8(1), 59–73. <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1284>
- DARLING, M., GUBER, H., SMITH, J. (2018). *A whole greater than its parts: Exploring the role of emergence in complex social change*. The Emergent Learning Community Project. https://emergentlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/4QP_Emergence.pdf
- KRAMER, M., RUSSELL, P., & KANIA, J. (2014). Strategic philanthropy for a complex world. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 12(3), 26–37. <https://doi.org/10.48558/1KDK-1T25>
- PATTON, M. Q. (2011). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. Guilford Press.
- SMITH, J., & FOSTER, L. (2023). Keeping work at the center. In M. J. Darling & A. Eenigenburg (Eds.), *Guide to the principles of emergent learning* (pp. 75-87). The Emergent Learning Community Project.

Marilyn Darling, M.A., is a co-founder of the Emergent Learning Community Project. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Marilyn Darling at marilyn@emergentlearning.org.

Veena Pankaj, M.A., is the founder and principal of Eval4Learning.