13

Seeking Synergy
Strategic Partnership Development as Organizational Practice in Informal Education Organizations

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Biography: ***Rafi Santo****, PhD, is a learning scientist based at New York University focused on the intersection of digital culture, education, and institutional change. Centering his work within research-practice partnerships, he has studied, collaborated with, and facilitated a range of organizational networks related to digital learning, computing, and technology in education. Within informal education, he has focused on organizational change and the design of innovation networks around digital learning, focusing on both regional networks including the Mozilla Hive NYC Learning Network, a collective of seventy informal education organizations, as well as national networks, such as the Digital Learning Challenge community supported by the Susan Crown Exchange. In work in kindergarten through twelfth grade schooling, he has partnered with the CS for All National Consortium to support school districts to develop values-driven strategic plans around universal computing education initiatives. He is co-author of a four-volume collection on digital making from MIT Press called* Interconnections: Understanding Systems through Digital Design. *His work has been supported by the Spencer Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Mozilla Foundation, the Susan Crown Exchange, and the National Science Foundation.*

Strategic Partnership Development

A MUSEUM SPREADS ITS CITIZEN SCIENCE program to a half-dozen community recreation centers across its city. A community-based organization with a focus on socioemotional learning leverages a network of local expert organizations in maker education to help it develop its own makerspace. A library system increases its teen program offerings in areas like fashion, game design, and film-making by connecting

local branches to specialized educational nonprofits. In these examples and so many others, informal education organizations utilize partnerships to "punch above their weight." Through collaboration across organizations, they are able to reach more young people, increase their internal capacity, spread their pedagogical practices, and expand the range of learning opportunities available to their youth. Yet while partnerships within education are now often an everyday part of organizational life, the processes of carrying them out and forming them cannot be taken for granted. A critical aspect of partnerships in informal education organizations needs to be explored—the dynamics surrounding *strategic partnership development.*

The findings shared here are rooted in almost five years of engagement in a research-practice partnership with the Hive NYC Learning Network, a collective of over seventy informal learning organizations based in New York City. As a network actively oriented toward using cross-organizational partnerships to explore the role and potential of emergent digital technologies for youth learning, Hive NYC was a rich context to investigate questions of how such partnerships come about. Two broad categories of phenomena associated with strategic partnership development are explored here.

The first category contains antecedents to the process of partnership development—factors that either directly instigated a process of exploring a potential partnership or were in some way preceding conditions to this process. Following this, the second category outlines facilitating actions—actions taken by informal learning organizations once the process of exploring a potential partnership was underway. These facilitating actions move the process forward toward either the formalization of a partnership or the decision to not pursue partnership. As informal education organizations increasingly look to partnerships for a variety of strategic purposes, the frameworks offered here might help organizations better understand the dynamics involved in partnership formation so that they may reflect on the partnership process.

Context—Hive Research Lab and Hive NYC Learning Network

This study took place within the context of a larger research-practice partnership between a university-based research group called Hive Research Lab and the Hive NYC Learning Network. Largely a project of the Mozilla Foundation,[1] Hive Learning Networks are regional collectives of educational stakeholders, principally youth-serving informal learning organizations, including

museums, libraries, nonprofit and community-based organizations, as well as some institutions of higher education and industry partners. They are oriented toward promoting digital literacy, equity and inclusion with regards to technology and digital culture, pedagogical approaches that focus on interest-driven learning, and generally positioning youth as producers as opposed to only consumers of media and technology. Hives aim to achieve these ends through the creation of strong collectives of informal learning organizations supported by catalytic funding and network participation structures. Mozilla Foundation, largely known for its relationship to the popular open-source web browser Firefox but having also been a supporter of digital literacy initiatives, has acted as the network steward that supported these activities in many cities. Between 2010 and 2017, it actively developed Hives in New York, Chicago, Kansas City, Chattanooga, Austin, and Toronto, with some amount of support for others in various other locations. In New York, museum Hive participants included the Museum of Modern Art, the American Museum of Natural History, the Rubin Museum of Art, the Bronx Museum, the New York Hall of Science, the Museum of the Moving Image, the Brooklyn Museum, the Smithsonian's Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, and the Wildlife Conservation Society.

Elyse Eidmann-Adahl, director of the National Writing Project, once characterized Hives as both "Networks for Learning" and "Networks that Learn." On the one hand, a Hive acted as an ecosystem of youth-facing learning opportunities that span a city in order to support interest-driven learning pathways around digital media (the "Network for Learning"); on the other, as a "Network that Learns," participant organizations learned together how best to support such youth learning.[2,3] In this way, the "network" was seen simultaneously as a something experienced by both young people and institutions.

The partnership between Hive NYC and Hive Research Lab focused on simultaneously supporting the network to advance its goals of being a strong learning context for both the youth and organizations within it, as well as producing more broadly applicable research useful to both practitioners and scholars beyond the network. One key area of study for the research group focused on how partnerships played a role in the process of organizational learning, and the framework and examples presented in this chapter is one that emerged from this line of inquiry.[4]

Notes

1. While it is not in the scope of this chapter to explore the institutional history of Hive Learning Networks as an initiative, it is important to note that the key actors involved in their founding were connected to and supported by the MacArthur Foundation, with the Social Science Research Council acting as the founding steward in New York and DePaul University's Digital Youth Network acting as the founding steward in Chicago. Mozilla became the steward in New York in October 2011 and in Chicago in July 2013, and ended its stewardship

of those and other Hive Networks at the end of 2017. In one location, Pittsburgh, an existing network, the Kids+Creativity Network, later known as the Remake Learning Network, was briefly branded as and received support from the MacArthur Foundation to become a Hive network.

2. Ching, D. 2016. "'Now I Can Actually Do What I Want': Social Learning Ecologies Supporting Youth Pathways in Digital Media Making." Doctoral dissertation. New York University, New York.
3. Ching, D., Santo, R., Hoadley, C., and Peppler, K. 2015. *On-Ramps, Lane Changes, Detours and Destinations: Building Connected Learning Pathways in Hive NYC through Brokering Future Learning Opportunities*. New York: Hive Research Lab. http://bit.ly/brokering.
4. The foundation for this analysis is qualitative data from one-hour interviews with twenty-four informal learning organizations within the Hive NYC Learning Network that took place during 2014 and 2015. The interviews focused on accounts shared by member organizations related to how they engaged in forming new partnerships. These included the contexts in which partnerships formed, activities organizations engaged in during this process, considerations they made during decisions about whether to engage in a partnership, what a partnership might focus on, and what steps they took to solidify such partnerships. The data from interviews was also augmented by fieldwork within network contexts like meet-ups, community calls, holiday parties, conferences, and the community's online listserv between 2012 and 2016. These contexts were especially relevant to the question of strategic partnership development as these were often spaces that facilitated such activities, a theme that will be addressed in the findings.

   In analyzing the data, I aimed to address the question of what factors and practices were salient to the process of strategic partnership development. While the broader study of organizational learning this analysis was situated in was driven by existing cultural-historical theories of learning (Engeström, 1987), for this particular analysis I used a grounded theory approach to deriving emergent themes from the data (Glaser, 2017).The analysis resulted in two sets of thematically driven factors and/or actions: a) antecedents to the process of partnership development—factors that either directly instigated a process of exploring a potential partnership, or were in some way preceding conditions to this process; and b) facilitating actions—actions taken by informal learning organizations once the process of exploring a potential partnership was underway in order to move forward toward either the formalization of a partnership or the decision to not pursue partnership.

The Role of Strategic Partnerships in Informal Education Organizations

These findings contribute to a small but growing literature on the nature of partnerships in informal education organizations. While there is a fair amount known about how informal education organizations partner with schools,[1] partnerships within informal education organizations are less frequently explored. Prior work on the Hive NYC Network has explored

the ways that such partnerships can support different kinds of goals and needs, especially with regards to the process of developing and spreading new programs, technologies, or educational initiatives.[2] A study examining ninety-four formal partnerships among organizations in the Hive NYC Network found that the roles these organizations played for one another fell into one of three broad categories—providing *expertise*, providing *networks*, and providing *resources*.

Expertise-related roles included designing new curricula or programs, playing an advisory role on a project, helping to facilitate a program, providing strategic planning assistance, or conducting evaluations or research. *Network-related roles* included activities such as recruiting youth, providing access to a network of educators associated with one's organization, or providing access to a distribution network such as an online portal with a wide audience. *Resource-related roles* within partnerships included providing physical space and facilities, specialized technology or equipment, and intellectual property.

By configuring these roles in a variety of ways, informal education organizations could develop new initiatives, refine existing ones, reach new audiences of both youth and educators, increase their own capacity in a variety of new pedagogical specializations, and provide new and distinctive learning opportunities for youth.

Developing Strategic Partnerships

Collaboration among Hive members was a strong network value, and members were regularly engaged in the process of developing new partnerships. The process of strategic partnership development was often talked about as being "in conversation" with another organization—going through a process of determining whether formal collaboration might be possible or beneficial. At times this process could be very directed and time-bound. Two actors from separate organizations connect at a network meet-up and sense that there could be some potential in working together. They exchange information and bring their respective teams into a series of phone calls or meetings taking place over the course of weeks where the organizations share their current work and brainstorm possible ways of working together; they either find clear next steps or one or both of the actors concludes that there is no immediate possibility or desire to partner.

In other cases, being "in conversation" might be interwoven within the fabric of a longer and more organic relationship. Two organizations may have been generally familiar with one another for some time and had

more informal relationships of knowledge-sharing, giving advice, and making introductions for one another. A leadership change in one organization prompts a re-evaluation of what the relationship could look like, and inspired by this internal shift at one organization, the two actors, long familiar with the range of one another's work, meet to discuss potential collaborations.

The following sections look at two sets of factors: *antecedents* to strategic partnership development processes and *facilitating actions* taken within existing ones that were meant to move the process along either toward formalization of the partnership or a decision to not pursue a partnership.

Antecedents to Strategic Partnership Development

Prior to directly engaging in the kinds of deliberation, ideation, and negotiation that characterize the later stages of developing a partnership, a number of *antecedents* help spark this process. There are seven antecedents to strategic partnership development found in the data, which often were intertwined: *affinity*, *exploratory stance*, *trusted brokerage*, *coercive pressure*, *network participation*, *working in the open*, and *open signaling*.

Affinity: A common precursor to strategic partnership development was *affinity* among employees within organizations. That is, an individual staff member might have a general admiration, sense of shared values, and appreciation for the work of another actor, be it a specific individual, an organization more broadly, or both.

Ricardo, an employee at the Science Exploration Center, in describing talks that he and his colleagues were in with TECHform, a technology-oriented youth development organization, shared a general admiration of the organization's leadership ("Jim is a really brilliant individual") and appreciation of their pedagogical approach ("I really love to see what the students are learning. There's an application to it."), and he generally saw a strong alignment of values. Hive members regularly shared such sentiments as "oh, we've wanted to find a project to work on together for ages now" when sharing stories about how formal partnerships came about. This pointed to the reality that sometimes the process of initiating a partnership exploration process was motivated, at least to some degree, by affinity, with an intuition that some possible way of working together would be found upon sharing more about current work underway and strategic priorities.

Exploratory Stance: A second precursor is *exploratory stance*. That is, an organization is in a place where it is generally assessing potential direc-

tions or next steps it might take and is open to meeting with and engaging in discussions around potential partnerships with other organizations as part of the process of better defining its own strategy.

In one interview, an employee from Ludo Learning Lab, when discussing a number of meetings it was having with potential collaborators, framed its organization as being in a moment where it had a "general stance of experimentation," saying that

> we were super interested in just partnering with another Hive organization. It came at a time for our organization where we were looking for new projects but we weren't really sure which direction to head into.

Having an exploratory stance can act as a precursor and motivation for engaging in strategic partnership development and is distinct in that there may not necessarily some highly specified strategy or project being advanced through this process, at least initially. Rather, such activities might be seen as a "strategy to develop strategy" and can contribute to larger process of clarifying potential new directions and possible futures for an organization.

Trusted Brokerage: A third precursor identified is *trusted brokerage.* Essentially, an intermediary familiar with two actors previously unconnected or loosely connected sees some potential for collaboration and makes an introduction that facilitates actions linked to strategic partnership development.

In one interview, a participant mentioned a person that regularly played this role of being a trusted broker for her organization when asked about how a specific partnership came about.

> Kara actually suggested that they [talk to us]. So often Kara has kind of been a catalyst in that. She's done a ton of brokering on our behalf. She knows us really well as an organization.

The broker here is familiar with this organization (in this case, she was a former employee), and, presumably, had similar familiarity, at least to some degree, with the other organization as well.

In another instance shared by the same participant, she pointed to a different organization that regularly acted as a trusted broker:

> They just really frequently introduce us to organizations who are looking to take advantage of our expertise. They're kind of playing the role of convener in the games and learning space.

Organizations acting as trusted brokers are not necessarily only looking out for the specific organizations they are connecting, but are also potentially acting more broadly as stewards of a particular part of a sector, a role where promoting the success of individual organization through brokering is part of a larger field-strengthening orientation.

Additionally, while trusted brokerage may be initiated by the brokers themselves, it can also be instigated by an actor either generally seeking collaborators to fill a certain need (e.g., "Do you know anyone that has experience integrating scientific inquiry and coding?") or more specifically looking to connect with a particular organization (e.g., "Can you introduce me to the folks at SciCode?"). In these cases, trusted brokerage can be the result of self-advocacy or search activities for the organization seeking partners.

Coercive Pressure: One precursor previously identified in literature on institutional theory is *coercive pressure*.[3] As Small[4] notes, coercive pressure can mediate the formation of social ties between organizations and "stem(s) from larger authorities that mandate or establish regulations resulting in inter-organizational ties or the exchange of resources across organizations." The phenomenon is somewhat similar to trusted brokerage in that it involves an outside actor mediating the process of strategic partnership development in some way.

Coercive pressure manifested in the research study in a number of ways. Some resembled the mechanisms of trusted brokerage, whereby a third actor actively connects two previously unconnected actors, seeing some way that these two actors might benefit or that by aligning their strategies the benefit that might accrue to the broader field. The distinction here is that the connection may be less mediated by trust, though trust may be present, and more by the power and position of the actor making the connection.

One place where coercive pressure was salient within Hive, less targeted to a specific organization, was criteria for Hive grants. Many Requests for Proposals required multiple organizational actors to participate in funded projects. A Request for Proposal from the Hive Digital Media and Learning Fund, for example, stated for some types of grants that "Partnership with another member of the Network is strongly encouraged. Partnerships with groups outside the Network will also be considered." Other funding competitions simply stated, "Partnership with at least one other group in the Network is required," and for projects involving at least three partners, two from the Hive network were required.

Participants responded to such coercive pressures in various ways. Generally, they were as part of the natural landscape of organizational life. In one case, a Hive member reported that he initially bristled when some

powerful actor recommended that his organization engage in a partnership with another group, but he eventually came to appreciate the specialized expertise that the recommended organization brought to their partnership and the unlikeliness that they would have worked together independent of such pressure. Others resisted such direct recommendations and proposed alternative relationships with organizations they trusted and with whom they had more experience that would fulfill the same function. Many study participants described a phenomenon they deemed "shotgun marriages," wherein two organizations end up partnering because some powerful actor either had a direct or indirect influence. In these cases, partnerships were either formed quickly, often without much deliberation or specification, and, potentially, without the depth that might allow the relationship to more effectively leverage respective organizational resources and navigate emergent challenges.

Network Participation: One of the most salient preconditions of partnership formation is *network participation*, when an organization's staff participates in contexts created by broader networks of actors. In Hive NYC, the network's managers created a range of participation structures, including monthly meet-ups, community calls, working groups, and member-led professional development opportunities where member organizations would gather in person. They also created such online contexts as a community listserv, blog, directory, project portfolio, and Slack channel where members were able to participate. Finally, the network stewards would often coordinate and encourage participation in broader field-level gatherings such as conferences or symposia, and travel funds were often made available for participation in these events. In all of these contexts, relationships would form and information would circulate among network members that would support the process of strategic partnership development.

Within these kinds of network structures, the nature and design of the experience would often support larger processes of strategic partnership formation. Promoting the often-stated view that the most valuable conversations "happen in the hallway," many of the in-person meet-ups were structured to ensure that member organizations had time to informally connect with one another. At the same time, these network contexts often contained more formal mechanisms for supporting strategic partnership development: presentations and share-outs about specific organizational practices or models, small and large group conversations that focused on common issues, and even formal activities where organizations were invited to share current strategic challenges. These activities helped to make more

transparent how participants might leverage each other's expertise, resources and networks for strategic partnerships.

Working in the Open: Linked to modes of work found in open source culture, *working in the open* is a set of work practices and program development that values transparency, an experimental stance, and open contribution and collaboration by large communities.[5] "Working open" covers a range of organizational approaches to innovation and scaling work that emphasize:

1. *Public storytelling and context setting*, where a project will regularly use public and semi-public channels to share about an initiative that promotes discoverability;
2. *Rapid prototyping "in the wild,"* where early stage project ideas will be tested in public contexts;
3. *Enabling community contribution*, or specifically designing a project's division of labor in a way that allows new actors to get involved;
4. *Public reflection and documentation*, or documenting learnings and having a trail of accessible artifacts that are created and share along the way; and, finally
5. *Creating remixable work products*, ones that can easily, and legally, be adapted and reconfigured by others that wish to build on them.

While these practices are ones that emerged from a technology culture associated with Free/Open Source Software, in Hive NYC they took place across both digital and in-person contexts, with sharing about projects happening in the context of in-person meet-ups as much as on blog posts. The values of collaboration, transparency, and collective impact that guided these practices were more important than the range of digital tools. Taken together, practices of working in the open were often precursors to partnership development, setting the foundation for a given organization or project to be discovered and for potential collaborators to understand how they might contribute.

Open Signaling: A final antecedent found in the data was that of *open signaling*—mechanisms for making clear within semi-public contexts an interest in forming partnerships with other actors. Often, such signaling occurred in contexts that were developed by the Hive NYC network stewards, such as within the community's online listserv or in face-to-face meet-ups or community calls. Sometimes these contexts included explicit opportunities where organizations collectively engaged in activities de-

signed to promote open signaling around particular needs. In other cases, a specific organization might share out about an early stage project and indicate its interest in finding partners that might be willing to act as testing or adoption sites, as in the instance of an organization developing an SMS-based tool meant to facilitate communication between educators and teens that was looking to find organizations interested in using and giving feedback on an early stage prototype of the technology.

Within the open signaling practices observed, actors indicated different needs and interests that varied in terms of their specificity. In one case, an organization posted to the Hive listserv with the subject line "Looking for a Partner?" and within the post outlined broadly what it could offer potential partners ("approximately 200 scientists on staff who can be accessed for guest talks, collaborative design work and one-on-one mentoring," "the ability to implement short-term or long-term programs in which science-interested youth can explore particular topics") and what needs it was looking to have filled through partnerships ("access to youth from under-represented communities," "creative approaches to engaging youth in science"). That approach was quite broad, with many potential avenues that interested collaborators could pursue through understanding the general needs of the posting organization.

A second example indicates a more targeted approach. Posting to the Hive listserv with the subject line "Looking to Finalize List of Partners," an organization indicated interest in finding additional implementation sites that would receive professional development and then run a technology-enabled environmental activism program developed by the organization. It outlined a specific scope of work that partners would undertake, a description of the program to be implemented, and the nature of the support the organization would provide.

Other, even more formal, mechanisms of open signaling included organizations publicly announcing a new initiative seeking network partners and providing a short-form "interest application" to be completed by potential partners.

Generally, the presence of open signaling indicated a degree of trust between organizations in the network and indexed strong norms around collaboration. While these behaviors did not replace the more intensive facilitating processes explored in the next section, open signaling helped support such facilitation.

Facilitating Actions within Strategic Partnership Development

Once the process of coming together to discuss a potential partnership was underway, there were a number of facilitating actions that moved the process of strategic partnership development forward toward project formalization, definition of roles, and procurement and provision of resources. This section describes four of these: *establishing identity*, *seeking synergy*, *framing value*, and *assessing capacity*.

Establishing Identity: The first facilitating action was the practice of *establishing identity*, through which organizations made more transparent their respective capacities, assets, interests, and needs. Participants framed this practice as "getting to know" another organization, "self-framing," and "defining resources." Within a discussion, this practice might look like a combination of telling the organization's broad story and orientation with a more detailed outlining of current initiatives and programs.

One participant noted that within such conversations he might share something along the lines of "We've been doing a lot of X and not as much Y, but are really looking to do less X," aiming not only to share what the organization has done and currently did, but also making clear the kind of work it wanted to do in the future. Thus, the process of establishing identity in this context was both retrospective and prospective. The potential partner could therefore prime the other(s) to see whether it could help the inquiring organization move in its desired strategic direction.

The process of establishing identity could also be condensed or even skipped over entirely if the actors involved had, through other mechanisms, become deeply familiar with one another and had a clear sense of the potential opportunities that might be pursued together.

Seeking Synergy: The centerpiece of strategic partnership development is arguably the process of seeking synergy. All preceding actions lead up to and support this process of establishing concrete possibilities for collaboration. Participants talked about this practice in terms of "brainstorming," "shooting around ideas," and "seeking reciprocity," essentially determining what needs might be filled or possibilities pursued through creative re-combination of distinctive assets that organizations bring to the table.

In one instance, a participant described details related to potential collaborations recently identified with another organization. Her organization had been developing media production tools focused on teaching about intellectual property and fair use through remixing existing video. The

organization they were in discussion with had access to a broad array of intellectual property that was in the public domain and thus not legally restricted in how others use it. She described the potential synergy between their organizations in this way:

> *Lisa:* [Our executive director] met with them and he talked with them and they loved the project and they love what it's about. And what we want to do is work on creating basically a conduit where people can import directly from the Internet Archives into the Message Mixer.
>
> *Researcher:* Which means that you don't need to worry about fair use.
>
> *Lisa:* Yeah. . . . [It's] public domain. It also cuts out a major technical barrier for a lot of educators because a lot of people [are] like, "How do I download a video? How do I upload a video?" [And] it solves a problem with the fair use issue in terms of how you acquire media, . . . So we don't have to worry about that. It makes it easier for our students. It makes it easier for educators. It also helps to, I think, raise the function of what their organization can do and what they're there for. So that funnel would be huge.

She pointed to a number of problems that might be solved by creating a partnership between the two organizations. For her organization, both technical literacy challenges concerning how to download and upload media could be avoided, and legal challenges associated with potentially using copyrighted intellectual property become less of a concern through access to an archive of media in the public domain. For the potential partner, she described how it created beneficial application and use of its assets ("raises the function of what their organization can do and what they're there for"). Both organizations would receive benefits and be able, through a potential collaboration, to solve problems inherent within their contexts. The process of seeking synergy helped identify problems inherent in the daily work of the organizations and resolve those problems through focusing on a shared goal.

At the same time, not all processes of seeking synergy end up with clear ways of moving forward together. In one case, a participant shared a process of partnership development that ended up with little to show for it, largely because it was not clear exactly what benefit could come from collaborating.

> We both had similar ideas, we both had similar philosophies. And we both had distribution [channels], we both had content, we both felt like we could make stuff, and it was this process of trying to figure out who did

> what. . . . It was just hard to figure out how the puzzle pieces fit together. Nothing ever came of it, it was unfortunate. We wanted to partner, it was just unclear enough how to do it.

Even having affinity in place—what seemed like respect and admiration for one another's work ("similar philosophies"), and a desire to partner—the process of seeking synergy was not successful. What kinds of problems each of the organizations could solve for one another remained elusive. Another instance pointed to a similar dynamic, with a participant, Ricardo, describing meetings with a potential partner:

> We were at TECHform two weeks ago. It's Jim, Sam—big thinkers shooting out ideas, and then me just jotting down a lot of notes and just, "Okay. How can we logistically make sense of all of this?" . . . Sam's really a big thinker. . . . But sometimes, it can get too excessive. "Okay. What are we doing? You sound like you said a really great idea, but–?" . . . What usually happens is that– . . . "Oh, you're a great organization, and I'm a great organization. You guys do cool stuff." And then list your stuff, and then, that's it. Nothing ever comes of it. "Oh, we would love to do that because you guys are doing that." You say, "Alright," and then you walk out of the meeting like, "Nothing happened. What's the next step?"

Essentially, Ricardo is describing how the process can start with affinity, move into a more substantive set of discussions around strategic partnership development with identities being established, but the process stalls there, with possibilities being generated but a lack of concretizing something that is in the realm of possibility for both organizations.

These examples reveal that the process of seeking synergy is tentative and fragile, and there are many reasons that alignment might not be reached. There simply might not be an obvious way to work together, or there might not be adequate resources of staff time or funding. Additionally, while one group might wonder why "nothing happened," even though many ideas were generated, it is possible that the other organization might not have found the concepts for collaboration sufficiently compelling. Finally, the prospective partner might question the level of expertise or capacity that becomes visible during the process of inter-organizational familiarization.

Framing Value: Interwoven with the process of seeking synergy is *framing value* of potential partnership projects—a process of showing other actors why it might be beneficial to work together, even if its value is not immediately apparent. One participant described this action:

> [Our executive director] likens a lot of [the process] to his political background where you're trying to talk about mutual benefits. And a lot of it depends on flattering the other person. . . . It's a matter of how are you constructing the message in a way that is endearing and alluring to the person that you're talking to.

She shared a number of examples of how this has played out within the process of strategic partnership development within her organization:

> So we are in talks with WebDex, right? We're talking about issues around fair use in interacting with content that exists that is out there and finding a proactive way to make it relevant and talk about it, remixing it, using it for education, all those things. That's kind of the frame that we're putting around it for WebDex. And then we're also of course talking about the fact that our population is demographically very diverse and tends to not be kids who are engaging with media in this way. When we go and talk to the Engaged Network, which is a marketing firm that would help us . . . to spread the tool and get more users to adopt it, get more school districts to adopt it, that conversation has more to do with making it sound like an interesting challenge to them because it's a little bit more complicated than just sending out a tweet. . . . And that is a challenge that's interesting to them. . . . And then the social educational benefits on top of that are also appealing.

For each of the potential partners, she described how her organization constructed particular narratives and arguments for why it would be of value to engage in a partnership. For WebDex, she used the frame of making their content "relevant" through "remix" and use within an educational setting. This enabled the other organization to understand why a partnership would help solve one of their challenges. For the Engaged Network, she talked about appealing to the unique and complex nature of "get[ting] more school districts to adopt" its tool, and how that is distinct from what they might usually be doing in marketing campaigns. For both potential partners, she emphasized appealing to the pro-social and mission driven aspect of working with her organization. All of these helped frame the value of a possible collaboration.

Assessing Capacity: A final facilitating action was *assessing capacity*—actions taken that help determine a potential partner's expertise, capabilities, work style, and interactional fluidity. Participants shared how evaluating a potential partner's capacity was ongoing throughout the entire process of strategic partnership development. Assessing capacity could include evaluating the kinds of ideas around collaboration that a potential

partner put forward, observing the ways the potential partner structured and engaged within a conversation, learning more about a partner's approach to tasks, or other, more formal actions such as reading responses to formal Requests for Partnership.

One participant talked about how, at the end of the phone call with a potential partner, he would often suggest that one of the actors write a follow-up email detailing the possible collaborations that had been discussed, including agreed-upon next steps, such as sending promised supporting documentation or scheduling the next phone call or meeting. He shared that when a potential partner does not follow through on such a commitment or inaccurately captures the next steps, doubts surface about the relationship's viability.

In another case, an organization had a promising conversation with another and decided to move forward on a collaborative funding proposal. The process of proposal writing, however, provided serious warning signs:

> It was a proposal that we were going to submit. . . . If the other partner isn't basically pulling their weight and being as helpful as they possibly can be in the proposal writing process, if they are not consistently checking in, that is something—OK, so this is what's it's like to start a proposal process and it's not going to go well during programming. So we should just stuff the whole thing, and we did.

This process helped evaluate the capacity of the potential partner and resulted in a decision to abandon plans to work together.

Such actions can help develop—or damage irrevocably—trust between new partners. They shed light on such questions as: How does the other organization work? Can I rely on them? How do they react if things don't go as planned? Questions like these are answered in large and small ways throughout the process of strategic partnership development, and continue, of course, in more substantive ways within formal partnerships that are born out of that process.

Conclusion

The process of strategic partnership development is explored in this chapter as observed in the context of a network of informal education organizations. The different factors discussed, antecedents to and actions taken within partnership exploration, can contribute to the broader organizational practice of strategic partnership development. Rather than reducing such processes to the most explicit and formal moments of interactions

between organizations, empirical analysis has attempted to show the ways that these actions span both long and short timescales. Broader practices of network participation are ongoing and occur along longer timescales, but they can often facilitate more intensive moments of seeking synergy between two organizations. At the same time, more micro-level dynamics that happen in the course of a conversation among potential partners, such as the ways one actor is able to frame value, or fails to, can play important roles in the process of partnership development.

The findings suggest that there are certain actions organizations, including museums, can take to become more effective in forming partnerships. Putting resources into participating in networks and publicly documenting work creates the conditions necessary for other actors to understand how they might partner with another organization. Forming a strong social network that deeply understands its work makes it more likely that an organization ends up benefiting from trusted brokerage. And within the process of exploring a given partnership, attending intentionally to how those involved are able to establish identity, frame value, seek synergy, and assess capacity will likely result in more robust and mutually beneficial partnerships. When done well, strategic partnership development can play a critical role in resolving internal challenges and advancing strategic priorities through transforming and expanding an organizational ecosystem by figuring out potential ways that assets another organization brings to the table might be leveraged. These partnerships can also increase the broader community impact of collaborative efforts. With today's increased emphasis on broad learning ecosystems and recognition that partnership development can lead to formal collaborations that support the design, improvement, and spread of educational projects, insights into the factors that drive partnerships can provide useful cues along the way to success.

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