
Stories of Early Impact

What does Emergent Learning make possible?

Change, like learning, does not happen in the abstract. It happens because of an action we take that creates a possibility for something different to happen. These small “micro-moves” are like creating building blocks or a small opening that can be nurtured into something larger. This is a story of an Emergent Learning action and what that made possible.



A story from: Karen Stornelli (2019), ATD Fourth World Movement

Featured Practice: EL Tables

Featured Principle: Bringing Diverse Voices to the Table

What happened?

We are using an EL Table to capture learnings around collective/community art as a tool for community engagement and positive family and community outcomes. We have two EL tables up on our office wall and use them to share what we're working on with community members and partners who come by.

I remember a community member stopping by our workspace and noticing the table, which was about a project that she is part of. This got her talking about the project. We grabbed a marker and started adding what she was sharing. She did not need to know which quadrant her thinking fit in; we could do that with her.

What difference did it make? (Early Impact)

The EL Table has been great for structuring our thinking and capturing what we've already learned through collective art projects in communities. We are beginning a new partnership with our town's art council, which involves a series of collective art projects led by local artists. The EL table is giving us a way to learn quickly from each experience to inform the next one.

The EL Tables on the wall created an ongoing space for our reflection and development of the project. It literally reflected the "work in progress" that the project was (that every project is!). It also invited community members' thinking in more informal, less intimidating ways. We have had to halt the project in the form it was taking because of COVID, but the learnings are not lost and have continued to inform our work.

What insights do you have?

The fact that the EL table is visual and can be added to over time makes it the most valuable tool for learning that we've used. It also gives us an organic way to share our thinking with community members visiting our office and add their thinking.

The focus of our work is to build knowledge and learning with marginalized people in order to inform actions/projects. But you have to be creative in order to do this well, because marginalized people are used to not being central to learning and decision-making. I have found that finding ways to be less formal, less structured in learning spaces frees people up to share their knowledge. While a big meeting can be intimidating, an informal conversation often opens the floodgates. That's what these EL tables on the wall enabled. It felt as if the EL Table being used in this way was one piece of bridging those gaps that block equity.