REFLECTING AND LEARNING

Learning is an integral part of the Fenomenal Funds model. Our Feminist Learning and Evaluation Manager designed a system to document the conversations among women's funds, invite feedback, and facilitate reflection and a collective sensemaking process. Through this set of practices, we generated insights about what it takes to support the co-creation of feminist collaboration, what it looks like to remain responsive to the experience of participants, and what knowledge we gain about the needs and priorities of women's funds.[1]

DOCUMENTATION

Documentation has been a central feature of ensuring we are able to capture and analyse data in realtime to support our objective of Emergent Learning. Making sure the process is systematic and relevant requires a fair amount of forethought and training since qualitative data requires in depth rich description documenting emotions and language turns as well as group dynamics[2].

Based on our [Feminist Emergent Learning Framework](#),[3] at a macro level, documentation was a central part of our learning process. We used this documentation as evidence for sensemaking and impact, sharing insights for validation back with our stakeholders. At a micro level, documenting each session served multiple purposes. It was a record of the conversations that took place as the women's funds explored the topics and the directions they could take. It documented where there was energy or interest and where there were challenges or lack of clarity. This was an important resource for the groups and for the facilitation team to make choices about where they wanted to go deeper and what they felt was not useful. It also served as the content for developing the plan by making sure that the facilitation team could draw from the thoughts and ideas of the women's funds to define their collaboration road map. It was also a rich resource for Fenomenal Funds to understand the themes emerging from the sessions.

In the context of the Collaboration Labs, we set up a system to document the formation of each collaboration and the development of the collaboration plan and budget through the three phases (Discover, Define, and Refine). This required building a team of documenters and facilitators (the facilitation team) to hold space for the formation of the collaborations.

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[1] Learn more about the Fenomenal Funds Learning Strategy here: https://fenomenalfunds.org/publications/learning-strategy/
[2] See our documentation templates for examples of how to provide guidance:
https://fenomenalfunds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Discover-Phase-Documenter-Template.pdf
https://fenomenalfunds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Define-Phase-Documenter-Template.pdf
https://fenomenalfunds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Refine-Phase-Documenter-Template.pdf
[3] Read more about the Feminist Emergent Learning Framework here: https://fenomenalfunds.org/blog/lessons-in-real-time/

Each Collaboration Group was assigned a documenter who received orientation on using our documentation format and data management protocol. The documenters not only took notes on what was discussed in each Collaboration Group but also reflected on the group dynamics, decision-making processes, and the issues that the group was grappling with. They also summarized the discussion, key decision points, and action points for each session and shared them back with the groups for follow-up. Guided by the conversations, the facilitation team worked collaboratively to support the writing of the collaboration plan. In addition, graphic illustrators created images based on the group discussions to help visualize the topic, their focus, and a road map for the collaboration.

Guidance

➢ Commit to creating a process and tools to facilitate documentation.
➢ Create tools that provide guidance and structure for the documentation.
➢ Identify individuals to support the documentation process.
➢ Orient the individuals documenting the process, providing guidance for the detailed notes, observations, analysis, and summary of themes.
➢ Check in as the process unfolds, providing feedback on what is working and what needs to be improved.
➢ Review the notes and synthesize the themes within and across the Collaboration Groups.
➢ Hold spaces for reflection among documenters to further synthesize the insights they have from the role that they are playing.

Practice

By deliberately setting up a system, structure, and process, the documentation becomes consistent in capturing the dialogue and themes emerging from the process. As such, it serves not just as a record but a reflection document for the group—they can be in the moment without the concern that they are making sense of the overall arc of their conversation and choose which threads they want to pursue.

FEEDBACK LOOPS

Strong Communication with facilitators and participants is essential to ensure that the process of ideation and input are smooth and streamlined for each of the emerging collaboration groups. Feedback is also part of the ethos of feminist participatory approaches and hence allows grantmakers to adjust processes based on the needs of participants.This requires some prethinking in preparing feedback tools that are simple, ensuring feedback is collected and periodically reviewed and timely action is taken.

As the Fenomenal Funds staff team did not participate in the Collaboration Group meetings unless specifically invited establishing feedback loops, this was a deliberate choice. In addition, it was also an act of decentering power to ensure that the women's funds felt at ease to have open and honest conversations. In order to gain insights into how the process was going, we set up a system for gathering feedback from the women's funds. We used a simple, online qualitative survey tool to ask participants about the process at the beginning and the end of each phase. This feedback helped us to recalibrate our approach based on the needs of the individual funds and the groups. The notes from the Collaboration Group meetings and the responses from the qualitative surveys at the start and end of each phase were extremely useful in guiding our actions and making adjustments based on the data.

Guidance

➢ Create a clear set of questions[4] that ask participants about their expectations for the phase.
➢ Provide forms in multiple languages.
➢ Ask the facilitators to allocate time at the beginning of each phase (Discover, Define, and Refine) for participants to share their expectations.
➢ Review the individual forms and analyze the collective responses to identify any themes. Where necessary, provide any support for specific needs or requests.
➢ Create a clear set of questions that ask participants about their experiences of the phase.
➢ In the orientation do suggest to facilitators to allocate sufficient time at the end of each phase for participants to give feedback.
➢ Ask facilitators to share feedback forms/links to the forms in multiple languages.
➢ Review the individual forms and analyze collective responses to identify any themes that reflect the experience of the phase. Reflect on the insights as a team and share them with the facilitation team.
➢ Complement the analysis with spaces where the facilitation team reflects on their observations and feedback.

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[4] For guidance, please review the sample questions found in these documents that you can download: https://fenomenalfunds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Discover-Phase-Reflection-Questions.pdf
https://fenomenalfunds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Define-Phase-Reflection-Questions.pdf
https://fenomenalfunds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Refine-Phase-Reflection-Questions.pdf

➢ Note: This process can also be done using voice notes or video notes to facilitate the requirements of the participants. There are other software or tool options available if you would like to be more adventurous and have additional resources to invest in the documentation process.

Practice

As Fenomenal Funds draws on a [Feminist Emergent Learning Framework](#), before-action reviews and after-action reviews are an important part of the approach. Integrating it into any process supports a focus on ensuring that action is aligned with intention, finding out where that is not the case, and making the appropriate course corrections.[5]

REFLEXIVE PRACTICE WITH FACILITATORS AND DOCUMENTERS

When we are in a process, it is easy to get caught up in the practical actions of what needs to be done. In that process of deep focus, we can lose the opportunity to step back and see what is emerging from the work and how we ourselves are impacting the process. We are always learning through practice; what we need are the systems and processes that help us make implicit learning explicit and examine what is shaping the unfolding. This is often deeply supported when we do it as a community.

To make sense of the patterns that we observed from the process, we held collective gatherings with the facilitation team, where we engaged in reflexive practice. This was an opportunity for the facilitation team to hear from each other and share insights, as well as offer tools and suggestions to each other. The relationships and connections built through this process nurtured a community of practice. Sharing in this space also allowed the Fenomenal Funds team to see where connections were emerging across collaborations and where additional support and accompaniment were needed. In addition, it was an important space to surface the complex dynamics in the Collaboration Groups.

Guidance

➢ Designate a regular rhythm for individual check-ins with facilitators.
➢ Designate a regular rhythm for collective reflection with the facilitators and separately with the documenters.
➢ Facilitate this as a space for sharing, learning, and reflection, in addition to connecting.
➢ Document the emerging insights and probe further for emergent learning.
➢ Connect the learning across time.
➢ Analyze and reflect on the conversations to identify key themes that provide insights into the value of the process.

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[5] Learn more about the Fenomenal Funds Learning Strategy here: https://fenomenalfunds.org/publications/learning-strategy/

FENOMENAL FUNDS

Practice

Reflexivity is the ongoing process of critically examining our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices, and habitual actions to understand our complex roles in relation to others. A reflexive practice supports deep learning and facilitates the ongoing improvement of what we do and how we do it.

LEARNING CONVERSATIONS[6] AND "FISHBOWLS"[7]

Traditional grantmaking processes reinforce power imbalances between funders and grant recipients. Reporting as a form of accountability is the ultimate exercise of a "power over" approach (as opposed to "power with") and an extractive practice counterintuitive to feminist principles. Creating a space where the participants gather to reflect on their journey centers relationships, self-determination, flexibility, and trust. It invites everyone into a conversation where the process is one of exploring and sharing, without the pressure of the right answer or even the perfect words.

The Collaboration Lab process was designed to center the voice and self-determination of the women's funds. We maintained the same orientation when it came to reporting. Rather than ask a group of women's funds to figure out who would report and how they would coordinate report writing, we invited each Collaboration Group into a dialogue where the group, as a collective, could share the experience of the collaboration: what was working well and what they were learning individually and collectively.

We did this through online Learning Conversations and online "Fishbowl Conversations":

- **Fishbowl Conversations[8]** were set up thematically and were opportunities for groups to present and share what they were doing with the other women's funds, ask questions, seek advice, and promote mutual learning across the Prospera network. The recordings were then documented, summarized, and shared back with the community.
- **Learning Conversations[9]** were held individually with each Collaboration Group. We shared the questions ahead of time, documented the conversation, and then shared it back with each group so that they could confirm if this reflected their experience and insights. These conversations were instrumental in capturing the insights and learnings from the women's funds as they implemented their projects, with the rich content documented and synthesized to meet reporting obligations to our funders. This approach allowed us to fulfill our reporting requirements in narrative and participatory methods, moving beyond the limitations of traditional written reports.

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[6] Learning conversations embody feminist approaches to knowledge sharing through reciprocal and generative conversations. These are mutually agreed upon preplanned periodic conversation meant to engage participants in a structured conversation on their learning to gain collective insights.

[7] A "Fishbowl" discussion is a way of having a structured conversation where the audience are also participants. We used this approach to facilitate virtual community learning where collaboration groups were invited by theme to present their work in progress and the members of the other collaborating funds could engage with them on their work.

[8] See an example of a Fishbowl Conversation here: https://fenomenalfunds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Fishbowl-Conversation-Example.pdf

[9] See an example of a Learning Conversation here: https://fenomenalfunds.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Learning-Conversation-Example.pdf

These learning tools were integrated into our process as spaces for real-time sharing and reflection, enhancing the collective learning experience across our network. These sessions were not only about meeting reporting needs but were crucial for the continuous improvement and adaptation of strategies within the funded projects as part of our emergent learning process. They provided a dynamic platform for the funds to exchange knowledge and experiences, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and impact of their work.

Guidance

Decide how you want to reflect and learn with partners over the course of their partnership. Once decided, do the following:

➢ Inform partners that you are centering an approach focused on learning together.
➢ Provide a date to the partners well in advance of the planned reflection session.
➢ Share the questions that will guide the conversation, making it clear that the questions serve as a guide rather than as a constraint.
➢ During the reflection session, all members of the community will be invited to contribute to the discussion.
➢ Provide space for the partners to reflect and respond to your questions.
➢ Document the dialogue. Transcribe it. Share it back with the partners.
➢ Document this as a report for the grant.
➢ Share insights with the Advisory Committee so that they can also benefit from the insights of the reflection.

Practice

Center relationships in the grantmaking process. Value learning. This opens up possibilities to do things in different ways, for example, having conversations instead of narrative reports. This means being open to both what is working and what is not working. Both present an opportunity for insights, support, and trust. Challenge the exercise of "power over" with a focus on "power with."

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Please visit the Fenomenal Funds website for more tools and resources:
https://fenomenalfunds.org/grantmaking/collaboration-grants/tools-resources