
Some Core Principles of Emergent Learning

Definitions and Rating Sheet

*Emergent Learning
Principles*

Emergent Learning is more than the sum of its tools! It is founded on an evolving set of principles that guide our practice. This document is intended to be an informal “gut feel” rating exercise which we offer in service of continuing to explore what Emergent Learning looks like in practice and what that makes possible. We define some of the most important principles (pp. 2-3) and provide examples of what “high” or “low” might look like (pp. 4-5).

We ask you to think of a project, program or initiative and give it a “gut feel” rating on p. 6.

This is (and, because it is emergent, will always be) a work-in-progress. Note that when we use the word “group,” that might mean a team, an organization, a network, a community, or a whole ecosystem of players. We invite your feedback and suggestions for refining these definitions and indicators!

| Principle | Definition |
|--|--|
| Strengthening Line of Sight | Line of sight refers to maintaining an unobstructed vision from current decisions and actions to the ultimate desired outcome. Line of Sight gives a group a way to keep testing progress against something clear, real and concrete, such that they can see progress rather than getting caught in the weeds. It helps avoid conflating strategies and outcomes (e.g., collaboration for collaboration’s sake). |
| Inviting a Diverse Group to the Table | In an emergent learning conversation, the more diverse the set of experiences and perspectives represented, the greater the potential for “robust” insights to be developed — insights that hold true across a variety of situations. Inviting the people who care about a question and who have an active role in addressing it to think together about what they’ve learned from their collective experience leads to a greater level of ownership for the hypotheses that get generated and agency for testing them out. Note that this is not just about who is at the table, but how their experiences are invited into the conversation! |
| Holding Experts in Equal Measure | Holding experts in equal measure means recognizing that expertise can come in many forms — from academic research as well as from years of lived experience. The best idea might come from someone who has just joined the group based on their experience in a previous role. It might get expressed in a “gut feel” way that needs to be filled out as a group. These ideas can only come forward when there is strong mutual respect, curiosity and inquiry. |
| Asking Powerful Questions | The ability to listen to conversations and recognize when asking just the right emergent learning question (e.g., What will that make possible? If we could turn the clock back, what would we do differently?) will help people explore their thinking more clearly, help them access their shared experience, or consider ideas that might otherwise be ignored. |

| Principle | Definition |
|---|--|
| Making Thinking Visible | Related to, and contributing to, Line of Sight, Making Thinking Visible is about expressing both the “what” and the “why” of an idea and the reasoning behind it, and the process of asking questions of each other that helps people understand each other’s thinking. It helps colleagues add to good ideas, offer interesting alternatives, or resolve perceived disagreements. It sets the stage for experimentation by expressing expected results. |
| Keeping the Work at the Center | The goal of any learning-related activity is to improve the results of our actual work. When learning overly focuses on the process or the tools, a group’s attention can drift away from what they are trying to accomplish. When learning is done in service of a group or team’s actual work, participants become more engaged, see the relevance of learning to their own work, and perceive the value of their investment of time. |
| Maximizing Freedom to Experiment | Freedom to Experiment refers to allowing actors the freedom to choose the path—or hypothesis—that, on the basis of their experience and perspective, is most likely to achieve their outcome. With that freedom comes the expectation that actors will treat their decisions and actions as an experiment and to honestly assess and learn from their success or failure. This freedom-plus-accountability accelerates the rate at which a team, community, or whole ecosystem can learn. |
| Stewarding Learning through Time | The greatest impact learning practices can have is when they are done iteratively, over time, focusing on the questions that matter the most to a group. Stewardship means holding the ultimate intention of a group’s learning, and building it into their regular way of working. This stewardship can be taken on no matter what role a person plays in the group. |
| Returning Learning to the System | Returning learning to the system refers to the ability of the whole system to learn from the collective experiences of individuals as they explore different pathways to achieving a shared outcome. In practice, this means finding a way for individuals in the system to easily and regularly communicate to peers, “Here’s what I saw, here’s what I did, and here’s what happened as a result,” and a way for the community of peers to compare these stories, begin to see patterns, and make meaning from them. |

Rating System

| | What “Low” Might Look Like | What “High” Might Look Like |
|--|---|--|
| Strengthening Line of Sight | People disagree on what the goals are or agree on the goals at an abstract level but don’t test their fuzzy language. Communication about goals is loaded with add on ideas and extraneous requirements. People get lost in the technical aspects (“the weeds”) of implementation. | Everyone in the group agrees on the goal(s) for each step along the path and would recognize success if they see it. They keep that image in front of them and use it as a guide for making decisions and testing their thinking and results, deepening their understanding of the end state with each success or failure. |
| Inviting a Diverse Group to the Table | The amount of experience to draw from is limited and leads to hypotheses that are risk-averse and reinforce the status quo. The conversation may default to what other people who were not invited to the table should be doing. | There are lots of stories to “rub together” to compare and contrast; to seek out patterns and explore surprising outliers. Counterexamples are welcomed. By lingering in inquiry mode, participants often find themselves asking new and more powerful questions. What looks like a barrier to one person may look like an opportunity from a different perspective. |
| Holding Experts in Equal Measure | Participants defer to solutions because of the perceived credibility of their source rather than their fit to the problem at hand, which can dampen learning. The more complicated the solution, the more it may be perceived as being “right.” People are hesitant to challenge expertise or offer alternative perspectives or ideas. People may delay taking action because they “don’t know enough.” | All ideas are welcomed and explored with curiosity and respect. All ideas, regardless of source, are interrogated for their fit with the current goals and situation. People feel free to step in and start experimenting. They trust the collective intelligence of the whole group. |
| Asking Powerful Questions | People advocate for their positions or solutions (sometimes disguised as questions) rather than engaging in deeper inquiry first. People ask questions that call for information or research, rather than exploring their own thinking-in-action. Not asking a question may mean that a powerful opportunity to learn gets missed. | Asking questions becomes culturally accepted, recognizing that the goal is not to challenge, but to understand. There is a proliferation of generative questions that lead to deeper and better thinking. People discover together what questions matter the most now. |

| | What “Low” Might Look Like | What “High” Might Look Like |
|---|---|---|
| Making Thinking Visible | Teams jump to solutions without examining underlying assumptions. People are afraid to ask clarifying questions, perhaps fueled by a culture of power inequality and distrust. There is a fear that, if a person shares too much of their thinking, they will get shot down. Or ... there is a highly inclusive culture where goals remain vague and efforts to tease them apart are discouraged. | Groups cultivate a culture that encourages people to ask respectful questions and to answer them in the spirit of greater understanding. When people advocate for different approaches, they are recognized as hypotheses and talked about in that spirit. |
| Keeping the Work at the Center | The focus shifts from the group’s work goals to advocating for, and learning about, favored processes or approaches. Success is measured against fidelity to that approach, rather than against progress on the work goal. Learning becomes detached from the actual work of a group, reducing engagement. | A group’s work goals drive its learning strategy; success and the value of learning-related efforts are measured against progress related to the work itself. Processes or approaches, including learning, do not become ends in and of themselves. |
| Maximizing Freedom to Experiment | Members of the system are expected to align their resources and/or follow a prescribed set of expectations about how to implement the initiative /program /project. There is a lag time between early indicators that something is not working and when the approach gets adjusted. | There is a clear distinction between the goal and the strategy/plan to get there and people in the whole system know that they are able, if not encouraged, to experiment with different approaches and/or to shift gears if something is not working. There is an expectation that they and everyone else will learn from these experiments. |
| Stewarding Learning through Time | A lot of one-off learning activities that do not add up to greater understanding or capability. Commitment to learning erodes over time. | Because learning is iterative, a group can see its skills around a particular question or its impact around a particular goal accelerating. They develop a shared sense of competence and confidence around what might have previously felt like a recurring barrier. Learning becomes “just how we do our work here.” |
| Returning Learning to the System | No news is good news. There is no appetite for learning and/or learning is seen as a big, cumbersome process that happens only infrequently. The core initiative team (the funder or other organizing group) is the hub, but really a gatekeeper, for learning activities and sharing. If members do experiment, they keep it to themselves. | People across the system...especially people doing the real work of the initiative...find ways to share what they are seeing, doing, and learning regularly, in fit-for-purpose ways. Results are visible, and failures are seen as important to learn from as are successes. |

Your Name: _____

Date: _____

Name of Initiative/Project/Program:

Describe the “ecosystem” — Who are the actors responsible for producing results?

(Example: Local intermediary representatives, local leadership fellows, their local partners)

Using the definitions above, give your initiative/project/program a “gut feel” rating by checking the appropriate box below each characteristic. The last column is for brief notes about why you rated it the way you did.

| Low | Pretty Low | Pretty High | High | Reason For Rating |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Strengthening Line of Sight | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Inviting a Diverse Group to the Table | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Holding Experts in Equal Measure | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Asking Powerful Questions | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Making Thinking Visible | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Keeping Work at the Center | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Maximizing Freedom to Experiment | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Stewarding Learning through Time | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Returning Learning to the System | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |