Collaborating with Strangers Evaluation

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CoLAB Description.

CoLAB Planning Series® was invented by Bess de Farber, certified professional facilitator and the UF
Libraries' grants manager, in 2002. CoLAB processes have been facilitated in groups ranging from 20 to
120 people and have produced extremely positive results. Over 1,200 participants representing 700
organizations have participated in sessions sponsored by libraries, library associations, universities,
United Ways and Community Foundations throughout Florida; Tucson, Arizona; and Baltimore,
Maryland.

Focusing on existing assets is one of the most effective ways to inspire creativity (Fritz, 1998). Moreover,
innovation thrives in open environments where each person feels comfortable sharing his/her ideas. By
providing a space that encourages open communication, contribution and creativity, participants will
make connections that spark new possibilities, perspectives and ideas. Whether it's a project, approach,
or solution to a problem, participants will find inspiration from conversations with "strangers."

In a university setting, the CoLAB process can help students find partners for research or other projects,
organizations to join or create, and/or faculty members who can mentor for navigating the academic
system. Similarly, faculty and researchers can meet new colleagues, graduate and/or undergraduate
students. The variety of assets available through collaborative teams are truly endless.

The CoLAB Planning Series® processes offer methods for achieving a myriad of results. It has been used
to solve community problems such as literacy and HIV infection in youth. It effectively connects
"strangers" at a conference, and it can develop long-term community alliances among nonprofit leaders
and program designers. For example, at the University of Arizona (UA), this process was used to connect
NGOs and government agency personnel working in the Sonoran Desert, many of whom had never met
and were clueless about each other's research and advocacy programs. The Sonoran Desert Knowledge
Exchange was born.

CoLAB at the University of Florida

Collaborating with Strangers is a set of workshops conducted by the University of Florida Libraries to
connect students and faculty. The CoLAB can take as long as 12 hours to fully implement. In this
project, students, faculty and staff participate in an abbreviated version of the CoLAB (1.5 hours). The
workshops are a large group process for participants to meet one-on-one in a "speed meeting" to share
their passions, interests, skills and resources. The meetings are set up to allow a safe and facilitative
environment where students and faculty can meet, exchange ideas and build networks for
collaboration.

Each workshop begins with participants completing a description of their study or research interests, their strongest skills, a list of groups or networks they are involved in, and something that most people do not know about the participant. This information is then pinned to the individual participant to share in their "speed meetings" with other participants. After an introduction of the purpose and the potential benefits of the workshop, participants meet one-on-one with other participants for three minutes. At the end of the three minutes, participants are asked to find someone who they have not spoken to yet and repeat the process. This process continues for the rest of the workshop. In the end, participants are asked to complete an evaluation of the workshop.

In addition to the workshops, a website was created (http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/communications/CoLAB/home.html) to facilitate collaboration after the workshops. The website includes descriptions of the participants from each of the six workshops (five scheduled and one requested in a class) and email addresses so that participants can contact other participants and engage in ongoing collaborations.

Finally, the CoLAB offered incentives for collaboration through micro-grants. The initial plan was to run a separate competition, but there were not sufficient applicants. Instead, the CoLAB worked with the Innovation through Institutional Integration (I^3) (http://i3.institutes.ufl.edu/) interdisciplinary grants to offer funds to support collaborative research. The I^3 grant competition was a grant competition for graduate students that encouraged collaboration across disciplines as well as the inclusion of undergraduates as mentees within the STEM and SBE disciplines.

Participants.

Six CoLAB workshops were conducted. The five scheduled workshops ranged in size from 17 to 38 participants with 149 total participants. The extra workshop that was requested for a class had 76 participants. The CoLAB was advertised as being open to all participants. The resulting sample had a majority of the participants being graduate students (87 of the 149 or 58.4%). In contrast, the percent of undergraduate students and faculty were 24.2% and 17.4%, respectively. Thus, the potential benefits of the CoLAB were more apparent to the graduate students. Another overrepresented group was the international students (41.6%).

Participants' research areas varied widely. Each session include a range of interests in the sciences, fine arts, humanities and medical fields.

Workshop Evaluation.

Two sources of data were used to evaluate the workshops. First, the evaluator attended five of the six workshops as an observer. Second, all participants completed an eight item questionnaire at the end of each workshop.

Observations.   My observations of the CoLAB workshops showed consistency across the five workshops attended. Each began with some of the participants feeling somewhat hesitant and unsure about what they would attain from the workshop. The first one-on-one pairing was often fairly subdued. However,

the energy and volume in the room quickly increased. Although several participants looked hesitant in the beginning, they quickly were excited about the conversations they were having and the possibilities of more one-on-one conversations. The enthusiasm for the CoLAB could be seen in the volume of the conversations, the lingering when it was time to change, and the animated body movements. All participants were relaxed and enjoying the workshop no later than the fourth pairing. The three minute timings were easily done in the first few pairings but participants were quickly lingering and not ready to move after they had engaged in just a few "speed meetings". The most frequent refrain was that "we need more time" referring to the length of the individual pairings as well as the number of pairings. Participants were excited and enthused about the process. As one participant said, "I never would have talked to any of these people" without CoLAB. Conversations varied in the one-on-one pairings from strictly social to discussing possible research collaborations.

The management of the CoLAB was also run much more smoothly after minimal experience. The introduction, the process of moving people and quickly finding pairings became more facilitative after the first part of the first workshop. The workshop was professionally managed and no problems were encountered.

Although the CoLAB was voluntary, it was extremely rare for anyone to leave the workshops before the end. When participants did leave, they were discussing the positive benefits of the workshop (e.g., social networking and meeting potential collaborators) and their need to leave for a prior commitment. They felt that they had an experience that was not available in any other way on campus. The testimonials contained on the website (http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/communications/CoLAB/testimonials.html) were typical of the reactions to the workshop.

Workshop Questionnaire.

A post-workshop questionnaire was completed at each session. Separate evaluation reports on the first four sessions are available on the website. All participants completed a brief eight item survey with three of the items being open-ended. The summary is presented below for each item.

1. Participants were asked about the length of the workshop. Very few felt the workshop was too long (3.5%) and most felt it was the right length (78.5%). However, almost a fifth felt that it should have been longer (18.0%). Open-ended responses also confirmed that many of the students would have liked to extend the workshop to engage in more "speed meetings".

2. Participants were asked to provide an overall evaluation of the workshop.   Less than one percent felt the workshop was poor (.6%) and only 6.4% rated it as fair. The remaining 93% were about evenly distributed between rating the workshop good or excellent.

3. When asked if they would attend a workshop like this again, 90.6% responded positively.

4. When asked if they would recommend the workshop to another student or faculty member, 96.4% responded positively.

5. Question 5 included three parts about the self-reported effects of the workshop. The first item showed that more than three quarters of the participants felt more confident in their ability to approach people they did not know as a result of the workshop with most of the remaining participants being unsure. The second item showed that more than 75% felt more comfortable with people in other disciplines as a result of the workshop. Finally, the third item showed that 35.5% of the participants intended to apply for a micro-grant (see actual numbers below).

Item	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral-Unsure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
More confident in my ability to approach people I don't know	23.3%	54.0%	22.1%	0.6%	0%
More comfortable with people in other disciplines	28.9%	46.2%	23.1%	1.7%	0%
Intend to apply for a micro-grant with a collaborator I met today.	12.0%	23.5%	43.4%	16.3%	4.8%

Three open-ended questions were also included in the evaluation. The three questions were (1) why they chose to participate in the workshop, (2) if the CoLAB helped them access new resources, and (3) the most useful part of the workshop. The open-ended answers were positive (consistent with the five items above). The individual responses can be seen in the four reports for the first four workshops. Below is a summary of some of the more frequent responses.

6. Reasons for choosing to participate in the CoLAB:

- Interest in interdisciplinary research and finding collaborators
- Networking
- Share ideas
- Meet people; improve social skills
- Practice communicating with others
- Curiosity; sounded interesting

7. New resources that CoLAB facilitated the access to:

- People with a different perspectives
- People with a different backgrounds
- Possible collaborators
- New ideas for collaboration
- Learned of a new club or organization
- Meeting people with similar interests
- Developing communication skills with strangers
- No resources yet with plans to follow-up with participants

- (-) Would have helped to have more focus or narrow the type of persons to those with a similar interest

8. Most useful part of the workshop:

    - Practicing
    - Networking
    - Meeting others from different areas or with different ideas
    - Learning ways to collaborate
    - Increasing confidence to meet others
    - Creating connections
    - Developing a concise statement about self

Post Workshop

The data above describes the workshops and the immediate reactions to them. For evaluation purposes, three sources of data were also collected late in the Spring term. The three sources of data were: (a) interviews of participants and the organizers of the CoLAB, (b) an online survey sent to all participants to ask about any sustained effects of the CoLAB, and (c) monitoring the use of the micro-grants process and awards.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with three participants and three of the librarians that conducted the workshops. The points of focus for the open-ended interviews centered around the mix of people at the workshops, the logistics of the workshop, and the effects of the workshop.

Mix of People. All of the interviewees felt that there was a good mix of people at the workshops. At the same time, they offered several suggestions for improving the workshops that were focused on the attendees. First, the size of the groups seemed optimal. It was important to have a large enough group to have plenty of diversity in their skills and ideas. On the other hand, it was important to feel that there were enough opportunities to meet most of the people in the workshop. With 20-40, both criteria were reasonably met. Smaller groups would not have enough diversity and larger groups would leave people feeling that they had not had enough opportunities to take advantage of the diversity. As one interviewee put it, "it was a good size because I was able to meet the majority" of the participants.

A second issue that was brought up was the mix of undergraduate, graduate and faculty/staff at the workshops. Several reported that the mix was about right. Others felt that there were not enough faculty/staff. Faculty/staff were noted as especially important to the collaborations because they could often provide a broader perspective; it showed that faculty were open to working with students

collaboratively; and they had the advantage of already having networks for research in place. Another participant noted that the three groups provided different but important roles for any future collaborations. Undergraduate students brought excitement and interest. Graduate students brought more knowledge and skills to conduct collaborative research. Faculty brought the broadest perspectives and knowledge base.

Interviewees also discussed the breadth of the fields of study. One interviewee discussed the advantage of breadth in terms of having more ideas, more room for collaboration and more diverse perspectives. However, most of the interviewees discussed focusing the CoLAB in the future so that there would be a common theme for collaboration. There was discussion of using it for faculty in departments, students in a class, or a mix of faculty and students around a theme such as grant writing. These more focused CoLABs would still need to remain broad enough for participants to bring a diversity of interests and skills but narrow enough to focus on a particular problem. One interviewee thought that the CoLAB could be especially useful for new faculty in forming collaborations.

Logistics. The logistics of the workshops were viewed very positively. It was felt that the workshop went well and that each of the components – pre-workshop organization including setting up the advertising and the preparation of the room, preparing for the workshops with the participants (e.g., pictures, and completing information), introduction to the speed meetings, moving people through the process, and collecting the final evaluation data – was well organized and no problems were noted. This was also consistent with my observations.   It was also felt that it went easier and better with each workshop as well as going better within a workshop as the participants learned the procedure.   On the other hand, some felt that the last workshops did not go as smoothly just because of the time in the semester (e.g., fewer participants came and they were a little less focused).

The only concerns about the logistics for the program were post-workshop. There was some concern that many people did not take advantage of the workshop and make collaborative connections after they left. Suggestions for improvement included meeting as a larger group after the "speed meetings" to discuss possible collaborations, providing a more immediate email reminder and multiple follow-ups about collaborating (one interviewee reported receiving an email one week after the workshop but felt it would be better to receive a reminder within a day or two of the workshop), and providing websites that are easier to use to search on topics of interest or open more than one picture at a time. Each of these suggestions was based on assumptions of how to increase collaboration after the workshops.

CoLAB Effects. The interviewees clearly felt that the CoLAB had very positive effects on the participants. The positive effects included:

- Creating new and expanding networks
- Opportunities for collaboration
- Learning how to provide an "elevator speech" to describe oneself
- Learning to communicate especially for shy or withdrawn individuals
- Meeting new people (noted especially for the large number of international students attending)

- Chance to initiate creative and multidisciplinary work

On the other hand, many felt that the CoLAB was not effective enough in creating collaborations after the workshop. One interviewee talked about contacting three people by emails that were not responded to. As one person said, the CoLAB was an important point of entry but there are still many reasons why the collaborations may not occur (or that they occur in small numbers). The summary of the program was that it was a "wonderful tool to break the ice" or "to meet new collaborators" but the participants still need to assume the initiative to engage more fully in collaboration after the workshop.

Survey

An online survey was sent to all of the participants. Even after multiple reminders, only 28 responded to the survey. Thus, the data is not representative of the full population. However, it does show the effects of the workshop on a subset of the participants. Of the participants who returned the survey 81.5% were students and 18.5% were faculty and only one person had attended more than one CoLAB. When asked about their satisfaction with the CoLAB experiences, 89.3% were satisfied or very satisfied with the workshop; 70.8% were satisfied or very satisfied with the website; and 70% of those that had subsequent collaborations were satisfied or very satisfied with the collaboration. Most of the remaining respondents were neutral toward the experience (i.e., almost no dissatisfaction was reported). Participants also still felt more comfortable talking to strangers in general (67.9%), in different disciplines (71.4%) and in their own discipline (64.3%).

Of the respondents, 11 (39.3%) reported making contact with someone from the CoLAB sessions after the workshop. When the contact was made they reported the following reasons (they may have identified more than one reason):

- Collaboration (42.9%)
- Friendship (42.9%)
- Cooperation (35.7%)
- Mentoring (14.3%)

The specific reasons for the contact reported in open-ended questions included the following:

- Won a collaboration grant
- We put together a grant proposal and we are waiting to hear if it's awarded
- Another participant shared a resource with me
- We have begun to plan our project
- Met a couple of people who share similar interests
- I wrote to several people I met simply to be in touch and remind them of our mutual interests, in the hope that such a 'latent tie' might be primed for activation should the right opportunity come along
- We met a few times, and still might meet again, but so far no progress on a project
- Sharing of resources

The specific roles in any collaboration included mentoring, strategic planning, planning projects, and doing field work.

Finally, open-ended responses to how to enhance the CoLAB experience included the following suggestions:

- More time
- Discussion time after the speed round
- More people attending
- "Clunky" website. Wanted to filter by background or having smaller breakout groups.
- A disciplinary focus would have helped (e.g., STEM)

Micro-grants

The original plan was to have a few micro-grants for the participants in the amount of $300 to conduct collaborative research. The initial call at the workshops and in the advertising did not result in any applications. The lack of applications may have been because of a lack of a clear focus for the micro-grants. That is, there were not clear guidelines for the grants. In addition, the amount of money may have been small to conduct research. As a result, the CoLAB project partnered with the I^3 interdisciplinary research grants (up to $2000) by allowing those who participated in the CoLAB to receive an additional micro-grant from CoLAB with their application to I^3, increasing the total grant limit to $2300. I^3 received 19 grant applications which included 5 applications with a CoLAB designation. Since each grant included 2-3 collaborators, there were 10-15 CoLAB applicants. Of those applicants, three grants were selected for funding. Thus, at least three collaborative research initiatives were the result of connections through the CoLAB workshops with 10-15 participants.

Summary and Recommendations

The CoLAB provides a unique workshop for students, faculty and staff at the University of Florida. The program allows participants to meet in an environment that facilitates interactions specifically on collaborative research. The evaluation shows that the program is well organized and has positive effects on the participants. They report learning communication skills that can be used with strangers and how to collaborate. Several of the participants went on to receive collaborative and interdisciplinary grants from I^3 .

While the effects of the workshop were positive, two consistent recommendations for improving the program were noted.

1. The initial program was not built to focus on any particular reason for the collaborations. Surveys and interviews suggested that the CoLAB may work better for collaboration if the participants were focused on a particular issue (e.g., grant writing). Within the university environment, unifying themes and focus would increase the utility of the program. Even

with the focus on one issue, there should be participants with diverse perspectives, ideas and skills.

2. While no issues were a concern for the workshop, there may be ways to encourage the collaborations after the workshop. The abbreviated format (1.5 hours) may need to be extended or other methods of encouraging participants to collaborate would increase the percent of those who do collaborate. This could include more immediate reminders after the workshop or more grant or other collaborative opportunities. It should be noted that the program produced known collaborations for almost 10% of the participants with the I^3 grants. Additional opportunities and/or feedback should increase the percent of participants who engage in post-workshop collaborations.