

From “Data Vultures” to Community Partners: Power-sharing in Data Collection

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The challenge:

When working in a partnership, members of different organizations might have differing values and priorities. In our case, the Exploratorium researchers tended to value *objectivity* in data collection, while Urban Alchemy practitioners centered *authenticity* as key to creating a trauma-informed environment. How could we value both perspectives equitably in the partnership?

Our approach & solution:

- Through weekly team discussions, we learned about the goals and hesitations of team members from both organizations and talked through potential solutions
- We collectively decided to use *participant observations* as one of our data collection methods
- During participant observations, researchers would participate in facilitation, take notes during (as much as possible) and immediately after an interaction, then the whole group would read back through the notes taken and discuss how we each interpreted the interactions and outcomes observed

Benefits of participant observation

- Researchers & facilitators can maintain *authenticity* as they interact with visitors
- It was easier for facilitators to actively participate in data collection and analysis, allowing for a more equitable partnership with power shared between organizations

Limitations of participant observation

- Researchers & facilitators have personal biases that may show up as we interpret our interactions with visitors; we may make assumptions that are inaccurate
- Wearing both a facilitator and a research hat at one time requires heavy concentration

Mitigation strategies

- We also collected audio recordings of interactions to review dialogues after the fact
- Deep discussion among team members - each with different backgrounds, perspectives, and biases - helped identify potential biases or misinterpretations of interactions through triangulation

The result: better understanding & equity

- All team members participated in both research and facilitation, so we better understood each others' perspectives
- Power was more equitably distributed between both organizations

