Toward a Real Simple Taxonomy: Bridging Learners and Content to Create New Value @ LearnPhilanthropy (v_3/12/2012)

By Dara Major

Overview

Is there a difference between good and great philanthropy? We believe the answer is: yes. We believe intentional, ongoing learning is a critical component of great philanthropy – and that it is possible to identify what effective grantmakers learn, and do, in order to achieve the results they seek.

LearnPhilanthropy is a network of grantmakers and philanthropy support practitioners who are building a fieldwide hub for grantmaker learning – by the field, for the field.

LearnPhilanthropy was launched on the widely-held premise that there is an existing learning marketplace for grantmakers (which includes regional associations, affinity groups, universities, advisory firms, and others) – but this marketplace is somewhat fragmented. Recent research finds that many individual learners are spending an inordinate amount of time trying to find what they need, and many providers are struggling to develop learning resources that are responsive to the needs of the field as well as to extend their reach.

At LearnPhilanthropy, we don’t want to duplicate what others are doing – we want to shine a spotlight on it! We’d like to bring the highly committed and growing community of learners and learning providers together to enhance learning and impact (recognizing that learners are also often themselves learning providers). We think there are some important network effects that can flow from this, including: improving access to high-quality learning resources; identifying some gaps in the landscape of existing resources; stimulating investment in underserved areas; and increasing the value of the learning resources themselves by getting them more widely used.

We are building a prototype platform to connect grantmakers, donors, and trustees to:

- A searchable catalogue of the sector’s high quality resources, tools, and information on ongoing learning opportunities;
- Frameworks, pathways, and special collections to help foundation staff, board members, and donors develop their own learning agendas;
- Peer learning opportunities and advice from experts;
- An ongoing conversation on how learning supports effectiveness, through blogs and other channels.

LearnPhilanthropy plans to implement universal search across all of these content types, and over the next several months will develop a critical mass of resources, data, user-contributed comments and other input.

A real priority for us is to help users to navigate these resources to find what they need. To help users, LearnPhilanthropy is creating a “Real Simple Taxonomy” that will inform searches, enable browsing and lead users toward more productive results – and, ultimately, improve the user experience. Over time, we will facilitate the sharing and importing of additional tags and taxonomies by our community of users, too.
We see the Real Simple Taxonomy as a small tool – but one with a big potential benefit to our users. And it’s just one of several possible starting points, not an end point, to the great content you’ll find at LearnPhilanthropy.

**What is a Real Simple Taxonomy?**

Good content needs a good search – but sometimes a simple keyword search is not enough to produce the result a user seeks. That’s where a taxonomy comes in: a taxonomy is a classification or categorization system that groups similar items into broad topics or buckets. A taxonomy can help to organize knowledge “at a glance,” describe concepts not found directly in the content, and includes terms, categories and keywords.

With the LearnPhilanthropy community, we are *co-creating* a small, simple taxonomy that can be iterated and refined over time. Small because we’re not trying to create something big and/or compete with what’s already out there. And small because we want it to be super high-functioning and actually *work*. To ensure the taxonomy remains relevant, we’ll iterate to improve it over time, and remain highly flexible and responsive to changing environments as we go.

Bottom line: the Real Simple Taxonomy terms must be intuitive to the uninitiated. And relevant across a range of organizations and donor types.

**Why and how are we developing a Real Simple Taxonomy?**

LearnPhilanthropy is bringing together the wealth of research, resources and ideas on good practice from sources *across the sector*: imagine a farmer’s market providing fresh products from a variety of producers, all in one place, as well as a gathering place where practitioners of all kinds can come together to exchange “recipes” and learning perspectives.

How will LearnPhilanthropy users find what they need at this market? To honor what users tell us they need to effectively navigate through these resources – and to improve the user experience – a general purpose taxonomy is needed to help make these resources more widely accessible.

Yet we’ve found that a general-purpose taxonomy on grantmaker learning just plain doesn’t exist. Our research to date – conducted in partnership with our Planning Committee, Content Partners, workgroup members and others in the field – has turned up taxonomies mostly for specific audiences or grantmaker types.

For this reason, LearnPhilanthropy is seeking to develop a general-purpose taxonomy. Not to create a new standard or because we think we have the “right” answers, but to support our users. So the approach we’re taking is iterative and highly collaborative – more user-generated folksonomy than the traditionally hierarchical taxonomy – with broad review at each iteration stage. We see this Real Simple Taxonomy as a living document, and encourage ongoing co-creation and co-ownership within the LearnPhilanthropy community.

But taxonomy is not the same thing as navigation! Though we hope this entire taxonomy will make it into the prototype platform…. to date, only a small slice of the taxonomy has actually been baked in to the platform pie. Most keyword topics or tags are not operational yet. That work is proceeding on a parallel but much longer technology execution timeline. Ditto supporting contributions of additional tags and taxonomies by our community of users. In other words, this is a multi-faceted work in progress.

For now, we’re seeking input and feedback from a wide range of sources, to gain cross-functional perspectives. Folks we’re reaching out to include grantmakers of all kinds, researchers and providers of a full range of content and learning resources for philanthropy practitioners. Your views on this are important to us, so please take the time to share them by emailing us at info@learnphilanthropy.net. Thank you for joining us and contributing to this work!
Real Simple Taxonomy

Essentials

Developing Your Talent & Leadership
- Governance
- HR management, policies & practices
- Communications
- Individual Development / building your career
- Organizational Development / building your team

Making & Managing Grants
- Grantmaking
- Grants Management
- Beyond the Grant
- General Grants
- Issue-specific Grants

Planning for Results & Impact
- Program-level learning & evaluation
- Organizational-level learning & evaluation
- Field / Sector-level learning & evaluation

Developed by Dara Major, Independent Consultant in Philanthropy: www.daramajor.com
Big thanks to the following for their input and feedback to date:
To get involved, please contact us at info@learnphilanthropy.net

Lori Bartzcak, Director of Programs and Communications, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations
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JuWon Choi, Vice President for Educational Services, Foundation Center
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Andrea Jett Fletcher, Senior Program Officer, McCormick Foundation
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Niki Jagpal, Research and Policy Director, National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy
Lauren Kay, National Network of Consultants to Grantmakers
Michael Litz, President & CEO, Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers
Jean McCall, Director of Human Resources, The William & Flora Hewlett Foundation
Molly McKaughan, Director, Research Resources Center, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Darin McKeever, Senior Program Officer, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
Kathryn Petrillo-Smith, Managing Director, Association of Small Foundations
Alison Powell, Philanthropy Knowledge Manager, The Bridgespan Group
Rebecca K. Putter, Program Officer, Westchester Community Foundation
Jen Ratay, Program Officer, Organizational Effectiveness, The William & Flora Hewlett Foundation
Kyle Reis, Manager, Strategy and Operations, The Ford Foundation
Vicki Rosenberg, VP Education, Communications & External Relations, Council of Michigan Foundations
Dana Schmidt, Program Officer, The William & Flora Hewlett Foundation
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