Learning Conversations: Inviting Community Partnership in a Science Center

By Wit Ostrenko and Fred Steier

MOSI in Tampa, Florida, has extended a bridge that goes in both directions between itself as a science center and its diverse community. MOSI is a resource for the community, and the community has provided the inspiration for MOSI’s rich array of programs.

Our neighbors are, to the west, an area formerly termed “Suitcase City” due to its largely transient population; to the east, a stable residential municipality; to the north, the University of South Florida; and to the south, another residential area with an annual influx of 4 million international tourists, attracted to a theme park.

MOSI’s ongoing co-evolution with its mix of stable and transitory neighbors has been facilitated through learning conversations whereby we explore with our community what hands-on learning means, both for our visitors and for ourselves. In designing MOSI as a program-based institution, we have invited our community to participate in these conversational processes so that the community owns the institution.

THE WORLD CAFÉ

At the heart of MOSI’s community engagement is the World Café (www.theworldcafe.com), which encourages deep dialogue as participants explore questions that matter to the community in small roundtable discussions. The approach used in a World Café meeting encourages creativity and cross-pollination of ideas.

Over the course of a World Café, the groups shift—one person stays at a table while others bring their conversations to new tables, making the issues current, dynamic, and co-evolving. Participants share key thoughts with the whole group, and each dialogue leads to the next conversation. Action steps are then agreed upon for implementation.

The World Café method uses seven guiding principles (see www.theworldcafe.com/principles.html for more information):

1. Set the context.
2. Create hospitable space.
3. Explore questions that matter.
4. Encourage everyone’s contribution.
5. Connect diverse perspectives.
7. Share collective discoveries.

We have used these World Café principles with community members to explore the future of the region and its ecology, as well as to design learning spaces at MOSI. We have also used them for board meetings. Indeed, MOSI has been recognized as a center of World Café activity for its way of building a culture of dialogue (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Ostrenko & Steier, 2005) in collaborative action research programs (Steier & Ostrenko, 2000) with its various communities.

At MOSI’s Summer Science Camp, students learn how the engineering and construction of dams impacts the environmental landscape. Photo courtesy MOSI
COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

MOSI's community engagement initiative focuses on how we, as a cultural institution and educational resource for science, technology, engineering, arts and design, and mathematics (STEAM), have collaborated within the community to respond to the needs of people from underserved populations and those who work with them. Here are some examples of our programs and related initiatives:

- **The National Hispanic Scientist of the Year (NHSOY) Award.** With the high school graduation rate at only 52.2% for young Hispanic/Latino students in Florida in 1999, MOSI met with Tampa area citizens and the school district to offer an opportunity for students to meet and be mentored by Hispanic/Latino scientists who had had similar early lives. With community partners, MOSI named the first NHSOY and held the first Meet the Scientist Day in 2001, with 500 youth participating. In 2013, MOSI hosted about 1,500 students. The messages and stories brought by these celebrated scientists have been clear and inspiring. Nil Diaz, former chair of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, told students, “Life is sometimes very difficult, but you can decide what you want for your future. Staying in school will give you the tools you need to be successful. If I did it, you can, too.” In October, we will celebrate our 14th distinguished scientist and will expand to include an early career scientist, as well (72.52.162.127/~wwwmosi/about-nhsoy).

- **Youth Enriched through Science (YES!) Team.** This year-long program, funded by the NHSOY Award event, allows 20 students, ages 13–17, to be mentored by the MOSI team to develop leadership and community service skills (www.mosi.org/education/yes-team.aspx). Participants volunteer at MOSI for 200 hours and can then become paid MOSI InterActors, who help teach visitors the science behind hands-on exhibits. By 2010, all of the over 200 youth who completed the program had graduated from high school, and over 92% of them had gone on to post-secondary education.

HOW TO TAKE A COMMUNITY APPROACH

If you want to increase the wealth of your science center and develop your community’s respect, trust, and investment in you, try these ideas:

1. Develop an ecological design process that values flexibility and an understanding of the dynamic community environment.

2. View the science center as a participant in the larger community environment.

3. Create a mindset that involves conversations and engagement with the community and creates new knowledge that allows the community to interact with the science center.

4. Apply these conversations to develop new economies that create business and social value.

5. Create awareness in your family, your organization, and your community about the power of conversation as a key means for creating valued outcomes—whether tangible outcomes, like new projects and institutions, or intangible ones, like trust, respect, and a feeling of inclusion in the science center.

6. Learn techniques of group dialogue, displayed thinking, World Cafés, mind mapping, pass the paper, and other means to listen to and interact with your communities. See www.mindtools.com/pages/main/newMN_CT.htm for some ideas about nurturing creative discussions and ideas.

—W.O. and F.S.
A visitor rides a 700-foot-long (213-meter-long) zip line, 65 feet (20 meters) above the ground, outside MOSI's Florida Hospital IMAX Dome Theatre. Photo courtesy MOSI

- **Mobile outreach.** Our mission is to provide access to the science center or take the science center to the community. The MOSI in Motion Bus is a mobile laboratory for an entire classroom to do experiential learning. Although it is a fee-based program, it is provided without charge to remote county schools thanks to the Mosaic Company, which mines phosphate nearby.

- **Give Day Tampa Bay.** In May of this year, Tampa Bay held its first 24-hour giving day to help create a culture of philanthropy in the region. MOSI raised scholarship funds for over 400 children, ages 2–17, to attend its Summer Science Camps.

**A NEW COMMUNITY APPROACH BEGINS**

MOSI is always looking for new ways to work with our community. We are part of the master planning for the development of our surrounding communities and are leading the way in getting the area’s major institutions integrated with all the neighborhood institutions to improve the entire ecosystem. One of MOSI’s current initiatives is working with the University Area Community Development Corporation (UACDC) to have learning conversations that will lead to a World Café with the transient community to our west. The goal is to get young people trained with certification or degrees, help them find jobs, and encourage them to buy homes inside the UACDC area.

MOSI will continue to approach its programs and community engagement as a learning center where the information and dialogue flow in both directions between MOSI and the community.

**REFERENCES**


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