



10-15 MINUTES

# Build Connections

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## Activity Rationale and Aims

### Aims

01. Establish community and build connections among team members
02. Learn about the unique and shared perspectives and expertise that each team member brings to the co-design process
03. Break down hierarchies and invite full participation of all collaborators

### Activity Summary

Prior to the meeting, the facilitator will ask collaborators to contribute a short printed biography of themselves. These bios will inform discussion about values, expertise, background, and other points of connection. From the discussion, collaborators will create a visual web illustrating connections. This activity is an important step in establishing a sense of community in the early phase of co-design. It also helps the team to articulate shared and divergent values, perspectives, and expertises within the team.

### Rationale

Co-design fundamentally relies on the experiences and relationships amongst collaborators (Potvin et al., 2021). Developing an efficacious research project or designed product relies on the relationships of the collaborators with each other as well as a shared understanding of each person's skills, expertise, passions, and experiences (Penuel, 2007; Ehret & Hollet, 2016; Gomez et al., 2018). It is important to invest time in relationships before tasks, so that collaborators get to know each other and understand the collective skills, expertise, passions, and experiences of the group.

# In Person Steps

## In pairs:

1. Introduce yourself to your partner and share your bio.
2. Reflect on mutual connections, interests, and backgrounds.

## As a whole group:

3. Post all bios on a large surface, such as a table or whiteboard or wall.
4. Invite the group to read through others' bios, and identify connections.
5. Provide collaborators with yarn and tacks, which will be used to create a line to connect one collaborator's bio to other collaborators' bios to illustrate the connections in background, expertise, and interests.
  - a. Use a tack to pin the yarn in place, first at the starting bio, and then link it to another bio with identified points of connection, effectively creating a web that starts with each individual and then connects to another, and then back to that individual, and then out to another.
6. Engage in shared reflection.
  - a. Examples of reflection questions include:
    - i. What are similarities/differences in professional expertise, personal backgrounds, hobbies, etc.?
    - ii. What did you learn from completing this activity?
    - iii. What surprised you about this activity?
    - iv. What did you learn about yourself and the team?

## Prior to the Meeting

Facilitators will create and send out a bio questionnaire. It is recommended that teams create their own questionnaire, so as to personalize the questions to their projects. Some ideas to draw from are:

- What brings you to this project?
- Share a little bit about your professional trajectory.
- Share about your current role.
- What sustains you in your work? What sustains you outside of your work?
- What do you like to do for fun?
- What are 4 words that you would use to describe yourself?
- What are 4 activities that are important to you?

Regardless of the questions you choose, when developing a bio template, it is important to include information relevant to the shared work as well as personal information, so as to get to know each others' interests and expertises personally as well as professionally. Have all collaborators complete the template prior to the meeting and print them out.



## Facilitator Preparation

### IN PERSON MATERIALS

- Yarn
- Tacks or push pins
- Markers if yarn is not an option

### IN-PERSON HANDOUTS

- Printed bios.

### DIGITAL HANDOUTS

- Share a folder containing short bios of each team member to the team.
- Create a blank presentation slide deck that either shares each person's bio, or their name with the bio linked.

## Facilitation Tips

- Prior to meeting:
  - Create a bio questionnaire and have all team members fill out the questionnaire. Either have collaborators bring a copy to the scheduled session or have them send to the facilitator, who will print them off.
- Save everyone's bios in a shared document for team members to refer to later in order to continue leveraging the connections and expertise within the group.

#### Specific Tips for In-Person Facilitation:

- Take photographs of the web and save to the team archive.

#### Specific Tips for Online Facilitation:

- If conducting this activity in a virtual environment, be intentional about pairing people for break out rooms, opting to pair those who know each other less.

## Modifications and Virtual Adaptations

- This activity is intended to be tailored to meet the needs of each individual group.
- If conducting this activity in a virtual environment, store and organize all of the team members' bios in a shared folder and ensure everyone has access to the bios. Then, organize the bios (or just names that link to more comprehensive bios) on a slide deck and ask team members to use the "insert - arrow/line" function in a presentation slide deck to draw connections between their bio and their collaborators' bios.



## Example from the field

This activity was used in a collaborative research project that brought together university students and faculty. It was done towards the beginning of the project and helped collaborators in identifying the expertise of all team members. It provided a way for folks to share parts of themselves that go beyond role and title within institutions, breaking down hierarchies and inviting more full participation. It allowed collaborators to identify commonalities that wouldn't be recognized when introductions

are limited to role and/or title. Some of the connections shared ended up being highly relevant to the project, such as expertise with graphic design, dance, embodied expression, and curriculum design. And other expertise was not immediately relevant to the project, such as a shared enjoyment of activities such as cycling and baking. However, these connections helped to enhance personal relationships and connections amongst the team.

## Commitments to Equity and Wellness

The power and promise of co-design is bringing people from different roles and positions together to collaborate (Penuel, 2007). A critical component of ensuring the success of a team is the recognition, value, and intentional incorporation of collaborators' full selves, including both personal and professional elements. Building relationships and connections from the start of the project helps to build a foundation of relationship, recognition, and shared value for each other and though it does not ensure equitable participation, it is an important component of building a team that is attentive to equity and that can be humanizing for collaborators (Winn & Paris, 2014; 2013). Committed time to building relationships can support collaborators in breaking down hierarchies and inviting full participation.



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# Works Cited

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