



Organizer Learning Project

Orienting to Community Organizers' Ways of Knowing

American Evaluation Association Webinar
June 2025



Organizer Learning Project

Origin Story, Evolution, and Approach



The Organizer Learning Project is:

A project of **Grassroots Solutions**

Funded by **The California Endowment**

Led by **Katie Fox, Gigi Barsoum, Margaret Post**



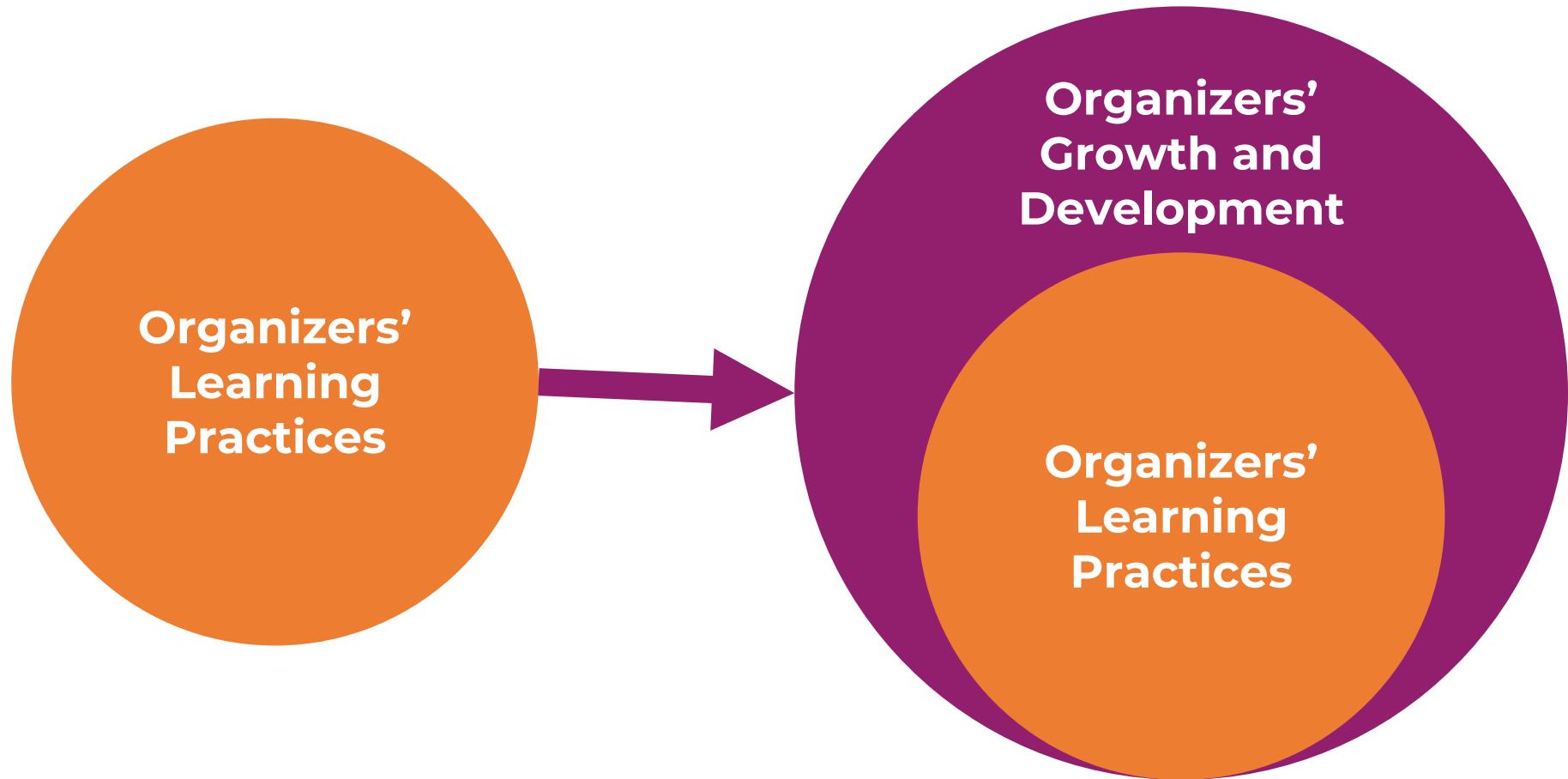


Community organizers do the day-to-day relational work of developing community leaders and engaging people who share common values and interests to stand together and take collective action.



**How would it change our approach
to learning projects and partnerships
with organizers if we centered and
oriented to their learning processes,
practices, and pace?**

Evolution of the Project



Context

- **Increased philanthropic interest in organizing.**

Evaluators are being called on to evaluate projects on organizing.

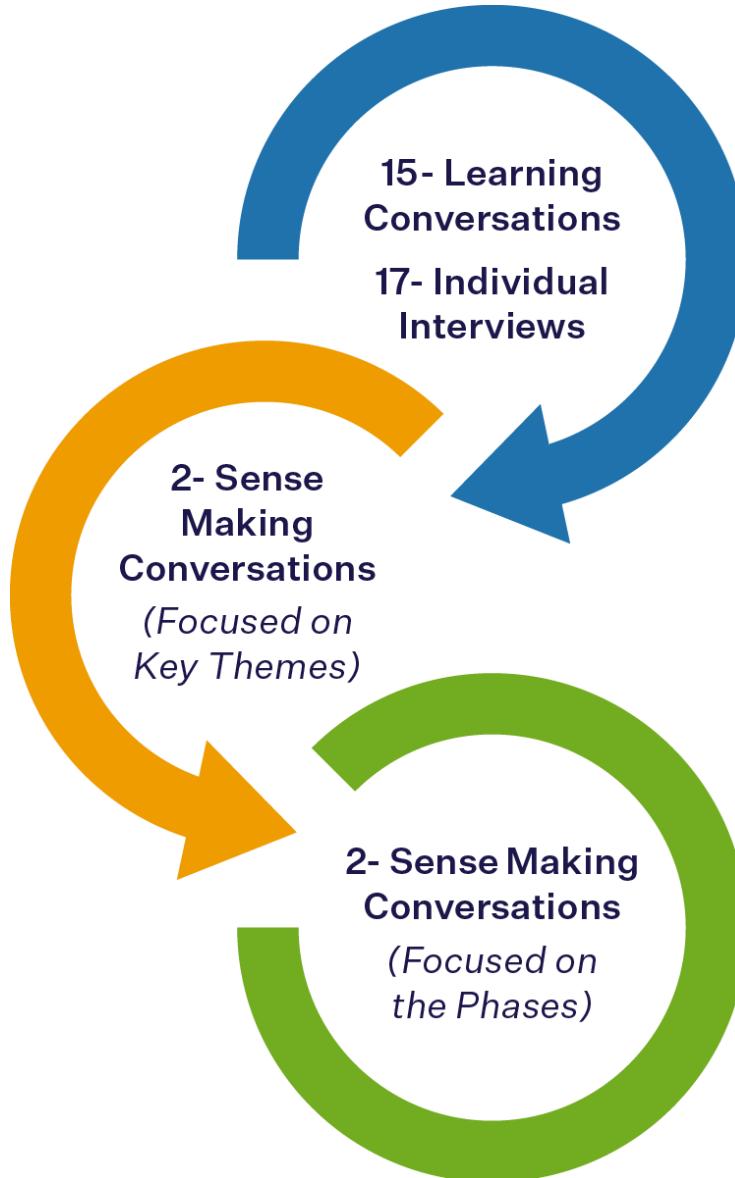
- **Staffing crisis in the organizing field.**

Driving a reimagining of organizer development and growth.

- **Current political moment.**

Organizing is an essential tool for responding to the polycrisis.

Approach and Methods



Learning Conversations

- 2-hours, virtual
- 75 organizers
- \$500 honorarium

Interviews with Field Sages

- 1-hour, virtual
- Halfway through learning convos and after

Sensemaking Sessions with Organizers

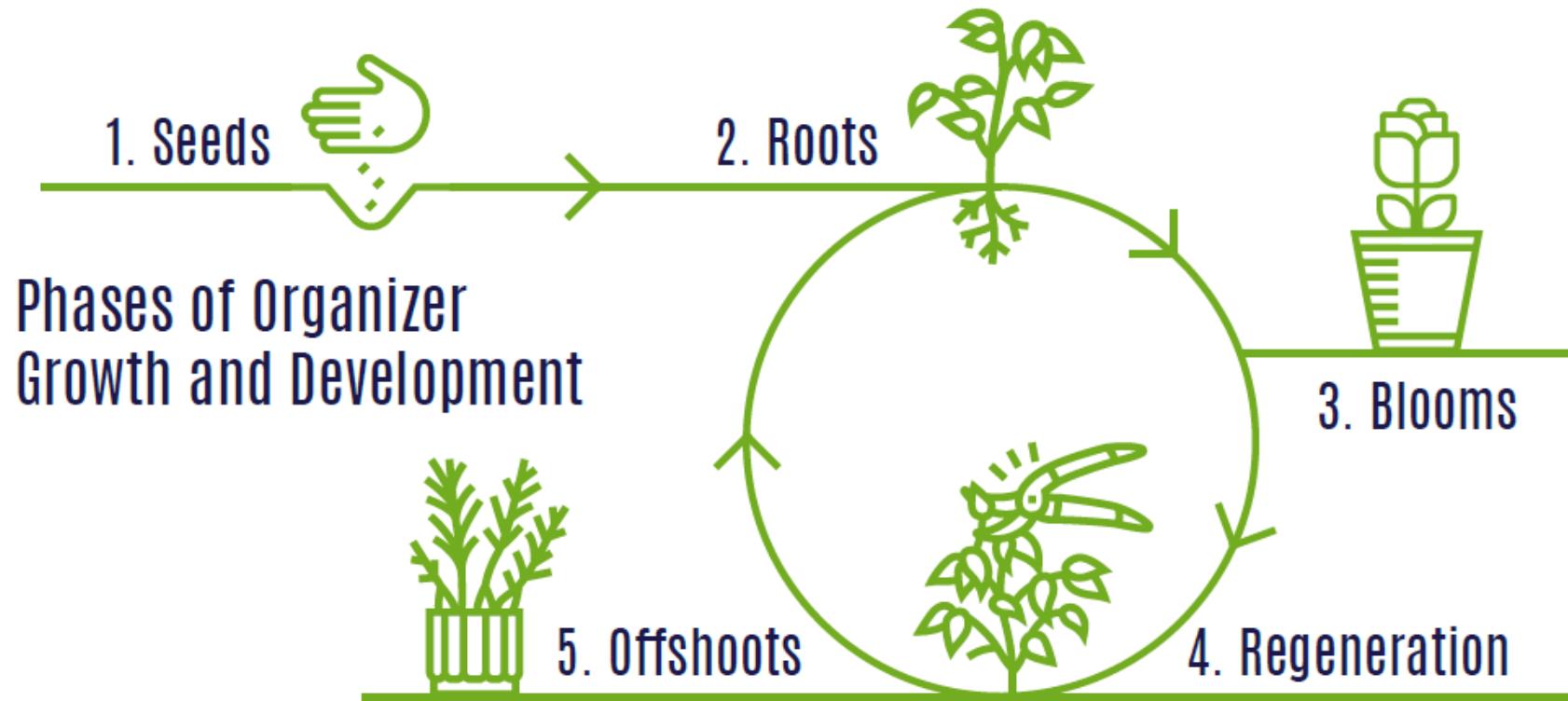
- 1.5-hour sessions
- 24 organizers
- \$500 honorarium

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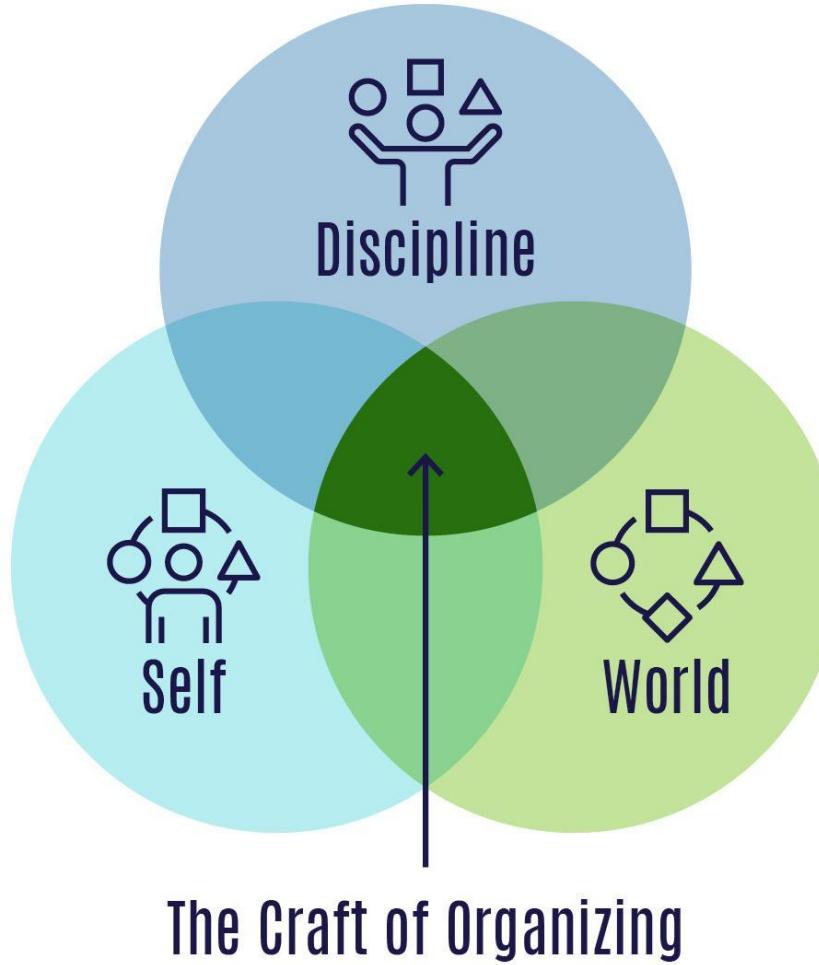
Findings about Organizer Learning and Ways of Knowing



1. Learning is ongoing, cumulative, and embedded in organizing practice.



2. The aims of organizing are multi-dimensional and so is organizer learning.



- Learning about and evaluating changes in the **self** and in the **community** are **as important** as learning about and evaluating change in **policy, elections, narratives, and systems**.
- Learning occurs **within and across** each dimension.

3. Relationships and experiences are the nutrients of organizer learning. Reflective practice is the bridge.



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Implications: How Evaluators Can Support and Orient to Organizers' Learning



Harmful Evaluation Practices

- **Applying advocacy and other evaluation frameworks** that treats organizing as a tactic and misses its multi-dimensional aims by prioritizing policy and campaign outcomes.
- **Romanticizing organizing and failing to tell the whole story** about how a win or a campaign came to be - the long-term and messy relational work, early risk-taking, and failure that often preceded success.
- **Imposing learning and evaluation processes and methods** that do not provide ample space, resources, or time to allow organizers to learn in their way, through their relationships, in their time, about what they want.



**How can we mitigate harm and
create the conditions to
support and orient to
organizers learning?**

1. Assemble a team that understands organizing.

- **Reflect** on what you do and don't know about organizing and how it is different from other mechanisms for change.
- **Read and study** about organizing
 - History and Organizing Traditions: [Rinku Sen, Introduction to “Stir it Up”](#)
 - Organizing 101 and how it relates to other change strategies: [The Forge](#) and David Beckwith, [“Community Organizing: People Power from the Grassroots”](#)
 - Current State of the Organizing Field: Future Currents
- **Hire** an organizer “guide/translator” for your project if need be.

2. Clarify who learning and evaluation is for.

- **Interrogate** whether/to what extent organizers will be the primary beneficiaries of the evaluation project vs. others (e.g., funders).
- **Recognize** how funder and organizer learning interests and practices may differ and be incompatible. [Our report may offer insight.](#)
- **Decide** what you are willing to trade off (e.g., questions, methods, deadlines) to make space in scope, budget, and timeline to support organizers' learning interests and needs.

3. Create the conditions for organizers to participate.

- **Use external sources** to gather information about organizing efforts to maximize your time with organizers (e.g., websites, national networks, program officers, other evaluations).
- **Build flexibility** into timelines and methods for evaluation activities.
- **Provide funding support** (e.g., grants or honorariums/compensation for organizers' participation).
- **Provide transparency** about the individual and collective interests behind projects and privacy/confidentiality practices.

4. Think expansively about the roles you can play to support organizer learning.

- **Documentarians:** Recording what organizers are doing, achieving, and learning.
- **Weavers:** Finding patterns across organizing efforts and groups.
- **Translators and Amplifiers:** Making organizing visible and legible.
- **Mirrors:** Facilitating high-level reflection.
- **Find small ways** to add value and offer support.

5. Lean into interactive and reflective practices in data gathering and products.

- **Reflective practice**, in relationship and conversation with others is where a lot of learning takes place in organizing. Build this into projects to add learning value.
- **Create opportunities** for reflection, connection, and emergence in data gathering (e.g., lean into storytelling, curate and pare down questions).
- **Deemphasize** the need to produce something written and lean into interactive, reflective, and relational opportunities to share findings and support learning.

Questions?

For more information about this project,
please contact: Katie at
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***“Tilling the Soil:
Cultivating Organizer
Learning and Growth”***

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Thank you!