Fresno Unified School District: Making Connections from Day One
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The 100Kin10 Unconference, as its name suggests, is not your typical conference. Conceived in 2015, it's one of 100Kin10's latest experiments—the culmination of the new partner onboarding experience and an intimate opportunity for the most recent cohort of partners to connect in a candid, immersive manner. The ideal outcome from this gathering? Immediate partner-to-partner connections that lead to collaboration and collective problem-solving.

From March 31st through April 2nd, 2015, freshman partners traveled to NYC from carefully-selected nonprofits, school districts, museums, government agencies, foundations, and universities. Julie Drapala, Partner Liaison for 100Kin10, shared:

"We wanted to build excitement that this network exists for the partners. Therefore the format is designed to spark new partner discussion regarding what they are most passionate about and to springboard their engagement in the network."

Gayle Spencer (Coordinator, Teacher Residency Program, Fresno Unified School District) knew at once was that this "anti-conference" was different. The first item on the agenda was "play", an improv game that literally had Gayle jumping in the air like a child. And it proved fruitful - she returned home with a host of new connections and ideas.

According to Gayle, "Anytime you can start with laughter, you're in a good place." Still, this former algebra teacher was initially pushed out of her comfort zone. "The improvisation exercise was disorienting at first because I'm used to point A point B." Ultimately, Gayle fell in love with the lack of structure at the Unconference. She noted:

"The game relaxed participants and lowered our affective filter, allowing for easy connection. After that, we drove the discussions. We opened up about where we can help one another, how we can push forward the agenda of exemplary STEM education, and broaden our impact nationally."

Setting their own pace, partner ideas, resources and contact information flowed quickly. Gayle and Fresno's Teacher Residency Program made connections at the Unconference that are still blossoming.

And it wasn't just the Unconference that proved fruitful. Gayle and her boss, Teresa Morales Young, also reserved spots in their preferred Open Labs, which took place on Friday and Sunday, bookending the Saturday Unconference.

Open Labs are “field trips” which allow new partners to uncover educational resources face-to face, learning on another partner’s home turf and getting a behind-the-scenes look at how that partner operates. It’s a peek inside the classrooms, laboratories, and boardrooms of other STEM-related organizations.

In choosing Open Lab partner hosts, Julie said: “100Kin10 looks for partners that have something to share—but that are also open to feedback. The Open Labs have a lot to offer in unique ways that are unexpected for both parties.”

Gayle and Theresa’s first Open Lab choice exemplifies that sentiment. “We had a session with Sesame Street, how can you not adore that?” Sitting under a big bird lamp, Gayle learned that Sesame Street has a curriculum for early STEM teachers, such as their Little Discoverers: Big Fun with Science, Math and More. They also talked about various aspects of early STEM learning, including preschool science and professional development for teachers. Best of all, all Sesame Workshop resources are free.

On Sunday, Gayle and Theresa visited the Science Friday studio, meeting with award-winning science correspondent, Ira Flatow, the show’s host and executive producer. As Ira, producers and technicians described the breadth of their work, the Fresno team discovered something new—how much technology is used in video or audio production. They listened to the Science Friday radio show, yet another manifestation of STEM education and learning.

Thanks to both Open Labs, Gayle now knows about new career options for Fresno students. “They can be technicians or engineers at media organizations like Science Friday or Sesame Street.”

Gayle continues to watch the captivating Science Friday videos, sharing them with Fresno teachers, “It may spark amazing conversations or insights for your kids.” And every time she goes to the refrigerator, Gayle sees the postcard she wrote to herself at the close of the Unconference. It reads: “Spend more time looking at what 100Kin10 partnerships have to offer.” Gayle grins, “I’d be foolish not to.