

A Learning-Centered Conference: The Breakout Sessions

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The backbone of most conferences is the workshops or breakout sessions. These often provide participants with an opportunity to gather in smaller groups to explore more deeply and practically topics related to their lives and work. So how do we ensure that workshop sessions deliver value for a conference? Here are three questions to consider.

1. **What is the purpose for breakout sessions?** Sessions can meet a variety of needs. They may update people on emerging theory, trends or practices; provide an overview of a new tool or approach; or, offer a chance to develop a new skill.

As conference organizers, state clearly the kind of sessions you are looking for and the time available. Consider using an accordion approach to scheduling, offering two or three different timeframes for workshops, depending on the purpose.

2. **How will you set and communicate expectations for breakout sessions?** Given the gap between what we know about how adults learn and the typical design of conference breakout sessions (i.e. a lecture ending with five to ten minutes for a Q&A), how will you encourage workshop leaders to design and facilitate sessions that engage participants and generate deeper learning?

Consider expanding the “call for proposals” guidance to include a clear statement of these expectations.

3. **How will you support breakout session leaders as they prepare?** In addition to clear, written guidance, consider doing a number of the following: offer an orientation webinar, one-to-one coaching, practical design tools or other resources. These all demonstrate respect and build conference quality, as well as ensure more potential learning.

Just as we advise walking through the 8 Steps of Design for the overall conference, invite workshop leaders to walk through and share these steps in the proposal phase. As leaders begin to prepare the actual session, they may find the “4A model” useful in designing sessions that generate learning.

Answering these three questions and then “working into the answers,” can help shift conference breakouts from “off the shelf” presentations by an expert to meaningful explorations of practice with a group of colleagues, all in service of being more successful with our work in world.