

## A Learning-Centered Conference: The Big Picture

by Jeanette Romkema and Michael Culliton

Conferences provide valuable opportunities for networking with colleagues and showcasing successes and emerging practices in a field. Given the expense and herculean effort of such events, how do we build on these aspects of conferences to ensure we also provide opportunities for meaningful learning and knowledge sharing?

Here are some tips to consider:

1. **Assemble a planning team dedicated to making the shift.** Before inviting others to serve on the planning team, draft a brief rationale and list of assumptions about what it means to ensure learning at the conference. As you form your team and plan the conference, continue to shape and revisit this document so that becomes a living and operational guide for planning.

**Consider all three stages of the conference: before, during and after.** How will you design and invite learning *before* the conference even begins? Ideas include inviting participants to engage with relevant content before they arrive i.e. read the recent published book by the keynote speaker; watch a YouTube video on the topic that just went viral; respond to a question on a password protect area of the conference website. The same sort of invitation can be made after the conference, to continue the dialogue and learning.

In addition, technology—especially when combined with thoughtful, open questions, can also be useful. Creating a conference Facebook page, Ning site and app, or other virtual conference space that is seeded with engaging relevant questions can invite dialogue and learning before, during and after the conference.

2. **Create an overall design.** Before inviting session proposals, the planning team needs to be clear about key elements of the conference.

These includes: the intended participants (who), the reason for the conference (why), the change in practice you anticipate as a result of conference attendance (so that), the location and timing (when and where), relevant content (what), and the global objectives for the conference (what participants will achieve during the conference), and the conference structures (how) that will support this learning. This in-depth look and planning will help the team stay focused, check assumptions and make intentional decisions.

3. **Set and share clear expectations.** What criteria will you establish and share with all who prepare and lead sessions at the conference to help ensure that each event is designed for learning? You want to encourage engaging learners in “doing

something meaningful” with the content presented in each session rather than “talking at” them. Clarify that this goes beyond a Q&A session at the end of workshops, but means inviting learners to working with the content at various points throughout the session.

These expectations are a natural extension of the overall design crafted by the planning team. (See tip #3 above.)

4. **Find ways for conference participants to share their learning.** How will you invite relevant knowledge sharing among participants *outside* of the keynote, panel and workshop times?

Consider creative tools such as a graffiti wall, art station, or poster session to invite dialogue and to expand and deepen learning. Such additions to the planned sessions can provide a rich canvas for sharing discoveries and emerging practices, posing important questions or synthesizing conference learning. These structures also allow for more reflective and quiet ways of engaging with conference content while at the same time providing sparks for conversation outside the formal sessions. Other ideas include:

- Ongoing live twitter feed (or other social media tool) in a central location(s) in the venue i.e. in main hallway or main conference room
  - Lunch discussion groups where people can post a question or topic of interest on their lunch table and anyone interested can join them for dialogue – no sign up, no obligation
  - Summary of the past day shared each morning in the form of a poem, song, drama or visual story
  - Video corner where people can record a 1-minute response to an open question related to the conference theme. There is then an ongoing loop projected on the wall with all videos created.
  - Cover tables with brown paper and invite ongoing doodling and writing about the conference topics
  - Post-it Note tree on a wall with people’s questions on one color paper and answers offered by others on another color paper
  - Image wall with provocative images related to the conference and an invitation to add remarks, questions, and observations.
5. **Select the venue intentionally.** This is not something to check off your to-do list. The carefully selected venue can support and enhance learning and dialogue. There would be nothing worse than being at an environmental conference and being stuck in a glitzy hotel with no nature in sight! Ask yourself: How does this venue reflect values and theme of the conference? Do the breakout rooms allow for interactive learning? Will this venue feel comfortable and warm, and how could it be set up and used to help build a sense of community and learning?

6. **Set up workshops for learning.** Most workshop presenters come because of their content expertise and do not necessarily have skills in facilitation of learning. Often they are there to check off a box: four conference presentations this year. For this reason you need to be clear about what your expectations are and suggestions for learner engagement. A few ideas to share may be: set the room up in a circle to encourage dialogue; pause a few times during your presentation to engage learners with the content you are presenting; use the first half of your workshop time for a presentation and the last half for learner engagement.
  
7. **Consider alternative learning models.** Including a cutting-edge keynote address (with a well-known name), a provocative panel discussion, and interesting and varied breakout sessions (workshops) are quite standard conference elements. However, there are other methodologies that are proven and tested ways to learn and great for conferences with a large number of participants. Consider these three:
  - **Circle practice:** This is a great way to start and end a day or to debrief a panel session. See [The Circle Way: A Leader In Every Chair](#) for a great resource.
  - **Open space technology:** Is a great way to engage with numerous pressing questions and topics being generated by the group. See [Open Space Technology: A User Guide](#) for a great resource.
  - **World Café:** Is an easy process for digging deep into a few powerful questions and harvesting data for further work. See [A Quick Reference Guide to Hosting World Café](#) for a great resource.