

## Ways to Ensure Learning at a Conference

*The following are ideas for ensuring learning at a conference, retreat or large learning event. As planners we can maximize learning by engaging participants both inside and outside the planned sessions. Here are some ways to consider.*

1. **Give clear instructions.** This sort of transparency enables all participants to feel safe and know what is expected of them. It can also minimize resistance.
  - *What instructions would be helpful for participants to know before they come to the event, beyond simply the title, time and venue?*
2. **Plan time for both personal reflection and group interaction.** We need both. Introverts need time to think and process and connect to the new content on their own and extraverts need to do this with others (see Susan Cain's book *Quiet* for more on this). Learners will grow in the telling and the listening to each other's reflections and stories. The more relevant and meaningful the engagement, the deeper the learning and greater the possibility of lasting change as a result.

This type of intentional engagement will also lead to a feeling of "connectedness" and to those we are with and a sense of "belonging" (see Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* for more on this).

- *In your conference when would be a good time for solo work and when would group work be helpful?*
3. **Create a workbook or program for the event.** Having all the details of the event is helpful, and making this a learning tool is even better.
    - *How can you engage participants in a printed program booklet throughout the event to deepen the learning and personal reflection?*
  4. **Give a take away.** A visual or physical object can be a memory aid for learning, the learning experience, promises made or the relationships created.
    - *What memory aid could you offer or create at a conference to support the learning or plans made?*
  5. **Ensure variety.** You know what they say: Variety is the spice of life... and of learning! Nobody wants to repeatedly do the same thing in the same way. Vary the way you



engage your participants, how to invite sharing, how you offer plenary sessions, and how people can network and process.

- *How can you encourage the presenters and leaders of the event to present, engage and share in varied ways?*
6. **Use visuals.** Whether participants are asked to create them or talk about them—visuals are such a powerful way of connecting participants to a different and deeper level of conversation and learning.
    - *What tips can you offer your presenters to help ensure they use visuals effectively to maximize learning?*
  7. **Share stories.** Dynamic, engaging and very knowledgeable presenters who speak with great authority is important. However, they also need to be personal and show vulnerability. Stories are a great way to do this.
    - *What stories connected to your conference topic may be helpful to invite at the beginning of the event and/or at the end?*
  8. **Create a safe place.** The safer participants feel the more open and honest they will be, and the deeper the dialogue.
    - *Considering the conference space, what can you do to maximize safety for all? Introverts/extroverts? Visual/kinesthetic/auditory processers? Different intelligences? Different personality types?*
  9. **Invite opportunities to engage with the content.** Learning is in the doing and the deciding, and for your conference to be a learning event you need to include time to engage with the content being learned. Through personal and meaningful engagement we push learning to “the cellular level.”
    - *How can you start the engagement on the first day in the first hour the group is together?*
  10. **Give time to process what is being learned.** We are not all able to share and engage “on our feet” and therefore need time. Offering spaces and ways to share questions and ideas after and outside the learning space can be helpful, i.e. a graffiti wall with guiding questions from the conference; a twitter feed through the conference; 1-minute video posting projected in the hall on the wall.
    - *What can you do to offer space to share questions and ideas in an ongoing way and outside the presentation space?*

11. **Model vulnerability.** The start of an event sets the stage for the entire event. Start well and model what you are hoping from everyone throughout the event.
  - *How can you model vulnerability in your pre-event correspondence or in the welcome?*
  
12. **Share instructions visually.** Most of us struggle to hear instructions or questions and understand/remember them. When you have invested time to design a strong session and you have the perfect open questions to invite deep work and dialogue, then share them. Whether they are on paper or on the wall, having a visual reminder to support our work is important.
  - *How will you share the task instructions and questions you ask people to engage with?*
  
13. **Plan to engage the participants' heads, hearts, and hands.** A conference that focuses on holistic learning has a greater possibility for change. Being intentional about where to focus your efforts and planning is key.
  - *What learning domain is most needed by the participants at your conference? Or, should you offer a selection of all three?*
  
14. **Have fun.** Invite people to participate in role play, games, debates, chart making, and other fun activities. If it is purposeful, people will engage and learn. Let's not take ourselves too seriously.
  - *What could you do that is fun, and still purposeful and connected to the conference topic?*
  
15. **Ask the right questions.** When the right questions are asked, the quality of the discussion, whether in group or plenary, is always better. Crafting "the right questions" takes time, intentionality and a deep understanding of the people in the room and the situation that brought everyone together. There will be times for "digging deeper" questions and there will be times for "open questions", but often the deepest work happens when we ask "powerful open questions."

As well, carefully creating a few "guiding questions" for the entire conference can also be helpful. These questions are usually introduced at the start of the event, posted in a

public space throughout the event, and asked repeatedly during the event. It is with repeated engagement that the answers and our understanding deepen.

- *What are the guiding questions for your entire conference that can be asked repeatedly throughout the event to deepen learning about the topic? How will participants engage with these questions outside the meeting rooms in an ongoing way?*

16. **Plan thoughtfully and thoroughly.** Invest time to ensure the conference is productive, fun, and rich. This means, start early.

- *What learning needs and resources assessment can you do that will help you plan your conference more thoughtfully and thoroughly?*

17. **Share guidelines or values for the conference.** Being clear about how the group will work and be together can help safety, deepen the dialogue, and heighten engagement i.e. How about putting a “tent sign” on each table with the main values of the conference.

- *What guidelines or values would be helpful to share at your conference? When/how will you share them?*

18. **Offer choices in how to engage.** Not everyone is comfortable or equally skilled or interested to share in the same ways. Offering choice can add to the safety and respect felt in an event: choice to draw or write a response; choice about which topic group to work on.

- *What choice may be helpful for your group? When would that be offered?*

19. **Ensure your conference is time well spent.** Adults lead busy and complex lives. When we take time out to participate in a conference or multi-day event we want it to be important and relevant, and I want to be grateful I came.

- *How will you communicate the importance of this conference to those coming?*

20. **Include all voices.** Everyone in the room has something to offer and needs to engage with the content to learning from it. People need time to decide what they think/feel about what they have heard, interact with it, and then decide what they want to do with it.



- *How can you ensure all voices are invited into the plenary sessions, panel discussion and workshop times (knowing that a large group Q&A just isn't enough)?*
21. **Be transparent.** Let everyone know what to expect and what is expected of them before and during the event. Knowing what is coming next and why the program is designed the way it is helps strengthen safety and minimize resistance.
- *What part of the conference event needs explanation to help strengthen safety or minimize possible resistance?*
22. **Mandate engagement in workshop and break-out sessions.** Yes, this can be done and starts by clearly describing expectations in the “Call for Papers” or “Instructions to Workshop Presenters” that are sent out. Then the organizers need to develop ways to help ensure presenters actually do this i.e. offer 3 tips in correspondence with each presenter.
- *Who do you need to talk to about considering mandating learning-centred workshops at your conference?*

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\*This tip sheet was written during the 2016 GLP *Learning-Centered Conferences* online course. The contributors are: Mary Streufert, Fiona Boshoff, Jan Eyre, Jen Sleboda, Sarah Larkin, Karen Ridout, Jessica Fairfax, Heather Dean, Ann Blyberg, Michael Culliton, and Jeanette Romkema.