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The Virtual Extension Annual Conference: Addressing Contemporary Professional Development Needs

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Keywords

conference, professional development, technology, programming, communication, flipped classroom

Disciplines

Curriculum and Instruction | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | Instructional Media Design | University Extension

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Extension systems are experimenting with new models for conducting professional development to enhance staff competence and other returns on professional development investments. The ISUEO virtual annual conference provides a successful flipped classroom model of asynchronous and synchronous learning events for conducting an Extension annual conference. The lessons learned and emerging promising practices from our experiment will help Extension systems better meet the professional development needs of today's Extension workers by providing new learning models and technology they can incorporate into their practice.

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Professional development needs and contexts are changing for Extension workers, with learners increasingly preferring to learn anytime and anywhere (Baruah, 2013; Baughman et al., 2010; Senyurekli, Dworkin, & Dickinson, 2006). Extension systems are also challenged to provide professional development due to reduced funding and workforce changes (Borr & Young, 2010; Franz, 2011). In addition, professional development for staff has become more complex, with more topics and competencies needed and more diverse learners and learning styles (Lakai, Jayaratne, Moore, & Kistler, 2012; Ota, DiCarlo, Burts, Laird, & Gioe, 2006).

Virtual Annual Conference

Virtual Extension conferences have been conducted using mostly live or recorded speakers viewed at dispersed sites. Essentially the methodology remained the same, with the format not being significantly altered to accommodate long-distance learners. The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach (ISUEO) virtual annual conference instead used a learner-centered, flipped classroom

approach, with staff learning individually online prior to interaction with others (Knewton, 2013). The model focuses on the use of educational technology and activity learning—buzzwords in today's conversations about education. The process has been fundamental to Extension education over the last 100 years. However, we have not kept pace in these areas, so new strategies like this virtual annual conference described here are needed. Goals for the conference were to the following.

- Learn something new every day.

- Anticipate and adapt to change in the world around us.

- Explore new applications of technology for improving communication and programming.

- Explore new applications of technology to enhance addressing our four signature issues.

- Learn and have fun to improve ourselves, our teams, and our organization.

The ISUEO virtual annual conference format included distinct but interrelated phases:

- Seventy-two asynchronous learning objects and 15 library resources posted in Moodle open to 527 employees registered for 2 weeks of independent learning, including key note presentations and tracks on communications and program development;

- Three days of synchronous learning through 50 program and county office team meetings, live streaming of keynote speakers, and a reaction panel to 23 regional and campus sites with 511 participants, and time for individual learning;

- Three weeks for additional learning for participants to return to learning objects, interact with each other, create a professional development plan, complete the conference evaluation, and translate learning into action

Conference Support

Many supports were provided for the conference because there was no Extension model to emulate and many staff were new to the format and the technologies involved:

- Extension administration championing the conference format and content as well as substantial staff time on the project;

- Two conference co-chairs with instructional design, adult education, and professional development experience;

- Creation of a Moodle course to guide learning, including an "ask the expert" feature and technology support hotline;

- Development of facilitator guides for synchronous events;

- An online scavenger hunt part of asynchronous learning and a mystery box of items sent to each regional and campus meeting site that included popcorn, door prizes, and tickets to win an iPad drawn during the Extension Director's keynote presentation;

- Information technology and video staff readily available.

Lessons Learned

The conference revealed lessons from this approach to ISUEO professional development.

- Staff appreciated a conference that modeled new educational delivery methods and technologies they can replicate with clients.

- Substantial staff time is needed for a successful conference and it is mostly invisible to conference participants.

- Multiple plans are needed to trouble shoot glitches, including prerecorded keynote talks and facilitators prepared to conduct impromptu discussions at local sites. When technology doesn't work, the audience wants to know what contingency plans are being used.

- Staff technology competencies vary, so extra support or local guidance is needed prior to or embedded into the conference. Some staff were confused about the format at first but in the end, rated their conference experience as positive.

- Advanced users of technology need breadth and depth examples of applications to stay engaged.

- Technology should enhance interaction throughout the conference rather than just deliver talks.

- Learning objects are readily available through YouTube, TED Talks, eXtension learn, blogs, etc.

- People will participate in the conference who haven't registered, especially if they aren't familiar with virtual conferences or online learning.

- Don't underestimate the time it takes for staff to engage in asynchronous learning.

- Provide blocks of time for staff to discuss their learning and how they will use it in their work.

- Including a meal at synchronous events helps participants register because a count is often needed for meals.

- Moodle works well as a learning management system for its ease of use by a variety of learners.

Promising Practices for Extension Virtual Conferences

This new approach to conducting ISUEO conferences yielded promising practices as follows.

- The flipped classroom allowed staff to learn when it was convenient for them and save travel time. One participant said, "I really like the idea of a virtual conference, especially with the learning on your own ahead of time. I think that this is a good use of staff time as well as a good use of resources by limiting the travel time and mileage but creating a professional development opportunity. I also think that there will be great learning by some participants, because they are taking the time to try out the new ideas right away and not having to wait until there is time in their busy schedule." This model of education is the next step in providing high quality Extension education because it is predicated on the notion of learning through activity and engagement with others.

- The asynchronous learning objects stimulated conversations across the organization before, during, and after the conference. One learner said, "I was skeptical at first, and didn't know how we'd find the time to watch the videos, but we did…everyone learned something new…and were so impressed that there was a mix of sources so we could learn from Extension and from others." Forcing people to use new technologies to participate in the conference was eye opening for some staff. This hopefully leads to them including this type of learning methodology into their own practice.

- Regional and campus meeting sites for the synchronous events were popular, and staff appreciated the time and travel this saved and the discussions that took place.

- A professional studio production is valued by learners because they feel it elevates the importance of their learning and participation.

- The mystery box of items sent to synchronous sites added fun and interaction into local meetings, and holding a drawing for an iPad using tickets in the box enhanced early engagement.

- Modeling new technology in conference delivery was rated highly by participants because they appreciate seeing direct applications for their work. One participant said, "The asynchronous format showed us what is possible with our clients."

- Facilitation guides helped provide consistency across synchronous sites and decreased technology trouble shooting.

- The conference was cost effective, with only $3,500 of new resources expended centrally, but required redirection of staff time.

Summary

Extension systems are experimenting with new models for conducting professional development to enhance staff competence and other returns on professional development investments. The ISUEO virtual annual conference provides a successful flipped classroom model of asynchronous and synchronous learning events for conducting an Extension annual conference. The lessons learned and emerging promising practices from our experiment will help Extension systems better meet the

professional development needs of today's Extension workers by providing new learning models and technology they can incorporate into their practice.

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