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Thinking outside the box: Conferences as collaborative professional development opportunities

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Abstract: This roundtable will focus on how we could reimage the concept of conferences from individual to collaborative events. Within the concept of collaborative events, we will also explore the use of various collaborative techniques to enhance conference attendees' professional development.

Time and money are precious commodities for individuals and institutions; professional development is imperative for careers, especially in adult education. Professional organizations spend substantial amounts of time and money to provide their members with quality conferences with the intent of contributing to the knowledge in the field, as well as enhancing the professional knowledge and skills of the individual members. Participants also attend conferences to further research agendas, establish contacts, and develop a professional identity (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002; Wiessner, Hatcher, Chapman, & Storberg-Walker, 2008). In many instances, the organization's membership volunteers their time to plan and execute annual conferences.

Yet, annual conferences are commonly planned in silos. For interdisciplinary fields of study and practice, often several separate conferences are sponsored in a year. Professionals who wish to expand their horizons by participating in multiple conferences do so, especially during strenuous global financial climates, at a tremendous sacrifice. More than ever, the limits of time and money are constraining the ability of individuals to engage in the professional development activities presented through conferences. We suggest that it is imperative for conference planners and participants to rethink the existing conference structure itself. This roundtable will explore research and models that might create a new paradigm that moves beyond traditional understandings of conferences as occurring in silos.

Collaborative Events

In the field of adult education, there are broad topic conferences, such as the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE), Adult Education Research Conference (AERC) and Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE). Additional conferences that would be of benefit to adult educators include the Adult Higher Education Alliance (AHEA), Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD), the Transformative Learning Conference (TLC) and the Annual Conference on Distant Teaching and Learning (DTL), to name a few.

CASAE and AERC frequently co-sponsor a joint conference. Some of the advantages are that we can hear presentations and get to know other adult educators who might not attend both of these yearly conferences. Some questions that we would like to explore in this portion of the roundtable are: 1) Is there a paradigm that might bring multiple conferences together in order to create a more efficient experience? 2) Can we create this new paradigm without losing the

important essence of the various conferences? 3) What are the advantages of creating this new paradigm? 4) What would that look like? 5) How could we combine resources, especially of personnel? 6) Finally, what would these new paradigm mean in terms of critical program planning (Cervero & Wilson, 2006). How do we make sure that all the stakeholders can participate and that marginalized voices are included?

Enhancing Professional Development

Research studies have examined how to enhance the learning for conference attendees. Some tools that have been employed are New Learning (NL) (Wiessner & Mezirow, 2000), Exploration and Reflection (E&R) groups (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002) and Communities of Practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). These methods invite participants to do more than just take in information during the conference; they provide intentional spaces where groups can meet for reflection and knowledge creation. These tools focus on increasing the value of the conference for the individual attendee within the current conference structure.

Another tool that might help conference attendees in their reflection, integration and creation of new knowledge is concept mapping (Boxtel, Linden, Roelofs, & Erkens, 2002; Daley, Cañas, Stark-Schweitzer, 2007). The questions that we would like to explore are: 1) Would this intentional space for enhancing professional development be useful to the attendees? 2) How might we create these spaces in an already packed conference schedule?

Pulling it all together

As Wiessner (2006) points out, adult educators generally fall into one of two categories in their view of conferences. Either conferences are all relatively similar or we focus on one specific type of theme or sub discipline within the field. "We fail to critically analyze the hegemonic structures that guide our current event practices. We do not question alternate means for organizing these important gatherings that lie at the center of our professional and disciplinary lives" (Wiessner, 2006, p. 537). Our hope is that reimaging the possibilities might create richer, more efficient ways for adult education professionals to engage in professional development.

References

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