

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE GUIDELINES



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Welcome to planning a virtual conference. This guide was created in partnership with the following Maryland State Department of Education trainers and staff: Patty Morrison, Amina Jones-Law, Brian Law, Lacey Egerton, Joanna Spilioti, Maria Kirby, Sheila George, Randi Albertson, Deborah Langer, Nancy Cahlink-Seidler, Angeline Bishop-Oshoko, Agneatha Wright, Jacqueline Woodruff, and LaTanya Taylor, to assure that all who participate hold true to our training standards. Additional information was provided by: <https://www.acm.org/virtual-conferences>

We hope the following tips help make the teaching, planning and learning experience more engaging and the coordination process easier to navigate.

Maryland State Department of Education
Division of Early Childhood, Office of Child Care
200 West Baltimore Street, 10th Floor
Baltimore, MD 21201-2595
trainingcredential.msde@maryland.gov

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CONFERENCE ORGANIZATION & SETUP

Themes

Every conference has a theme or a big idea to get us engaged in the process. A concept that pulls the event together.

Elements

Virtual conferences should mirror what happens at a face-to-face conference as best as possible. It should have elements like keynote presenters, breakouts, and opportunities to network.

Introductions

Open daily with a “priming session” to highlight the connection to the theme and of each session.

Accountability

Integrity pledge to allow for accountability.

Assistance

- Session Chairs- session chairs help the moderators within each of the trainings. The main function is to be a guide in a breakout session if needed.
- Have hosts available in each session. Hosts may be volunteers. These volunteers assist the Session Chairs during the actual sessions. They may oversee the chat boxes or assist with any problems.

Virtual Platforms

Virtual learning is NOT the same as in-person learning. Virtual workshops do not have the same look and feel. Every virtual platform is different and has different functionality. The choice of platforms should be made with the goal of reaching a good balance between participants’ sense of presence, scalability, geographic reach, and simplicity. The number of expected participants has a tremendous impact on this balance.

Trainers

When selecting trainers to present at your conference, please keep the following in mind:

- There is a learning curve for trainers just as it may be for participants and patience is the key to success.
- You may want to view the presenters prior to the event to ensure they are what you are looking for. Are they engaging? Are they professional? Do they have the presence to do this kind of training? Are they professional on camera? How do they keep participants engaged? Is there someone that can verify they are savvy to present virtually?

Monitoring

Monitoring is a large piece to this planning process. For each 50 participants in a training, the state is requesting volunteers or staff be involved in the behind the scene production. These individuals will respond to the chat box, assist with breakout rooms and be available to answer any questions participants may have during the event. They must be able to give participants a comfortable experience with technology if requested.

CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION

Learning Models

Incorporate collaborative coaching models into the event. This allows for better learning interactions with participants in the virtual exchanges.

Virtual conferences can be anywhere from a day to a month. By spacing out over a long period of time, attendees will have the opportunity to digest, review, reflect, and apply what they learn.

Pre-recorded sessions may be an option for presenters who live out of state. This recording could be shown during the live session followed by a Q and A session conducted by a facilitator.

Assessments

An assessment for each breakout session is required. Consider how you will disseminate to the participants.

Proof of Participation

Certificates must contain the participant name, not a printable copy for the participant to fill in their own name. How will certificates be disseminated? Will there be one certificate issued at the end of the conference? This should include the title, core of knowledge area, number of hours course id number for each session attended, as well as the conference number.

Social Interactions

There are many other ways of using available technology to enhance social interactions at conferences. Here are a few to consider:

- Invite participants to make a list of 4-6 people that they could possibly run into at the conference, then send emails to these people to schedule half-hour video chat sessions at some point during the conference.
- Conversely, organize “virtual lunch tables” where a senior member of the community is placed at a table and then others (e.g., students) can sign up to join the table for a certain length of time. Or consider a model, where participants are randomly assigned to tables, with the intent of having different groups for every meal.
- Consider chill-out corners — places where people can just join and chit chat in some virtual places during the breaks, even with coffee in their (physical) hands or a drink.
- Provide a way for participants to advertise “sign-up sheets” (e.g., links to a Google Sheet with a list of open meeting slots and an invitation for others to fill in their name in the slot they want) that others can fill in to schedule one-on-one sessions.
- Expand the time allocated to (virtual) poster sessions, where participants can wander around and gather in small groups to discuss posters displayed in the virtual space.
- Educator Meetup: The idea is to match like-minded educators who have not met before: at morning coffee every day [time-zone matched, or across time zones], 5 min. minimum time; each swaps one slide (from initially registered set in a conference list).
- End the day with a “synthesis session”, to reflect on experience and share on going actions. This can utilize discussion boards.

TECHNOLOGY

Technology

- Technology is the biggest hurdle when planning virtual conferences. Navigation is important.
- The live sessions of virtual conferences need to be easy to find and get into.
- The online program needs to have information about “when” and “where” the sessions will take place, e.g., the Zoom meeting links, the Webinar links, the Slack channels, etc.
- Information should be presented through user interfaces that are easy to understand and with links that “teleport” participants to the “places” they want to go.

Technical Challenges

You have the potential of having possible troubles. How will you fix this for your audience of 1000, 2000, etc.? Who do you have in place?

The first question in planning is looking at your browser:

- Does the platform/ virtual classroom being used function better on a certain browser? If you are struggling to enter the virtual classroom using Chrome, try a different browser like Safari or Microsoft Edge.
- Patience with technology: There are ALWAYS technology glitches. Sometimes it's something you have control over, like changing a setting on your computer. Most often, it's out of everyone's control. There could be a slow internet connection that causes a delay in the audio and/or visuals. The host server (the cloud-based storage) could be over capacity, which in turn may cause an audio-visual delay, OR could cause an inability to log on to the classroom. Your local internet provider, or the trainer's internet provider could be reducing the bandwidth (speed of transmission of data), which in turn causes an audio-visual delay OR kicks you out of the classroom.
- The presenter must be on a webcam during the entire presentation. Are they on a headset? Can you hear them? Is their technology prepared to handle this event? What guidelines do you have for them? Are they controlling muting the volumes of participants or are you? If you are controlling everything you may need to adjust the settings on your computer to have the best online results.
- Did you test your webcam and your computer audio, including the microphone and speakers? You may need to adjust the settings on your computer to have the best online experience.
- Is your computer or phone compatible with the learning platform being used? If your technology specs are not compatible with the virtual classroom, you may not be able to enter the classroom or use all of the classroom functions.
- Did you download the app for the virtual classroom? While you may be able to access the classroom through a weblink, you will typically have a better experience and an easier time if you download the app associated with the learning platform.
- Do you know how to turn on your webcam? Do you know how to adjust your speaker volume? Do you know how to mute and unmute your microphone?

TECHNOLOGY

Accessibility and Inclusion

Another important issue to consider when planning a virtual conference is ensuring that existing socio-economic disparities are not amplified by the rapid move from physical to virtual. For example, one might envision technically sophisticated solutions that would be out of (economic) reach for many communities; or long interactive sessions that are at odds with child care duties of the participants.

While planning virtual conferences, we also need to put in place mechanisms to support their deployment to all members of the community they will serve.

Some platforms may not be accessible in some geographic regions. For example, Google, may not be easily reachable in some remote areas. If possible, organizers should test availability and quality of services from regions where people have registered. Many participants will need to watch and listen from home, but their internet connectivity may not support high-bandwidth streaming video. Thus, offering a fall-back option that allows asynchronous downloading or participation by audio-only, including dial-in by phone, can ensure that nobody is excluded by network constraints.

This applies particularly to presenters, whose at-home bandwidth may not be sufficient to reliably stream video, and whose housing situation may not offer a quiet space for remote presentations. (Make sure to check whether the platform you are considering offers local dial-in numbers across all regions too.) Giving presenters the option to present via pre-recorded video, even if you wouldn't normally consider that for your physical event, should be considered.

Expectations for participants

In-person workshops

Virtual activities are NOT the same as in-person activities. In-person workshops typically have small group work, whole group discussion, and maybe some hands-on activities with materials. The engagement that you experience in-person cannot be replicated online. BUT trainers can try.

Online workshops

As a participant, it's important to recognize that the online workshop experience will be different. In-person we expect some wait time as participants finish an activity or small group discussion. We can look around the room and see groups still finishing up a task, so we wait. Or we can see other participants still reading or walking around the room to write on charts, so we wait. In a digital world, we tend to expect things to happen instantly.

Online we can't see what others are doing, if they're still reading a text, typing in a chat box, or writing on a digital whiteboard. The downtime feels wasteful, and we may not be expecting to wait. Online learning requires the same wait time and patience for other participants to complete an activity before we move to the next thing. In-person workshops have a certain hum throughout the workshop. In addition to the trainer, we hear whispers of other participants, we hear papers rustle, we hear small groups talking or even see people moving. In a virtual classroom, all of those sensory stimulants are missing. We can't hear others typing. We can't hear papers rustling. We can't hear whispers. Those missing stimuli may make us feel like nothing is happening and we are wasting time waiting. BUT most likely, other participants are figuring out technology and taking time to type in a chat box or write on a whiteboard.

Remember the technology delay? That may also play into what feels like dead space in a virtual classroom. Don't be surprised by silence or what feels like a longer wait time. Be patient while others catch up to you.

TECHNOLOGY

Materials and Preparation

Are you prepared for the class? Did you download the app? Are there handouts you will need during the workshop? Are there any other materials you may need access to? If you are uncertain as to what you need for the workshop, did you reach out to the trainer or host? While it is the responsibility of the trainer to prepare the learning environment for you, as a participant you have a responsibility to prepare as well. There is an unspoken expectation that you attend an in-person workshop with paper to write on and something to write with. That same expectation exists in a virtual environment. You should be prepared to take notes and have any workshop materials including handouts with you at the beginning of the class. In a digital classroom, trainers may not be able to see every participant. Do you know how to “raise your hand” or ask a question during a virtual training?

External Distractions

- Have you minimized external distractions during the workshop? Consider pets, children, and adults.
- Have you turned off your phone, music, and TV?
- Are you an active participant during the workshop?
- Do you post comments and questions in the chat box?
- Do you write on the whiteboard or respond to a poll?
- Do you ask for clarification if the content is unclear?
- Do you ask the trainer to repeat or explain if you can't hear clearly or there was a bad connection?
- If there is a breakout room, do you engage with your peers on the assigned task?
- Do you find ways to let the trainer know you are an active participant?
- Do you know how to contact the host or trainer before and after the workshop in case of any challenges or questions?

Additional Suggestions

- Scavenger Hunt: Questions could encourage people to dig into the papers or presentations, individually or in teams. Awards/acknowledgements for winners.
- Consider spaces for speakers to meet each other (a “speaker’s lounge” room or a speakers Zoom session for introductions).
- Consider ways to highlight speakers to attendees (similar to speaker’s badges at physical conferences) and perhaps special breakout rooms for attendees to continue asking questions of a speaker after their talk.
- Consider if a virtual version of “badge ribbons” make sense. At many physical conferences, attendees can get ribbons of various sorts that attach to their badges--e.g., “my first time at this conference.” (In some cases these can become quite complicated, including your interests, your status and even puzzles you need to meet a certain number of people to decode the puzzle).
- Mentoring: consider many of the previous suggestions, and place them in the context of mentoring sessions.