

Cultivating Community in Virtual Professional Development: A Familiar Goal / A New Frontier

Leslie Murrill

Roanoke College Education Department

Timothy G. Thomas

James Madison University

Lisa Earp

Roanoke College Education Department

Abstract

During spring and summer 2020, the COVID-19 lockdown upended professional development schemes across the globe. Professional development for PK-16 teachers at one college-sponsored program abruptly shifted its forum from college campus to meeting in a virtual setting online. Over time, this annual teacher conference had developed a professional learning community that attracted remarkable keynote speakers yet cultivated a setting in which attendees felt valued during exchanges of ideas. In this study, researchers analyzed participants' reflections on their virtual experiences of shared engagement vis-a-vis the warm face-to-face professional gatherings from the past. Findings in this study offer a road map to organizers of professional development programs for teachers. Teachers expressed value for hearing insights from experts related to improved pedagogy, while also spending time in reflection with fellow classroom professionals and learning from the experiences of other teachers.

Keywords: professional development, teacher training, professional learning community

Face-to-face conferences have served as a flagship of professional development (PD) for years, offering opportunities for educators to meet, listen to keynote speakers and other professionals, and discuss shared topics with other educators. Upon the arrival of the coronavirus, plans to offer these conferences were upended, and *pivot* became the buzzword as conference organizers examined options for in-person conferences. As online platforms such as

Zoom, Google Classroom, and Canvas quickly became a part of everyday vocabulary for educators, conference organizers began to consider how these platforms might be utilized as a means to offer PD. This initiated exploration of a new frontier; virtual conferences.

The Margaret Sue Copenhaver Institute for Teaching and Learning (MSCI), a yearly conference planned for June 2020, chose to move its 2020 conference theme and speakers to 2021 and shift to a virtual format for 2020. With two months to plan and organize, the institute directors and steering committee designed and led a three-day conference focused on the goal of providing participants with an experience of shared engagement within a professional learning community, but in a virtual format. As a conference known to inspire a sense of community among participants, meeting that familiar goal would be a challenge.

MSCI Background

MSCI has provided PD for K-16 educators for two decades. Directed by education faculty at Roanoke College and advised by a steering committee of K-12 teachers and administrators and university faculty, the summer conference has become a source of professional growth for approximately 150 participants annually. The authors of this manuscript have played key roles as co-directors of the institute and a longstanding member of the steering committee. MSCI's two central purposes have informed its design: 1) providing educators with cutting-edge relevant educational theory, and 2) offering opportunities for educators to consider effective ways to translate theory into classroom practice. Following these touchstones, the institute has historically implemented a three day conference model. On opening day, participants are introduced to educational theory relevant to the selected annual theme during keynote addresses and discussion sessions with keynote speakers. On the second day, small-group breakout sessions are offered, presented by educators who model examples of classroom

practices that implement the theory. On the final day, time is provided for participants to process learning and begin to construct their own classroom plans. The institute closes with an inspirational speaker and luncheon, intended to celebrate its participants and their ongoing commitment to students.

In an in-person format, offered by MSCI from 2000 to 2019, the conference limited its annual enrollment and structured the three-day program to include ample time for collegial, free-flowing conversations, encouraging a sense of community. The result was a collaborative experience that has been described by participants as: “a place to meet academic needs ... (as well as) a time to sit and talk, share and laugh together,” and “a professional development opportunity that provides restoration, revitalization and renewal,” consistent with data reported by Murrill et al. (2013, p. 44).

MSCI 2020 Online

When MSCI 2020 planners made the decision to move the event to a virtual platform, an early planning priority was to secure technological help. Although MSCI directors had begun to use basic Zoom tools to facilitate college courses, their experience was limited. A meeting with Roanoke College’s Instructional Technology (I.T.) staff provided assurance of two essential supports: 1) Zoom’s webinar format could be purchased, allowing up to 500 participants to attend the event, and 2) the I.T. Department invited MSCI to employ one of its graduating instructional technology assistants to help run the Zoom webinar behind the scenes during the event. With the knowledge that capable hands would assist with these aspects of the conference, MSCI directors and committee moved forward in determining the institute’s schedule and identifying presenters.

MSCI 2020 Online loosely retained the conference model implemented in previous institutes, while making modifications to better align with an online format. One-hour keynote sessions were scheduled to open Monday and Tuesday mornings, featuring previous MSCI speakers who had been noted as “favorites” from past years. The theme for the two days, *Celebrating Teaching and Learning in K-16 Classrooms*, was broad enough to serve the interests and needs of a wide range of educators. Following the keynote sessions, each day continued with thirty-minute sessions presented by speakers from across the state who were recommended by the steering committee. Wednesday’s focus, *Celebrating Preservice and Beginning Teachers*, provided support for graduating preservice teachers and those in their early careers. The day opened with an hour-long panel discussion, followed by four thirty-minute sessions during which graduating preservice teachers shared educational research presentations. The institute closed on Wednesday at noon.

Other features of MSCI 2020 Online included a moderated question and answer period during the closing ten minutes of each session. Institute steering committee members and directors served as moderators, providing introductions and organizing questions from the Zoom Chat feature. Morning welcomes, announcements, and speaker introductions were shared ten minutes prior to the daily opening sessions in order to allow ample time for the keynote to present. No time elapsed between sessions except for a thirty-minute break which took place from 11:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. on Monday and Tuesday, during which a rolling slide show was displayed for viewers. Each day concluded with a song selection shared by students from K-12 schools to provide an inspirational feature as closure.

Similarities shared by the in-person and online formats of the conference included well-received keynote speakers, relevant topics, and like sessions provided by educators who shared

authentic instructional examples from classroom practice. Participants also had opportunities to ask questions, although there was less time provided to respond to keynote speakers than would have been available during in-person discussion sessions. One key distinction between MSCI 2020 Online and previous face-to-face MSCI conferences was that all sessions were held back-to-back on the same Zoom Webinar link, and no sessions ran concurrently. Another difference was the number of participants. The online conference had 475 individuals register, which far exceeded any previous MSCI offering. Perhaps the greatest difference, however, was limited opportunity for participants to interact with colleagues over the course of the online institute. A sense of community was an aspect of MSCI's in-person events which were consistently experienced and valued by many participants. Thus, this missing element in MSCI's online iteration reflects a divergence that warrants further consideration.

Benefits and Challenges to Virtual Professional Development

Because school settings had to pivot with immediacy from in-person instruction to virtual or hybrid classes, there is limited research literature that spells out a recipe for conducting virtual professional development (PD). The relevant literature regarding online PD at the time was most plentiful from authors of educational articles, blogs, and other online sources.

For professional conference planners from a variety of fields, the immediate response to the online delivery pivot was abrupt and jarring. Across the U.S., national and regional meetings had to be cancelled or adjusted to an online format. For K-12 educators and learners, the classroom lockout was also sudden, strange, and pervasive (Hill 2020; Kraft, Simon, & Lyon, 2020; Martin, 2020; Rivero, 2020) and the readiness of students to learn from home proved challenging for all involved. School districts provided digital devices, at-home internet connectivity (Hill, p. 1; Martin, para. 10-11; Rivero, p. 24-25), and delivered hard copies of the

materials that learners required to participate in classes online (Rivero). Teachers ramped up their instructional expertise over the months, from feeling autonomous and isolated without the district's guidance (Rivero) to manipulating the technology to yield sophisticated lessons for the learners at home. Teachers and districts also stepped-in to ameliorate family trauma and insecurity exacerbated by the lockdown, providing increased individual counseling and launching meal distribution programs and other social services where needed to support the efforts of their learners at home (Hill, 2020, p. 1-2).

In order to prepare teachers for the challenges of this “new normal,” professional development (PD) was essential. Even during normal times, K-12 teachers regularly anticipated PD sessions at the start of a new school year. However, with the COVID lockdown in 2020, the typical PD schemes had to be replaced with virtual options. Professional development in Mobile, Alabama, for example, shifted to self-paced modules for teachers that used online handouts and videos (Martin, 2020, para 6-7).

By the end of the summer, conference planners from a variety of professions noted a number of advantages that the online delivery provided (Ball, 2020; Gillin, 2020; Knafo, 2020; Liimatainen, 2020; National Press Club, 2020; Olena, 2020). For example, without extensive travel to national gatherings, participants in virtual conferences noted reduced costs with increased available time not spent in transit (Ball, 2020, para.13; Liimatainen, 2020, para.8), as well as a smaller carbon footprint (Olena, 2020, para. 4). Some tech companies who shifted their conferences to online settings noted costs that were reduced by as much as 90% from in-person conferences (Gillin, 2020, para. 8).

For conferences of various professions, the virtual meetings offered twin benefits: a bumper crop of participants in numbers larger than organizations had ever seen, paired with a

lack of worrying about the logistics of booking enough rooms or organizing refreshments (Liimatainen, 2020, para. 8). The virtual setting enabled increased participation by individuals who were often unable to master the logistics of traveling to a conference, and it provided previously unavailable access to individuals with caregiving responsibilities, limited funds, or disabilities (Olena, 2020, para. 10). The ability to reach participants globally provides opportunities for connections across the world, further increasing the outreach to a broader audience (Knafo, 2020, para. 19; National Press Club, 2020, para. 13).

When looking beyond the scheduled sessions of the event itself, virtual conference organizers discovered that the virtual gatherings yielded a deeper version of audience engagement with “a longer tail” of viewing conference recorded and on-demand content online for many weeks following the gathering (Gillin, 2020, para. 14; National Press Club, 2020, para. 16). Virtual attendees also exchanged ideas with presenters with greater frequency than what typically occurs at an in-person gathering (Gillin, 2020, para. 20). For the future, organizers do not envision an abandonment of face-to-face gatherings, but they do imagine that large conference gatherings will include a more prominent presence of virtual offerings (para. 11).

Organizers from a variety of professions also noted disadvantages of online conferences (Ball, 2020; Knafo, 2020; Liimatainen, 2020; Olena, 2020). While the technology enables attendees to access sessions and ask questions of presenters, Olena (2020) points out that the experience also is “missing the in-person stuff—dinners, drinks, and chance meetings when sharing a cab to or from an airport,” the additional opportunities for exchanging ideas that the technology cannot replicate (para. 8). Many face-to-face conference attendees seek the social interactions offered in an onsite conference (ACM Presidential Task Force on What Conferences Can Do to Replace Face to Face Meetings, 2020).

Informal, unstructured social interactions are one of the main reasons people travel to physical conferences—and one of the areas where people tend to believe virtual meetings are destined to fall short. Common concerns are that there are no obvious opportunities for “hallway connections,” that nobody is “trapped” at the conference and thus seeking people to talk to, and that not restricting access to an exclusive group of registered participants may change the social contract. (para. 30)

Online settings limit the length of interaction, time for one-to-one communication, and relationship-building opportunities (Liimatainen, 2020, para. 9). The online interface also limits the connections that participants might build through facial expressions and other nonverbal cues as the online delivery mutes those interchanges between speaker and audience (Ball, 2020).

In her comments, Professor Anne Frenzel, convener of the CARbon REDuced Conferencing! organization, notes the scarcity of both the data and the analysis to describe the virtual conferencing (Olena, 2020). While preliminary studies indicate no statistical psychological difference that attendees experience in resolving their basic need satisfaction, Frenzel notes that it is too soon to say that virtual gatherings satisfy the same psychological needs that are addressed when meeting face to face. Of three basic psychological needs that conference participants seek to satisfy -- relatedness, competence, and autonomy -- Frenzel notes that relatedness (“feeling connected with other conference attendees”) appears to be under greatest strain with remote gatherings (Olena, para. 31, 32).

The National Press Club (2020) considered factors that affect decisions about three conference formats: face-to-face, virtual, and hybrid. The factors addressed in Table 1 show the conference format(s) that may be most conducive to each factor.

Table 1

Factors identified by the National Press Club (2020)

Factor	Face-to-Face Conference	Virtual Conference	Hybrid Conference
Most Effective Communication	X		
Faster Turnaround		X	
Cost Savings		X	X
Increased Collaboration	X		
Greater Reach			X
Flexibility and Convenience			X
Relaying Complex Info	X		
Reduced Travel Cost		X	X

Shortly after K-12 education moved online in March 2020, the Learning Forward organization established a webinar-based forum through which they sought to build community among educators. In this forum, teachers shared the various lessons they were learning in their new teaching environment, including what guidance and support they needed as professionals. The webinar discussion yielded several epiphanies about online PD for teachers that included the following:

1. an emphasis on experience, with an awareness that important lessons in this new reality come from learning by doing
2. a recognition that the expertise to meet current challenges resides in the community
3. building relationships in order to generate change

4. intentional space is required for communication that is vulnerable and honest
5. professional learning benefits from grace and space in the pursuit of solutions because many current educational challenges are brand new (George, 2020, p. 13-14).

The Need for Cultivating Community Among Educators

The significance of participant interaction within a PD environment has been well established. Without the interchange of ideas that emerge from collegial discussion, the learning that is inspired by professional development may remain “alien, literal, fragmented, [and] non-negotiable” (Wegner, 1998, p. 220). However, “learning from others in your professional learning community allows you to reflect on ways to enhance your teaching and to adjust your practice. The more minds that come together from different backgrounds, the more likely you are to add value and purpose to the field of education” (Serviss, 2020, para. 12).

The cultivation of community has been an essential consideration for the MSCI planning team since the institute’s inception. A 2013 analysis of post-institute surveys explored the perceived significance of the learning community to MSCI’s participating educators. Previous data indicated a strong perception among participants regarding the importance of a collegial learning community within the PD process (Murrill et al., 2017).

At times, the conversations are scheduled at the close of formal addresses. At other times, the conversations occur informally in dorm rooms, coffee shops, the dining hall or other local venues. Wherever they unfold, these professional dialogues focus on teaching and are filtered through the experiences and knowledge of MSCI participants. The sharing is significant because it gives voice to personal processes of transformation and individual stories of student success.
(p. 52)

Annual MSCI surveys collected since 2013 have continued to reflect a positive perception of community among participants. Representative statements shared by attending teachers include: “It creates a positive, collaborative community of educators who WANT to share and help one

another. It provides different perspectives that allow you to evaluate what is best for your classroom” (2017 participant), and “the complementary blending of the knowledge of the keynote speakers, the knowledge of fellow educators, the reflection time provided on Tuesday afternoon, and the time to network with fellow educators at Monday’s reception and at the luncheon were all strengths” (2019 participant).

Guiding Questions

Recognizing community as a notable strength of MSCI’s in-person format, the 2020 shift to a virtual professional conference raised fundamental questions for the authors including the guiding question: How might a virtual conference such as MSCI 2020 Online provide participants with an experience of shared engagement within a professional learning community? Additional questions included: Would the absence of in-person events intended for open conversation and limited opportunity for unplanned exchanges among participants detract from the learning experience? Could virtual offerings adequately fill the gap left by these omissions? Conversely, were there features unique to the online platform that effectively contributed to community building? Finally, how might exploration of these questions shape future institute planning? What considerations may be beneficial to others planning virtual PD for educators?

Conference Attendee Survey

At the close of MSCI 2020, participants received an email which provided a link to the online evaluation form. The instrument’s purpose was to measure participants’ perceptions and satisfaction with MSCI 2020. One component of the survey invited participants to share open-ended comments regarding the following: 1) What they found most valuable; 2) aspects of an online conference which were beneficial; 3) aspects of an online conference which were less effective than an in-person setting; 4) recommendations for future in-person conference

offerings; and 5) recommendations for future online offerings. Approximately 151 of MSCI 2020’s 475 registrants submitted the forms. The electronic version of the evaluation was available for two weeks after the close of the Institute, and participants were sent a reminder asking for their feedback.

Analysis of participant open-ended comments was accomplished in two stages. Two independent researchers completed this process to establish reliability of the data analysis. Their process began with open coding, which allowed for identification of ideas reflected in the data. Using this methodology, ideas are “clustered around a related theme” (Brown et al., 2002, p. 176). As thematic clusters emerged through open coding, analysis shifted to focused coding, a process used to search for the most frequent or significant themes within the data (Salda a, 2012). At the conclusion of this stage, each researcher listed the recurrent themes determined by their analyses. Themes which both researchers identified were noted for further consideration.

Tables 2 and 3 reflect each of the open-ended questions for which comments were analyzed and themes mutually recognized by the independent researchers. Order of significance is listed by researcher, demonstrating the degree of recurrence independently determined. Notably, for Questions 1 and 3 there were slight discrepancies in order of significance, but agreement on themes. For Question 2, 4 and 5, there was agreement for both themes and order of significance across the researchers.

Table 2

Participant responses regarding MSCI 2020 Online

Theme	Rankings for Order of Significance	
	Researcher 1	Researcher 2

Q1 – What was most valuable?

Keynote sessions	1	1
Hearing what others are doing in schools	2	2
Learning new strategies for teaching online	2	4
Relevance and timeliness of topics	4	5

Q2 - What aspects of the online conference format were beneficial?

Session recordings and materials posted online	1	1
Convenience of participating from home	2	2
View and interact with tech. based platform	3	3
Flexibility during presentation	4	4

Q3 - What aspects of the online conference format were less effective than an in-person setting?

Opportunity for conversation and networking	1	1
Opportunity to choose session options	2	3
Distractions in setting made focus difficult	3	2

Table 3

Participant recommendations regarding future MSCI offerings

Theme	Rankings for Order of Significance	
	Researcher 1	Researcher 2

Q4 – Recommendations for MSCI in an in-person format.

Provide online access to recordings and materials	1	1
Provide in-person, online or hybrid options	2	2
Ensure a variety of session choices	3	3
Provide question opportunities for all participants	4	4

Q5 – Recommendations for MSCI in a virtual format.

Provide opportunities for interaction	1	1
Revise question and answer opportunities	2	2

Recurrent themes identified through the analysis of survey data provide a starting point to inform the primary guiding question: How might a virtual conference such as MSCI 2020 Online

provide participants with an experience of shared engagement within a professional learning community? To consider this, we discuss the themes identified to have the greatest significance.

Valuable and Beneficial Aspects

Participant responses to Question 1, “What was most valuable?” suggests that participants found significant merit in the keynote addresses. Comments included terms such as “relevant,” “insightful,” “engaging,” and “applicable” in describing the keynote sessions (2020 participant comments). This finding is consistent with evaluation data from prior in-person iterations of MSCI, suggesting that there is value in providing keynote addresses within a conference setting, regardless of its platform.

A second theme relevant to this question focused on opportunities to hear what others are doing in schools. In the MSCI 2020 Online format, this aspect was provided through thirty-minute sessions led by classroom educators, many of whom shared presentations on classroom implementation of innovative pedagogy. In their survey responses, participants used phrases such as “see[ing] what teachers from different schools are doing,” and “listening and watching professionals of varied years of experience,” to describe aspects of MSCI Online of greatest value to them (2020 participant comments).

Survey Question 2, “What aspects of the online conference format were beneficial?” explores the added value that a virtual platform can provide. Numerous participants stated appreciation for online materials, noting benefits such as easy access to resources for classroom use or the opportunity to watch a missed session at a later time or review a session of interest. One participant remarked, “The ability to save materials and go back to the different materials as a refresher after the presenter got done talking and presenting will make it more likely for the practices to be implemented in my teaching and classroom” (2020 participant comments).

Additional themes reflected in Question 2 responses focused on the convenience and flexibility afforded by a virtual format. Several participants mentioned that they would not have been able to attend if the conference had been held in person, listing responsibilities such as child-care as a factor. Others delineated specific benefits that a virtual environment allowed. One wrote, “I was able to immediately look things up on my computer without appearing ‘rude,’ because I wasn’t ‘looking’ at the speaker. I also could get up and check the resources I have here at home to see if it was what the speaker was talking about or not. That was great as I got immediately engaged!” (2020 participant comments).

Participants also valued the opportunity to view and participate within a technology-based platform. Many noted that the experience would be helpful to them in preparing their own online teaching strategies for the school year. Some found it beneficial to view speakers working through technological challenges. A participant stated, “As nerve wracking as it was for presenters, the technological issues that were occasionally observed were also comforting, because we’ve ALL been there” (2020 participant comment). This points out the value of cultivating relatable elements within virtual conferences, suggesting participants’ desire for connection that extends beyond the role of passive viewer.

Less Effective Aspects

Question 3 asked participants to respond to the question, “What aspects of the online conference format were less effective than in an in-person setting?” One of the themes identified in participant responses appeared nearly four times more than any other theme relevant to the question. That is, participants expressed that they missed the opportunity for face-to-face conversation and networking with colleagues. One participant statement represented many,

Unfortunately the conference not being face to face means that we didn’t have those few minute breaks to chat with those around us as we would’ve had about

the presentations. I think being able to do that would mean hearing how others interpret the strategies and reflect on them, and really talking with more people, even a minute or two at a time, is just beneficial in widening the scope of my exposure. (2020 participant comment)

The desire for interaction extended also to opportunities for open discussion with presenters, reflected in comments such as, “Not having face-to-face opportunity to talk and elaborate on certain strategies and insights with the presenters will make it less likely for new insights to be implemented in the classroom” (2020 participant comment).

Another participant wrote specifically of the need for participants to revisit learning from the sessions, remarking that this occurs “NOT during the sessions, but in the interactions among the participants - sitting next to each other, in the hall, at lunch, etc.” (2020 participant comment). This aligns with the previously noted concern that, “there are not obvious opportunities for ‘hallway connections’” (ACM Presidential Task Force on What Conferences Can Do to Replace Face to Face Meetings, 2020, p. 30) within a virtual conference setting. Clearly, this aspect of community provided within a physical conference setting is beneficial.

Future Recommendations

The two final questions of the online survey solicited input from participants for the purpose of informing future offerings of MSCI. Due to the pandemic, the MSCI planning team does not currently know whether its 2021 event will be offered in an in-person or virtual format. Given this uncertainty, participants were asked to respond to two separate questions. Question 4 asked for recommendations relevant to offering MSCI in an in-person format, and Question 5 asked for recommendations applicable to a virtual format.

Participant recommendations regarding an in-person conference confirmed the value they found in aspects of MSCI 2020 Online. The recommendation most frequently expressed was the desire for in-person participants to receive online access to session recordings and materials, a feature provided in the virtual format. Specifically, participants proposed that slideshows, session recordings or transcripts, materials and resources be uploaded to the MSCI website. One participant stated that she appreciated “access to videos for the month of July so I could listen to the ones I liked from [the] comfort of [my] own home with snacks by my side” (2020 participant comment). This validates Gillin’s finding that a “longer tail” (2020, para. 14) of engagement with conference learning may be made possible by providing recorded conference sessions online.

Two of the additional themes emerging from this question suggested that future in-person offerings of MSCI should be augmented by parallel virtual opportunities for participation. This reflects the hybrid model described by National Press Club (2020) in which participants may choose from in-person or virtual attendance. Participant descriptions of how this might be implemented varied. One suggested, “Video stream from each conference room where people from home can watch and comment via Zoom and still have answers addressed,” (2020 participant comment). Another wrote, “Virtual presentations would enable MORE people to hear the speakers. If they are recorded, they could be incorporated into a professional development session, to be followed up with face-to-face discussions with the participants” (2020 participant comment). An observation across comments was the need for all participants to grapple with learning through questioning or discussion. While opportunities for these components are naturally afforded to in-person attendees, intentional options should be added for those attending virtually, such as use of Zoom chat or the Q and A feature during sessions.

Some participants suggested a primarily in-person conference with sessions recorded for those who were not able to attend on a specific day. Medical situations, family commitments or school responsibilities may cause participants to miss a particular point in the conference. In general, participants saw value in providing both in-person and virtual offerings. This finding supports Knafo's remarks,

My personal opinion is that virtual conferences are more like an add-on than a replacement to in-person conferences. It's impossible to attend every in-person conference that might be of interest — there [are] just too many of them. Virtual conferences can give attendees the opportunity to participate in a lot more events. (2020, para. 23).

Participant responses to Question 5 offered recommendations for an all-virtual conference. Responses focused primarily on two themes, both relevant to the central emphasis of cultivating shared participant engagement within a professional learning community. The first identified theme garnered more responses than any other theme reflected on the survey. Participants expressed a desire for opportunities for virtual interaction with other participants. This theme is validated by others, such as George's assertion that virtual PD requires "intentional space...for communication that is vulnerable and honest" (George, 2020, p. 13-14). Additionally, Ryan Holmes, a contributor on Forbes.com, polled his approximately two million social media followers, requesting "tips from the frontlines." Among the ideas shared by his followers, the need to be active participants made the top 10 list of tips. Holmes explains,

Virtual conferences need to provide small group settings — workshops, breakout groups, even smaller panel discussions — where participants can truly interact and engage instead of just sitting back and watching. In real life, some of this happens naturally, but when everything is mediated by a screen, these efforts need to be deliberate. (2020, para. 15)

MSCI participants offered a range of suggestions for virtual interaction. Some focused on opportunities for discussion within the context of sessions, such as Zoom breakout rooms. One

suggested providing a virtual site where participants could elect to “sit together” during sessions. A group of four MSCI 2020 Online attendees created their own opportunity for interaction by hosting a socially distanced gathering. A participant explains, “They (the four attendees) watched the presentation and could talk and share ideas from what they learned” (2020 participant comment). Other recommendations advocated for opportunities to extend discussion of learning beyond the time allotted for a session. Ideas included providing discussion boards where participants could share in collective conversations on topics of interest, workshop rooms where participants who taught mutual subject areas or grade levels could exchange ideas or collaboratively plan, and optional discussion rooms for open conversation regarding previously attended sessions. Finally, a number of participants suggested virtual opportunities intentionally designed for social interaction, networking and mingling.

The second theme emerging from Question 5 remarks also emphasized the idea of interaction among participants, suggesting that question and answer offerings should be expanded. Ideas included providing additional opportunities for participants to engage keynote speakers, dedicating sessions to questions, answers and discussion, and documenting questions and responses for later access. At MSCI’s previous in-person conferences, the schedule provided 30-45 minute open discussion sessions with each keynote speaker. Responses to this question clearly demonstrated a need to replicate this type of offering within a virtual context.

Conclusion

In a final reflection, we have learned from MSCI 2020 Online survey data, as well as the collective experience shared in recent articles, blogs and online sources, the ways to cultivate a sense of community within a virtual professional conference. The benefits of collegial interaction in professional contexts are well established, both in research literature and in evaluative

statements offered by two decades of MSCI's in-person participants. Virtual implementation of this essential aspect of learning, however, is still under investigation. The ACM Presidential Task Force on What Conferences Can Do to Replace Face-to-Face Meetings addresses the role of social interactions in online and face to face conferences, stating,

...now that virtual meetings are a fact of life for the moment, there are many creative ideas floating around for how organizers can construct opportunities for unstructured and even serendipitous interaction. Some of these ideas have been tried before in the few virtual conferences the task force is aware of, as well as in some physical conferences that have experimented with additional online forms of social interaction, but the possibilities are relatively unexplored. (ACM, 2020, p. 30)

Virtual platforms represent uncharted territory for many who plan educational PD, whether organizing opportunities for professional learning through in-service training or an educational conference. An essential question is how the events may deliberately cultivate a sense of shared engagement and community within an online platform. Intentional inclusion of opportunities for interaction with speakers, collegial conversation among participants and continuing access to materials provide a positive starting point for exploration of the virtual PD frontier.

References

ACM Presidential Task Force on What Conferences Can Do to Replace Face to Face Meetings.

(2020). Virtual conferences, a guide to best practices [PDF file]. Retrieved from

https://people.clarkson.edu/~jmatthew/acm/VirtualConferences_GuideToBestPractices_CURRENT.pdf

- Ball, C. (2020). Face-to-face vs. virtual meetings: Which is better? Retrieved from <https://www.corbinball.com/article/44-virtual-meetings-web-meetings-video-and-collaboration/273-f2f-vs-virtual>
- Brown, S. C., Stevenson, R. A., Troiano, P. F. & Schneider, M. K. (2002). Exploring complex phenomena: Grounded theory in student affairs research. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43(2), 173-183. <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:43324959>
- George, M. (August 2020). Webinars teach us and bring us together. *The Learning Professional*, 41(4). Retrieved from <https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/the-learning-professional-august2020.pdf>
- Gillin, P. (9 Aug. 2020). Who needs live events? Virtual conferences are attracting more people than ever. *Siliconangle*. Retrieved from <https://siliconangle.com/2020/08/09/needs-live-events-virtual-conferences-attracting-people-ever/>
- Hill, P. (October 2020). Lessons from remote learning in six school systems [PDF file]. Retrieved from https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/aspd_case_studies_final.pdf
- Holmes, R. (11 June 2020). 2 million professionals polled on how to make virtual conferences better— Here are their top 10 hacks. *Forbes.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanholmes/2020/06/11/i-asked-2-million-professionals-how-to-make-virtual-conferences-better--here-are-their-top-10-hacks/?sh=268bc5343132>
- Knafo, J. (14 May 2020). Virtual conferences vs. in-person conferences [web log]. Retrieved from <https://blog.devolutions.net/2020/05/virtual-conferences-vs-in-person-conferences>
- Kraft, M. A., Simon, N.S., and Lyon, M.A. (2020). Sustaining a sense of success: the importance of teacher working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic . (EdWorkingPaper: 20-

- 279). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University:
<https://doi.org/10.26300/35nj-v890>
- Liimatainen, H. (8 October 2020). What's the difference between digital and face-to-face facilitation? *Howspace*. Retrieved from <https://www.howspace.com/resources/difference-between-digital-virtual-and-face-to-face-facilitation>
- Martin, U. (28 April 2020). Remote learning in action: building online professional development and resources for teachers. *Tech & Learning*. Retrieved from <https://www.techlearning.com/how-to/remote-learning-in-action-building-online-professional-development-and-resources-for-teachers>
- Murrill, L.D., Thomas, T.G., and Reynolds, T.L. (Spring 2013). Place of learning, place of practice: Elements that affect the transfer of teachers' professional development to students' learning in classrooms. *Teacher Educators' Journal*, 20, 39-56.
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b2fca94f7939217ed700824/t/5c2ba2818a922d1c5eb31ea1/1546363522641/The-Teacher-Educators-Journal-Spring-2013.pdf>
- National Press Club. (2020). Live, virtual or hybrid events - Which approach is best? Retrieved from <https://www.press.org/live-virtual-or-hybrid-events-which-approach-best>
- Olena, A. (28 September 2020). COVID-19 ushers in the future of conferences. *The Scientist* Retrieved from <https://www.the-scientist.com/news-opinion/covid-19-ushers-in-the-future-of-conferences-67978>
- Rivero, C. (August 2020). What teachers need now. *The Learning Professional*, 41(4). Retrieved from <https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/the-learning-professional-august2020.pdf>

Saldaña, J. (2012). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, California: Sage.

Serviss, J. (2020, September 16). 4 benefits of an active professional learning community [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.iste.org/explore/4-benefits-active-professional-learning-community>

Wegner, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.