

Beyond Webinars: Learning Together in an Online Collaborative Space

Webinars are an important venue for sharing information, but they are so frequently used to communicate content, that we sometimes overlook the need for the interaction that webinars were designed to provide. Originally envisioned as a web-based seminar, too many webinars are presented as web casts, lacking the interaction and reflection that a seminar provides. Although webinars will continue to be an important way to share information, there is a need to engage the participants during an event and begin ongoing work on the issue. So, are there alternatives to a webinar?

Online collaborative [spaces](#) offer some new opportunities to re-image a seminar that engages individuals and leads to more and deeper work. These online collaboratives have an advantage over broadly advertised webinars in that they already appeal to a group of knowledgeable and interested individuals who voluntarily affiliate with specific spaces. Each of the individual members has a professional and/or personal network that also may have expertise, experience, and interest. These elements make online spaces a great venue for creating alternatives to webinars.

OSEP's [IDEA Partnership](#) devoted 15 years to building collaboration across groups representing special and general educators, decision makers, practitioners, and families. The approach is captured in an online blueprint titled [Leading by Convening](#). One of the tools in the blueprint presents advice about online collaboration that may be a useful alternative to a webinar.

Tips for Designing Alternatives to a Webinar

1. Be attentive to the topics that garner the current interest of your members.
2. Define the topic. If the topic is broad, acknowledge the full scope and limit this particular interaction. Develop other aspects of the topic in future activities.
3. Create some content to which people can question, react, add, or edit.
4. Once there is interest in activity, bring people together to exchange insights through a conference call or web meeting.
5. Promote active engagement by undertaking one of the activities in this document.

Build a stakeholder-recommended repository of resources. Make it a “one-stop shop” for information on the issue.

- Include formal guidance, practice documents, stakeholder reviewed websites, videos, and articles from the professional and popular press. Make it a “living site”: regularly seek contributions, announce updates, thank contributors, and share stories of use.

Identify foundational resources and co-create a Dialogue Guide to enable others to share the information.

- With site members, develop Reaction Questions to probe perspectives. Ask, “In your experience, ...”
- Create Application Questions to generate ideas for use. Ask, “ In your practice ...”
- Provide an online space to contribute stories of the lesson learned through dialogue.

* Leading by Convening offers a tool to support the development of [Dialogue Guides](#) and a stakeholder-developed [handbook](#) to help individuals organize a dialogue in their setting.

Use existing webinars on key topics to develop a collaborative blog.

- Identify a webinar of importance presented by a group with credibility on the issue.
- Seek and identify designated viewers.
- Provide a viewing guide for use during the webinar.
- Create a space for important insights and ideas for follow-up from the designated viewers.

Create a 360*Blog

- Scan the membership to identify a current issue and an important resource (a video, a webinar, or a document) on the issue.
- Identify a range of stakeholders holding varying perspectives from among your members who will commit to exploring the resource within a designated time.
- Create an online space to post the resource and insights from each of the stakeholders.
- Create a series of polls informed by the postings to probe your members’ perspectives and identify opportunities for collaboration.
- Co-create some simple talking points on the issue informed by the 360* blog and polls.

Invite guest bloggers who hold important connections to policy, research, practice, and family or youth networks.

- Build interaction around the perspectives communicated by guest bloggers.
- Help your members learn about the blogger by adding a podcast interview to accompany the blog.
- Co-create some simple talking points based on the interaction among members during the activity.

Maximize understanding and engagement by linking activities.

- Connect the pieces of the work that you are undertaking. Feature them in various ways on your site. Direct members to places on your site where they may get the information they need to respond to your activities.

- Remember: It is not about the events. It is about *interaction through the events* that is regular enough to develop a sense of community among your members. The driving purpose of an online site is to bring people together and create meaning from that interaction.

Online spaces have an intuitive appeal. With thoughtful use, they can access the abundance of existing webinars to advance their collaboration and add a few ideas of their own!