PROCEEDINGS from the TAN Symposium

Spreading Our Wings

Guelph, Ontario   May 3 - 4, 2019

Background

Our 2019 Symposium, hosted by the Summer Lectures Club in Guelph, focused on growing new and existing third age learning (TAL) groups in Ontario.

Keynote Presentation

The Saturday keynote was delivered by Dr John Lewis, Senior Advisor on Age-Friendly Communities to the Ontario Ministry of Seniors and Accessibility, and Associate Professor in Urban Planning at the University of Waterloo. Age-friendly communities have policies, structures and services that enhance quality of life and well-being by providing a physical and social environment that enables people of all ages to participate fully in society throughout their lifetime. The Age-Friendly Cities movement, founded by the World Health Organization, identifies 8 dimensions to an age-friendly community.

The age-friendly movement has been embraced in Canada. In Ontario there are 82 communities that have achieved, or are working towards, their age-friendly designation. For more information on Age-Friendly Communities, see www.agefriendlyontario.ca

Third Age Learning (TAL) programs contribute to 'social participation', one of the 8 dimensions of an age-friendly community. They also constitute a movement, growing in our communities. We chose the topic of age-friendly for this year's keynote to learn from another initiative that supports active aging in Ontario. Dr Lewis spoke on "Age-Friendly Communities in Ontario: Lessons Learned". His key messages were:

1. **Get Feedback** to understand community needs and assess the value you provide
2. **Grow Your Organization by Collaborating** with other groups focused on similar populations
3. **Know How to Express and Communicate Your Unique Identity (Brand)**
4. **Recruit & Retain Your Volunteers –** use effective, diverse approaches
5. **Incorporate Technology –** that meets community's needs and interests and is accessible
6. **Plan for Sustainability** – focus on strategy, inclusiveness, provincial leadership, funding, communication, representative engagement and academic assistance to evaluate.

Round Table Discussions

The Symposium included small group discussions, inviting participants to join tables to share insights, concerns and solutions on a variety of topics. These discussions culminated in reporting back to all attendees. Key points were:

Dynamic Speakers

- watching TVO is a good way to find speakers, also TEDx
- TAN website lists speakers used by local groups but in some cases local groups are not keeping their lists up-to-date. They should also only be listing recommended speakers.
- some TAL groups have protocols for vetting speakers
- have a backup speaker on hand for no-shows; some TAL groups keep a backup video
- be cautious about copyright issues re materials used by speakers and on your website
- there have been several recent incidents of threats to TAL groups on the pretense of breaking copyright with a demand for payment –these were reported to be scams and have been reported to police, but the risk of inadvertently breaching copyright is real

Peer Learning

- teaching others adds to your own learning: "to teach is to learn twice"
- peer learning enhances one's social network

Feedback

- some TAL groups are gathering feedback through surveys, websites, focus groups and board member inquiries
- some are not clear about pros and cons of various board models
- ask for a balanced perspective: what's working well and what needs improvement
- when asking for feedback, be clear on TAL values you espouse demonstrate you are responsive and don't ask about program aspects you have no intention of changing
- TAL groups need to know their community demographics: who has the skills to gather the data and analyze this information?

Technology

- software applications, such as Zoom, are being utilized to provide TAL learning in select rural communities in Ontario
- Ontario libraries have resources to support use of technology; also consider partnering with students to provide tech skills

- technology can create more inclusive TAL programs for older adults with hearing and visual disabilities
- one TAL group has used a local cable company to videotape their lectures as part of a CRTC requirement to produce Canadian content; the cable company has gone on to also broadcast these talks and increase awareness of TAL
- TAN has an informal working group of interested members who are investigating videoconferencing opportunities. A webinar on this subject was held two years ago

Volunteers

- TAL depends on the vital contribution of volunteers
- a general request for volunteers is not going to work - approach people directly. Follow up with people who make suggestions and ask them if they would like to help make these ideas happen. Identify and recruit volunteers all year round.
- recognize and reward your volunteers to support retention
- be open and flexible to new ideas from volunteers. Board members (also volunteers) need a term of office so that new folks and ideas have space to contribute
- move volunteers from smaller tasks to bigger roles over time
  some TAL groups are creating volunteer coordinator positions
- document the tasks /responsibilities of volunteers so new people can ease into these responsibilities.

Growth without Cannibalization

- some new TAL groups are still growing their membership, but many mature TAL groups are unable to meet demand
- TAL groups need to have a conversation on how large they want to be: do you have the resources to handle more members, deliver more programs or manage larger venues?
- expanding existing TAL groups may require the need for paid staff: this generates new roles and responsibilities in our groups, human resource expertise, and more formalized infrastructure to carry out the work
- some TAL groups are managing increased demand by offering both peer learning and lecture formats, ancillary programs in alternative settings (such as seniors' residences) and video conferencing
- TAL groups need to think about how to grow to become more responsive, inclusive and accessible to diverse local populations: this is an ongoing issue that has not been resolved
- fear of cannibalization (new TAL programs pulling in members from existing groups) appears to be a myth. Demand (who wants to attend) and need (who could benefit by attending) is high and continues to grow.

Cooperation, Not Competition

- presence of multiple organizations and groups increases choice, opportunities and access
- it's hard to collaborate when we don't know who else is out there: if we do know we can plan together
- we need to shift our mindset – our TAL groups are not in competition with other groups: we are in high demand
- understand how we fit in with the Age-Friendly framework (social participation) and start connecting through Age-Friendly affiliations
- we should be thinking about collaborating with the private sector, e.g. movie theatres for space, corporate sponsorships

Sustainability

- recruiting new board members and other volunteers, and continuing to attract good speakers are key issues for sustainability of TAL groups

An Expanded Role for TAN

Nancy Christie, outgoing President of TAN, made the observation that TAN was founded to promote and build capacity in later-life learning groups for Ontarians. TAN's vision and mission have evolved to include supporting the creation of new lifelong learning groups. As TAL groups in Ontario have matured, it is becoming evident that many are now seeking enhanced provincial support to identify best practices, share templates and other resources, and represent TAL groups in the provincial milieu.

The following requests were made of TAN during the Symposium:

i. prepare an instruction sheet on how local TAL groups can update the speaker list on TAN website.
ii. coordinate the development of best practices that address how TAL groups can manage copyright issues.
iii. share surveys being used by TAL groups for participant feedback.
iv. lead the development of a common brand that can be used by all TAL groups that are members of TAN.
v. initiate provincial discussions with both Age-Friendly and private sector to identify opportunities for collaboration.
vi. develop a standardized TAL presentation to approach local Age-Friendly initiatives.
vii. Request to steward the exploration of expanded adult learning options to increase access and inclusiveness to third age learning.

viii.   Request to provide workshops and materials on understanding board governance models, and tools for collaboration.

TAN requires additional financial resources to expand its scope of work to meet these newly emerging needs. Several TAL groups indicated they would recommend to their membership that their groups make an additional contribution to TAN to enhance its capacity. Future considerations may also include changes in membership fees and/or seeking corporate sponsorships to lead new work.