

TAN Information Exchange on Socialization

September 30th, 2021

The group consisted of members from the following TAN member organizations: Academy of Lifelong Learning, Burlington, Niagara, Guelph, Georgian Triangle, Lifelong Learning, Guelph Summer Lectures, Etobicoke, Living and Learning in Retirement, Hamilton, Mississauga, Barrie.

This information exchange used break-out rooms for deeper discussion, so the notes are based on the summaries provided by the groups in the return to the plenary session.

The context for this discussion is the coming year when groups are starting to think about transitioning from purely online to some type of hybrid model that includes in-venue and livestreaming, or whether their audience wants to stay online but with some additional social aspect to the program.

The following questions were shared prior to the information exchange:

- Is the provision of socialization an important part of your mandate? Or a benefit?
- Does the opportunity to socialize draw people to your organization?
- To the best of your knowledge, have you lost members because of a lack of socialization opportunities during COVID?
- Do we have a responsibility to consider 'isolation' as well as 'socialization'?
- Our pre-covid programs may not be appropriate any longer. What new, non-traditional opportunities might there be? Can lectures and socialization opportunities be handled as separate events rather than together?
- Can socialization be done effectively using technology?
- Do we know what 'socialization' means to our membership? Do we know what a successful socialization program looks like?
- The ability to offer lectures online has allowed many of us to:
 - Increase the number of participants we can reach
 - Expand our geographic reach
 - Increase our revenue
 - Decrease operating costs

How do we balance these benefits and opportunities with our desire/mandate to provide in-person socialization? Are we willing to return to smaller audiences in order to offer socialization?

- Should socialization be fun?
 - What socialization programs have we tried through COVID and how successful have they been
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Many groups have determined that social opportunities are very important to their audience; however, not all groups have received the same feedback. Some indicated that learning is the primary mandate, and social opportunities are just a side benefit. Others indicated that their mandate officially includes both learning and social opportunities, especially for people who are isolated.

Socialization was defined as ‘human interaction’ and included examples such as: chats (before or after lectures), organized events, workshops, walks, coffee groups, book clubs, interest groups (travel, gardening), breakout room discussions. There was some suggestion that even learning requires more than (passive) listening, it requires some active, in-person back and forth interaction. Etobicoke indicated that they operate with an eye on three categories – education, entertainment and socialization, recognizing that there may be overlaps between them.

There was acknowledgement that many groups have grown their audience size while online and drawn from a broader catchment, while others have lost much of their audience who wouldn’t come online, and picked up fewer people from afar. This underscored how critical it is to survey your own audience to understand their preferences, and what they want from their learning and social experiences. The information might lead to the need to review/revise our mission/vision/mandate (e.g. do we want to stay local, or does it not matter because learning is more important than the social benefit and we can reach more people online).

Online and hybrid models require IT support that may be easily manageable with IT-knowledgeable volunteers, or quite expensive if you have to purchase expert support. Hybrid models are likely to be very expensive given the in-venue equipment (cameras, etc.) and the more complex knowledge needed to livestream while carrying all the venue costs.

A huge benefit of online options is the increase in accessibility for people with disabilities, by removing the need to travel, park, etc. Closed captioning supports people with hearing issues effectively, and they can participate fully in break out rooms. Zoom also increases the availability of learning, since many programs had maxed out their physical venue (extended reach). Most speakers seemed to come to terms with Zoom during the pandemic, although some are still not comfortable with anything other than in-venue lectures.

Other highlights:

- It would be helpful to have a ‘how-to’ document that takes us through the hybrid details regarding technology and costing
- We need to think about the needs and skills of younger retirees as both audience and volunteers, especially as they are more likely to have more IT experience. How do we attract them?
- If you want to follow up a webinar with a discussion group, you still need to send two separate links.
- For older audiences, we have a responsibility to provide robust training to get them online comfortably and willing to try social activities
- Smaller communities may have more opportunities for social interaction than larger communities, so the need to include a social aspect to online programs may not be as great in smaller communities
- One way to try out new things is to allow new people to pilot if they can bring a small team together to do it
- Many groups have a volunteer IT team or tech group, and lots of experience with break-out groups. Could TAN help match up groups looking to try new things with groups who have expertise?