

Virtual Collaboration: Advancing Practice-Based Learning

Few practices span the boundaries separating people who do shared work as successfully as virtual collaboration. New technologies offer opportunities to join together in ways that were unimaginable just a few years ago. Today, we have the potential to learn from and with individuals working across the state, across the nation, and across the world.

Virtual collaboration has important implications for advancing practice because it holds the potential to open communication among individuals with varying perspectives, diverse experiences, and differing roles who might not interact in its absence. The reach of virtual networks greatly expands the ability to engage leaders and implementers across boundaries that often separate people who have a common interest in an issue.

OSEP's Practice-Based Virtual Learning

In May 2017, OSEP promoted an issue-focused national symposium on Creating Safe, Supportive Learning Environments for Children with Disabilities for an array of participants. During the symposium, national researchers and respected leaders provided information and posed thought-provoking questions to the attendees. Following the symposium, OSEP used its Collaboration Spaces where attendees could interact with each other and the national presenters.

The most successful virtual collaborations use what is known as practice-based learning. Like typical learning activities, practice-based learning aims to present, use, and share research, evidence, and expert knowledge about a practice. But practice-based learning also co-creates new knowledge by working at the intersection of recommended practice and realities of implementation. See *OSEP's Practice-Based Virtual Learning* for an example of virtual practice-based learning in action.

As this example demonstrates, when practice-based learning is delivered in a virtual setting, experts, researchers, administrators, practitioners, and the intended beneficiaries can interact and learn. Experienced implementers and novices alike can

contribute meaningfully in the same learning community. Stakeholders working in widely diverse settings can describe the variety of contexts, innovations, and adaptations that they have undertaken. Successful virtual collaboration efforts are productive and engaging, and participants are leaders and learners. Some key strategies can help to ensure that practice-based learning is carried out effectively.

- **Keep the issue at the core of the work.**

Many of the first conversations around collaboration focus on the technology that connects individuals. Although technology is important and surely enhances collaboration, it does not *drive* collaboration. Issues bring people together! It is the “*pull of the issue*” or the “*legitimacy of the convener*” that coalesces individuals from various parts of a system and joins them together in a successful virtual collaboration. Therefore, it is important to engage users initially around the issue or topic, not just the technology.

- **Make sure the convener has the background and connections to keep the work going.**

Many people can host an event or a series of events, but a convener should have a reputation for competence on the issue and influence with constituencies that can act, or are already acting, on the issue. Together, competence and influence offer promise to potential collaborators, and they help encourage them to become part of an effort that will produce sharing, learning, and, most importantly, action.

To understand which groups may have competence and influence on an issue, visit *Leading by Convening*, a blueprint for authentic engagement, and explore the tool, [Meet the Stakeholders](#).

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- **Learn why people care about the issue and make a place for them to share their experience.**

When people coalesce around an issue, they learn that they have unique perspectives based on their roles and their settings. Conveners of successful virtual communities learn to keep the focus on the issue while they encourage small groups of collaborators to join together on a particular aspect of the issue. This dynamic interaction keeps the engagement fresh and promotes learning by giving attention to the intersection of issues and settings.

To learn why potential conveners care about the issue, visit *Leading by Convening* and access the tool, [Four Simple Questions](#).

Technology is a facilitator of collaboration.

It is not a driver.

Issues bring people together!

- **Take advantage of common events to build or expand a virtual network.**

Many individuals report success in building new collaborations with a face-to-face experience in which potential collaborators interact personally. However, such events are far less frequent in today's workplace. Given that reality, conveners can build or expand connections through common participation in virtual events. Virtual symposiums, even topical webinars, can be a catalyst for potential collaborators to find each other. If you are the host of a virtual event, turn it into an opportunity to invite participation in ongoing work.

To browse ideas for active engagement, access the brief, [Beyond Webinars](#).

- **Extend the connections in face-to-face meetings with virtual follow-up.**

Given the diminishing potential for face-to-face meetings, make the most of each one! When it is possible, create activities that will encourage individuals to continue the work after the meeting. Create "sign ups" during the session. Identify co-leads and connect soon after the meeting to keep the momentum. Connect your presenters to your ongoing work; invite them to continue conversing with attendees virtually.

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- **Make it easy for people to connect and build the habit of interaction.**

Although technology is not a primary driver of collaboration, it is a facilitator. It is challenging to maintain connections without a place to host key documents, share stories and tools, have dialogue among members, and call members to action. A virtual site is an important learning asset. When combined with other technologies such as web access, desktop cameras, and telephone links, virtual collaboration can address the issues and the relationships that keep people connected.

- **Promote virtual collaboration experiences to build appreciation for the strategy.**

Virtual collaboration has enormous potential to help us understand practice beyond the confines of our own experience. Agencies, organizations, and individuals are learning the value in connecting people who have a shared interest in an issue. By approaching virtual events using practice-based learning, we can make the experience more valuable for all involved.