

Covert Conversations: Using a Backchannel to Improve Teacher Professional Development

Kellie Claflin & Josh Stewart
Oregon State University
108 Strand Hall
Corvallis, OR 97331
541-737-2661
kellie.claflin@oregonstate.edu
josh.stewart@oregonstate.edu

Covert Conversations: Using a Backchannel to Improve Teacher Professional Development

Introduction/Need for Innovation

Professional development for educators is used to change teacher practices (Shoulders & Myers, 2014), encourage teacher growth and development, and increase student learning (Desimone, 2009). Teacher professional development can range from formal workshops to informal discussions and are often a short-term learning experience (Desimone, 2009; Myers & Roberts, 2004). Desimone (2009) identified five core features of professional development for teachers: content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation.

According to Desimone (2009), collective participation focuses on participants with similar backgrounds which result in a meaningful conversation and connection. Agriculture teachers have previously identified collective participation as a critical feature of effective professional development (Easterly & Myers, 2017). Often, professional development for teachers is presented in a teacher-centered fashion as a way to accentuate the information shared in a short timespan (Myers & Roberts, 2004). However, this format may not allow for collective participation or recognize participants' expertise, an important aspect of adult learning theory (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Additionally, a session such as this may not be set up well for questions or participants may not feel comfortable asking a question that could take the presenter off-topic.

As a way to encourage collective participation and recognize participants' own experience during professional development, a backchannel can be utilized during professional development sessions. A backchannel simulates an electronic conversation between individuals that occurs online, similar to a chat room, that occurs in a controlled environment ("Backchannels," 2019).

How it Works

We implemented a backchannel to serve as an additional form of communication during a professional development workshop for early career agriculture teachers in Oregon. We chose to use Padlet, a website that allows users to create electronic documents and webpages, to host the backchannel ("What is Padlet?," 2019).

At the beginning of the workshop, participants were introduced to the backchannel, focusing on how it works and how to utilize it. The primary purpose of the backchannel for the workshop was to have a place to pose questions, make comments, and provide recommendations, to increase the opportunity for collective participation. The backchannel was not mandated but instead offered as an additional resource. The participants knew that workshop organizers would be monitoring the site to ensure that questions were answered. Throughout the workshop, participants engaged with each other via the backchannel, without interfering with ongoing presentations or activities.

Results to Date/Implications

The backchannel was used during one professional development event in February 2019. The participants were asked to provide feedback at the conclusion of the workshop to assess the benefits and disadvantages of using a backchannel. Overall, 90% of respondents (n = 33, 55% response rate) indicated they found the backchannel useful. Respondents were also asked to provide additional thoughts and comments. Their responses were very positive, as participants shared that they appreciated the ease in sharing links and information. A few participants commented:

- “Loved the easy way to share links. Really quick and nice to use...”
- “I enjoyed this and am curious to see how it would work with students.”
- “I think it was a great way to ask questions or throw up suggestions during presentations without stopping everything.”
- “This served as a parking lot to help me ask questions that we don’t have time for during sessions.”

There were disadvantages to the backchannel. The Padlet backchannel did not allow threaded responses which bothered some participants. Workshop attendees who posted were identified as “anonymous” unless they had their own Padlet account, which was frustrating for a few participants and was less personable for users.

There were 72 total posts from 36 individuals on the backchannel which ranged from questions about acronyms, comments about how teachers apply the ideas being shared in their own programs, and links for workshop materials. While not all participants engaged in the backchannel, it is clear it was beneficial in clearing misconceptions and serving as place to share ideas that may have otherwise been missed.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Based on the feedback from participants and observations, we plan to utilize the backchannel during other professional development events. The backchannel is suited for one common group instead of participants in concurrent sessions. It is important to test out the backchannel platform beforehand, whether it is through Padlet or another site. Others are encouraged to model how to use the backchannel to the entire group as it is being introduced. Organizers should also share why the backchannel is being utilized and the expectations for using the backchannel during the event.

Costs/Resources Needed

There was no cost in implementing a backchannel during the early career teacher workshop. The Padlet backchannel did not require a fee, unlike other backchannel platforms. However, the organizer needs an account for the platform to set up the backchannel. Participants will need access to an electronic device, whether it is a smartphone, tablet, or laptop, to access the backchannel. Internet access needs to be available to participate in the backchannel.

References

- Backchannels. (2019). Retrieved February 22, 2019, from <https://padlet.com/blog/backchannels>
- Desimone, L. M. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), 181–199. doi: 10.3102/0013189X08331140
- Easterly, R. G., & Myers, B. E. (2017). You seize what pops up: A qualitative investigation of the core features of school-based agricultural education professional development. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 58(3), 56–71. doi: 10.5032/jae.2017.03056
- Merriam, S. B., Caffarella, R. S., & Baumgartner, L. (2007). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide* (3rd ed). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Myers, B. E., & Roberts, T. G. (2004). Conducting and evaluating professional development workshops using experiential learning. *NACTA Journal*, 27–32.
- Shoulders, C. W., & Myers, B. E. (2014). Effective professional development in agriscience education: An examination of core features. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 55(1), 167–185. doi: 10.5032/jae.2014.01167
- What is padlet? (2019). Retrieved February 22, 2019, from <https://padlet.com/support/whatispadlet>