

# The Mini Conference

## CREATING LOCALIZED OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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N THE WORLD OF EFL, INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES OFFER EXCELLENT opportunities to exchange information and to stay informed about the latest ideas and research. However, for many EFL professionals, attending international conferences is not possible for a variety of reasons, including logistical concerns as well as financial considerations. Increasingly, institutions are looking for more cost-effective and localized arenas for professional development. I participated in such an activity at a university language program in Korea where we held an in-house conference, or mini-conference, during orientation week at the start of every semester. The participants always found these sessions educational, informative, or at the very least, a chance to get together and network with colleagues. This approach took our belief in student-centered education and extended it into teacher-centered in-service training and professional development.

This reasoning, along with the belief that all working EFL professionals have valuable experiences to share with others, establishes that mini-conferences can provide valuable opportunities for professional development. By *mini-conference* I am referring to a conference with presentations by staff members organized and hosted by their local institution. The idea of the mini-conference is certainly open to interpretation; the conference can be strictly for the staff of your school, or you can invite teachers from the community to participate. It is these local professionals who have intimate knowledge of the dynamics of the institution or community and of their students' needs. This article will recall a particular mini-conference, consider the benefits of mini-conferences in general, offer steps for organizing a mini-conference, and offer suggestions for expanding this concept.

### Our experience

At a university in Korea where I taught, we had a weeklong orientation session every semester to acquaint new teachers with our institution, its various courses, and our approach to language education. Progressively, in addition to the academic management, teachers became involved with leading orientation discussions and helping to inform the new teachers about our programs. As a result of this enthusiasm and staff support, we decided that it would be useful to hold presentation sessions in the afternoon, inviting teachers to present topics they had been researching or their unique adaptations of our program. Thus, we set the schedule of our orientation week: academic coordinators worked with the new teachers in the morning, and all the teachers met in the afternoon for two- or three-hour presentations by current staff members. For most presenters, this was their first chance to present an idea to professional colleagues, and we took these opportunities seriously. We were all using the same materials and operating from the same educational philosophy, but as was to be expected, our classroom practices varied greatly. The opportunity to share practices was important. Some of the most useful information for our staff came from these presentations, and many classroom practices were enhanced or amended on account of the information shared with our colleagues.

### Benefits of mini-conferences

- *A mini-conference is cost effective for the participants, speakers, and institution.*

The mini-conference can take on different shapes depending on its size or context. For example, some conferences require only the meeting space and virtually no funding. For mini-conferences that are open to the public, conference expenses might include food and beverages, certificates for the participants, and materials for the organizing committee. Our conference required virtually no funding—only a meeting space and a schedule for the participants.

- *Presenters are speaking from a localized context, and the speakers and participants have a high level of familiarity with each other and the issues they are presenting.*

One issue that continually faces trainers for in-service training, as well as international conferences, is a lack of focus or knowledge of local contexts and cultures. The mini-conference is organized by people from the local context, and the presenters have intimate knowledge of the culture and issues facing educators in the community. While the speakers may not be recognized experts, the common knowledge they share with the audiences makes the presentations useful and informative.

- *Teachers have valuable opportunities for giving professional presentations.*

One of the most important steps in professional development for teachers is doing professional presentations. The mini-conference can motivate teachers to continue their professional development and can build the confidence of staff members, encouraging them to go on to present at larger conferences. Our conferences in Korea had the impact of elevating the professionalism of our institution by encouraging in-house professional development and offering a non-threatening environment for exchanging ideas.

- *Teachers can network and establish professional relationships in the local context.*

Quite often teachers who work in the same school have little professional contact with each other during the school year. A mini-conference is an effective method of bringing the staff together, building cooperation and teamwork, and raising the overall achievement levels of the school. This sense of community can

have valuable long-term effects for the institution as it evolves.

### **Organizational procedures**

#### *Step 1: Determine the size, scope, and date of the conference.*

If the conference is going to be an in-house event, there are fewer factors to consider. In our case, the scope was a totally in-house conference. Essentially, our staff members presented ideas to their colleagues. Conversely, if you are planning to open your conference to the general public, you will need to advertise, invite speakers, and arrange for the conference space.

Decide whether to make the conference a half-day or one-day event. With the half-day event, generally you will not need refreshments; however, with a full-day event, the participants will most likely require some type of beverages or food. In regards to setting the date and time, you will want to consider the local context. Our mini-conferences in Korea were held in the afternoons during orientation or preparation week, which made attendance convenient.

#### *Step 2: Conduct a needs analysis.*

In an institution with a high level of staff cooperation, many of the issues facing the staff will be commonly talked about and discussed informally. These types of issues make excellent presentation topics for a mini-conference. Also, the students and administrators can be sources of information to identify the needs of the staff and institution as a whole. Once needs are identified, they can be addressed at the mini-conference.

#### *Step 3: Decide if you will have a theme and identify speakers.*

In our in-house conference in Korea, we asked for volunteers and occasionally encouraged certain colleagues who were doing research, organizing new programs, or had interesting adaptations of the materials or program to make presentations to the staff. In our particular institution, we had a steady stream of volunteers, but all institutions might not have such eager participants. If it is difficult to find volunteers to present, perhaps the administration can provide some type of incentive to the faculty for presenting at and attending the mini-conference. In our university, attendance at the mini-conference was mandatory; however, most faculty members saw the value in

learning from each other and attended willingly. Ideally, in an institution where staff cooperation is the norm, finding staff members to participate and present will not be a problem.

#### *Step 4: Identify possible sources of funding as necessary.*

For an in-house event, you might need only to arrange the meeting space and might not require any funding. For larger conferences, some items that might require funding are food and beverages, printed programs for the participants, and certificates for the participants. Some sources of funding might include the host institution, the English Department, or a nominal fee charged to participants.

#### *Step 5: Determine the logistical factors for your conference.*

Things to think about here are how many people you can accommodate in your meeting room. Also, are you going to have workshops with small audiences or larger lecture-style presentations? If you plan to have food and beverages, decide how much you need and where you will get them. Also, you will want to ask the presenters what equipment they are going to need. These are just some of the logistical concerns you may have; most of these are dependent on the size and scope of your conference.

#### *Step 6: Make a schedule and publicize the event.*

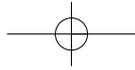
Again, making a schedule can vary depending on the exact nature of your conference. Think about any opening speeches or introductory presentations you will have and plan accordingly. For our in-house conference, we all met in the afternoons during orientation week and this event was publicized to the staff on our website as well as in the orientation week handout.

#### *Step 7: Obtain feedback.*

Finally, no matter what type of in-house or mini-conference you have, you will want some feedback to determine the participants' reaction to the event and to determine the direction of the conference in the future. Also, for the presenters feedback is an important reflective tool for their professional development.

### **Conclusion**

The idea of an in-house or mini-conference is in line with current educational trends of learner-centered education. In this case, the



learners are teachers, and their subject is professional development. A mini-conference is an easily organized event that can be informative, enjoyable, and motivational and can have long-lasting professional influences on the staff of your institution. For many educators in the EFL profession, there are numerous barriers to attending and presenting at international conferences. The leaders in your local institution need to break the self-defeating cycle of relying on outside sources for professional development and begin engaging the professionals in your institution because they have the most

intimate knowledge of the issues facing your students and faculty. With mini-conferences, we can extend professional development into contexts and communities that are often excluded from these opportunities.

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