

CREATING AN EFFECTIVE CONFERENCE PRESENTATION: A REFLECTIVE PRACTICE ON CHALLENGES IN CREATING AN EFFECTIVE CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this reflective practice was to examine my conference presentations to K-12 teachers and administrators in order to increase their effectiveness. I have often felt frustrated by my conference presentations not accomplishing their intended objective for the attendees. I possessed a general understanding of the suspected reasons; however, I wanted to identify specifics so that I could implement change through a conference presenting protocol (Appendix A). This reflection occurred through a series of three conference presentations. This allowed me to iterate through each conference presentation, focus on specific areas, and arrive at beneficial insights. Ultimately, this reflective practice demonstrated the need to keep the audience central, narrow the focus, and provide guided assistance with the design thinking process. The lessons learned will assist in creating more effective conference presentations, which can also be applied to additional contexts, such as leading professional development for K-12 teachers.

Keywords: *reflective practice, John Dewey, conference presentation, design thinking process, audience, narrow focus, action step.*

PURPOSE

The purpose of this reflection was to gain insight into delivering effective conference presentations. The lessons learned can also be applied to leading professional development for teachers within K-12 school districts. My full-time role throughout the reflection was as an instructional coach within a large public urban school district just outside of Philadelphia, PA. One of my core responsibilities was to provide professional development to K-12 teachers. I did this throughout the school year and in various settings. For example, I conducted a professional development session on Google tools for over 200 middle school teachers, and then a few weeks later, I led a smaller technology workshop session with five elementary teachers. I also got the opportunity to present at various

conferences throughout the year. I enjoyed presenting at conferences and leading professional development, but at the same time, I often felt frustrated because the conference presentations and professional development sessions did not always accomplish their intended goals.

My desired outcome for this reflection was to grow in my ability to present effective conference presentations and apply lessons learned to professional development for K-12 teachers. I wanted to do this so that conference attendees and professional development participants came away with a deeper understanding of the intended objectives in a way that could be applied to their local context.

My reflective practice was guided by Greenberger's (2020; et al., 2021) Guide for Reflective Practice. This guide provided a helpful structure,

clearly marked sections, and specific guidance to engage in effective reflective practice. The reflective lens through which I viewed my experience was John Dewey. Dewey (1964) highlights that reflection helps to leverage thoughts into deliberate actions. Furthermore, reflective thought breaks us away from our impulses and routines. It allows us to gain insight into our actions so that we can plan for future considerations. In other words, reflection elevates us from our animal instincts (Dewey, 1964). Reflective thought adds immense value. It leads to developing systems and processes to deal with that issue in the future (Dewey, 1964). Another valuable asset of reflective thought is the continual growth of ideas. As new understandings emerge, they foster growth in connected ideas. For example, as one comes to understand the nuances of minerals beyond the general scope, it helps to propel understanding of rocks, geology, and even nutrition. This progression of understanding is limitless as one learns and connects through a reflective lens (Dewey, 1964). The third value of reflective thought is that it helps develop our thought patterns so that we are not steered into wrong beliefs by immaturely developed ideas. Reflection assists us in thinking for ourselves in a logical way instead of aimlessly following passions (Dewey, 1964).

PROBLEM

Delivering conference presentations can be a complex undertaking. On the one hand, conferences provide the ability to deliver thoughtfully constructed content to a wide range of attendees. But on the other hand, there are varying attendee backgrounds and interests. On top of that, the sessions are often constricted by tight time limits, making it difficult to accomplish intended objectives with depth.

I have encountered three major problems as I have presented at conferences. First, I tend to write the title and description in vague language, which adds confusion and does not encourage maximum attendance at my presentations. Secondly, I attempt to cover too much material on a given topic in an individual conference presentation, which leads to surface-level understanding for the attendees. Thirdly, on top of wanting to cover too much material on a given topic, I also try to cover multiple distinct topics, which blurs the focus and impedes progress on the objective.

I iterated through the above-mentioned problems by presenting at three different conferences. All of my conference presentations were breakout sessions, allowing a conference attendee to choose to attend my presentation or a different one during the time slot. The first conference was hosted by the California Department of Education. My conference title was “Attitudes and beliefs: the foundation for effective technology integration.” The second conference was hosted by Schoology. My conference title was “Using Schoology to light the fire of learning and not extinguish the flame.” The third conference was hosted by a regional intermediate unit, MCIU. My conference title was “Rethinking technology use.”

Three things were unexpected as I presented at the conferences, which prompted this inquiry. First, there was only one person in attendance at my first conference presentation hosted by the California Department of Education. This was shocking as I knew the conference was well attended. Second, throughout my second conference presentation, which was hosted by Schoology, I felt a disconnect between the audience that my presentation was geared toward and the audience that was in the room. Third, at the third conference presentation hosted by the MCIU, attendees did not have a good grasp of the design thinking process. They struggled to consider action steps and initiate change with the way they used technology.

WORKING IDEAS

I have three working ideas as to what contributed to the unexpected when presenting at the three conferences. First, the low attendance at the first conference presentation surprised me, the moderator, and the lone attendee. At the conclusion of the conference presentation, I asked the attendee why she thought the attendance in my breakout session was so low. She provided great insight and told me that the title was a little confusing, but she came to the session anyway because she loved to talk about technology. Her feedback was valuable and on point. My session title was “Attitudes and beliefs: The foundation for effective technology integration,” and I was so proud of it. I loved that title because it was connected to the research I discovered in my doctoral dissertation. However, the attendee was correct. The title was vague, confusing, and abstract. This was evidenced by the lack

of attendance in my session. I was aware that my vague wording could be a problem. But this experience gave me a greater appreciation for creating a clear title and description when presenting at conferences. I also found it helpful to check my biases when considering wording that might add confusion rather than clarity.

Secondly, the reason for the audience disconnect at my second conference presentation was that my presentation was geared toward classroom teachers; however, the room was filled with administrators, technology supervisors, and instructional technology coaches. My examples and application were aimed at classroom teachers rather than through the lens of the attendees. This made the application of the content and discussion not as dynamic as it could have been had I considered the audience's specifics. I made sure to consider the audience for my third conference presentation.

Thirdly, my conference presentations were broken into two parts. The first part revolved around technology use in the classroom. The second part embarked on a design thinking studio that helped attendees work through a problem they were facing with technology use in their classroom. I was surprised by the attendee's reflection responses at the conclusion of my third conference presentation. Participant comments showed they did not have a clear grasp of the design thinking process. For example, participants explained they had difficulty with the action step and the change process. This made me wonder if I was attempting to tackle too many topics in one conference presentation. For example, instead of discussing technology use problems and launching into a design thinking studio, it might have been more helpful to focus on just one of the topics—technology use or a design thinking studio. In connection with this, I also wondered if I was undervaluing the complexity of bringing about change in one's local context. This was no easy feat and should be guided with clarity, research, and care.

REFLECTIVE-NARRATIVE

My reflective narrative looked at three distinct conference presentations. I explored the different conference presentations and the changes I made from one conference presentation to the next. The three conference presentations allowed me to iterate and work through my proposed problem pre-

sented in this reflective practice. Ultimately, the process of reflecting on three distinct conference presentations allowed me to gain helpful insight into conference presentations.

PRESENTATION ONE

The first conference presentation was virtual, one hour in length, and hosted by the California Department of Education. There was a high attendance at the conference due to popular keynote speakers such as Tristan Harris, the primary subject of the popular Netflix documentary *Social Dilemma*. However, my breakout session only had one person in attendance. This was shocking and caused me to ask the lone attendee her thoughts on the poor attendance. She pointed out that the title and description were vague, so that was where I focused my attention. The presentation title, "Attitudes and beliefs: The foundation for effective technology integration," was formed from my doctoral dissertation and internal interest rather than considering the attendee's interests. As I looked at it from the attendee's perspective, I agreed that the title and description were unclear as to what attendees would gain from participating in the session. Attitudes, beliefs, and foundations were difficult concepts to measure. I was unable to see this before the conference, but once pointed out, it made complete sense, and I wanted to fix it for future conference presentations. For the next conference presentation, I focused on developing a focus that attendees would find interesting and writing it with clear and actionable language.

PRESENTATION TWO

The second conference presentation was in person and hosted by Schoology, a popular learning management system used by K-12 school districts. The title of my session was "Using Schoology to light the fire of learning and not extinguish the flame." The description elaborated on the idea and highlighted that the session would be discussion-based and action-oriented. The session was one hour in length and had 21 participants in attendance. I began with a reflection question, then presented information about passive and active learning. Next, I led a discussion on active and passive learning, which included thoughtful responses. Following that, I initiated a design thinking protocol. For the next 30 minutes, participants followed a protocol that took a problem they were experi-

encing with technology and created an action step to solve it. The session concluded by giving participants a chance to reflect and share the action step they intended to take.

I was excited about my presentation. I felt like it was a unique take on Schoology, and I conducted the session differently than most other presenters. It was common for presenters to lecture for the entirety of their one-hour time block; however, my session incorporated extensive discussion about active learning, and I guided attendees on a design thinking protocol that led to an action step.

Three major thoughts came to mind as I reflected on the Schoology conference presentation. First, I was more nervous than I anticipated. I was used to presenting virtually for the previous two years due to the pandemic. The energy in the room was difficult to manage. I was able to regain my composure during the opening question. I gave attendees time to reflect and talk to a partner. Meanwhile, I pretended to look for something in my bag while I did breathing exercises until I felt regulated.

Secondly, my presentation was geared toward classroom teachers so they could use Schoology to light the fire of learning. As I interacted with the participants, my intended audience was misguided. Attendees were administrators, technology supervisors, and instructional technology coaches. While the audience in attendance still benefited from this message, the nuance and specific nature of the presentation were geared toward a different audience. This caused the intended impact to diminish significantly.

Thirdly, I felt like my intentions were divided. On the one hand, I wanted to explore the idea of lighting the fire of learning with Schoology. On the other hand, I wanted to walk the participants through a design thinking protocol to help them solve a problem within their context. I wanted to do all of this within an hour. As a result, the action step seemed to lack specific application to their context. I planned to tweak this for the third conference presentation.

Overall, I got helpful feedback from the participants and made some positive connections. The attendance numbers were much better than the first conference presentation and were comparable to other breakout sessions during my time slot. However, I was left with three big ideas I wanted to

change for the next presentation. First, I wanted to be better prepared for the energy of presenting in person. Secondly, I wanted to understand the audience better so that I could speak to their specific contexts. Thirdly, I wanted to condense my comments on technology transformation to make more room for the design thinking studio that would assist participants in an action step.

PRESENTATION THREE

The next conference was the Southeast Region Coach Mentor Collaborative hosted by the MCIU. This conference was for K-12 instructional coaches around Philadelphia, PA. My session was in person, an hour in length, included 15 participants, and was titled "Rethinking Technology Use." My session's attendance was positive as it had more attendees than the other breakout sessions that were occurring during the same time slot. I began the session with a general discussion about problems attendees experienced with technology use. Participants shared thoughtful responses, which led to some great conversations. Next, I briefly shared two problems I had been seeing with technology use and included a couple of references and quotes. Following this, I introduced a design thinking protocol and broke the participants into groups. Participants worked through a problem they were facing with technology use and created an action step they would take. In conclusion, all attendees joined back together and shared an action step they wanted to take in the coming week to begin solving a technology problem they were experiencing.

Overall, the conference participants' responses were very positive, and the organizers asked me to speak next year. I had three main focuses as I prepared for the conference presentation. First, I dealt with the increased energy of in-person presenting by reflecting on the differences between virtual and in-person, and I engaged in breathing exercises before presenting. These minor tweaks rectified the nervous excitement that I felt when presenting at the Schoology Connect conference. I felt similar to how I have traditionally felt presenting at in-person conferences.

Secondly, I made sure to gain a better understanding of the conference attendees. The conference was geared toward instructional coaches; however, I wanted to clarify the audience even further, so I reached out to the organizers. They

told me that all attendees were K-12 instructional coaches across all content areas. The conference organizers were happy to provide as much information about the participants as possible so that I could personalize the presentation and make it engaging.

Thirdly, I reworked the conference title and description. The title was “Rethinking Technology Use,” and the description emphasized that attendees would explore a problem they were facing with technology through discussion and design thinking protocols. I felt good about the narrowed focus. I was not attempting to light the fire of learning and had moved well beyond attitudes, beliefs, and laying foundations.

Despite addressing these issues, a new problem arose to the surface. When participants shared their concluding action step, it revealed they did not thoroughly understand the design thinking process. One participant shared how the technology problems would remain no matter what she did. Another participant explained that she wanted to change how the entire district used technology. A third participant detailed how she was a bit lost about where to start. These concluding responses highlighted clear and significant failures of the design thinking studio.

Three reasons came to the surface as to why this failure in the design thinking process occurred. First, the conference presentation was trying to accomplish too many objectives. I had narrowed the technology discussion in this conference presentation as compared to the previous conference presentations; however, I was still trying to combine the technology discussion with a design thinking protocol. That was proving to be too many distinct topics within one conference presentation. I realized that I not only had to narrow the focus within each topic but also narrow the conference presentation to a single topic to explore it in depth. This was difficult and went against the way I have experienced conference presentations. For example, a recent keynote address at a conference I attended highlighted 15 strategies teachers could utilize to increase happiness. It was thoughtful and presented well, but it was so much information that I came away with nothing of substance I could retain.

Secondly, the process of bringing about change is a complex and difficult undertaking. We all want

to make a change in our own lives, but the process of doing it can be difficult, frustrating, and often left undone. I was asking the participants to bring about a significant change in their classroom technology use with little framework beyond the design thinking protocol. If I wanted to assist participants in bringing about a change, then I needed to provide support and explore the change-making process with examples and research.

Thirdly, I was becoming aware that a follow-up session was important. It was not helpful to take participants on this change-making journey and leave them hanging. It would be interesting to consider ways to continue the conversation with the participants beyond the one-hour conference presentation. For example, interested participants could share their email addresses, and I could follow up with them through virtual sessions. This would provide support and possible community around the change-making process.

EVALUATION OF IDEAS

Five ideas should be implemented as a result of this reflective practice. First, the audience should be of paramount importance. The conference presentation should keep them in view and speak to them in a way that helps the audience apply the information to their context. Secondly, the amount of information within a specific topic should be narrowed. Care should be taken to focus on the most essential ideas and develop them effectively. Thirdly, it is best to pick one topic for the conference presentation instead of covering multiple topics. I saw this to be true from my experience when I covered technology and a design thinking protocol. The divergent topics prevented me from dealing with either effectively. Fourthly, bringing about an action step as a result of the design thinking protocol is a complex undertaking. Participants should be provided structured guidance throughout the design thinking process, as well as a follow-up system to provide additional support. Fifthly, I have created a conference presenting protocol that leverages my past experiences to assist with future conference presentations for myself and others (Appendix A).

The concept of “audience” is the first idea to implement as a result of this reflection. Keeping the audience central might seem obvious, but when presenting at conferences it is easy to get wrapped

up in the specific details of the conference or the content that will be presented. I found myself neglecting the audience when I presented at Schoology Connect. This became apparent throughout the discussion and the wording of my questions. I corrected that issue for the next conference presentation, which led to richer and more applicable conversations. Timofte (2016) points out that as a presenter elevates the importance of the audience, it leads to a more successful experience for both parties.

Secondly, the narrowing of content takes extensive effort and demonstrates the presenter's deep understanding of the content. It requires grappling with nuance and a plethora of perspectives. It also leads to a more thorough understanding for the conference attendee. It is easier for a conference presenter to speak in broad terms rather than get into specifics. In the same vein, a conference attendee will gain much more in-depth takeaways from a narrowed conference presentation rather than obtaining vague and general knowledge from a broad treatment of a topic. Worthy et al. (2012) found this reality to be true when doing research in a second-grade classroom. As the content was narrowed, it led to an increase in student comprehension and an improvement in the overall classroom environment.

Thirdly, the narrowing of a conference presentation should extend to the number of topics included in the presentation. If there are multiple topics, even if each topic is narrowed, the focus will be lost. Niching down on one topic is no easy task, but there are many benefits. One such benefit is that it makes the presenter an expert and authority on a specific topic. Happell et al. (2021) point out that experts in a given field have been shown to empower their audience, break down barriers, and improve understanding. This brings long-term benefits to the presenter as well as to the attendees.

Fourthly, I found there is much power in connecting learned information to action. It brings a deeper understanding of the material when applied to a real-world context. Ghoshal (2019) demonstrated this by connecting learning about politics to a real-world action step, such as writing a letter to a local politician. This led to an increase in student engagement as well as future civic involvement. Taking an action step in response to learned information can be difficult and complex. The connec-

tion is not always clear and can be challenging to navigate if roadblocks to action present themselves. Assistance in this process should be provided so that potential action steps can be accomplished with success. Another option is to provide ongoing support following the conference presentations through video platforms such as Zoom.

Fifthly, protocols can help put into practice what has been learned. A protocol is a checklist of sorts to provide clarity and direction. It highlights and elaborates on the most important elements as one walks through a situation. Presenting at a conference can be a frustrating experience when it does not go as intended. I created a conference presenting protocol (Appendix A) to prevent this experience from occurring at future conference presentations.

Amankwaa (2016) suggests that protocols also create trustworthiness when used within a research context. Protocols provide consistency and clear guidelines for the researcher.

DECISION

The decision came as a result of wanting to present effective conference presentations and extending them through three different conference presentations. This process allowed iterations and clarity as important insights rose to the surface. Prior to this reflection, I was aware that my conference presentations tended to be vague, attempted to cover too much information, and interacted with multiple topics. This process of reflective practice brought much more specific insight to be applied to future conference presentations.

I was interested in presenting unique angles about technology use and helping people think through a problem they were facing so they could arrive at an action step to bring about change. The technology angle came from my interests, work as a K-8 technology coach, and doctoral research. The action-step angle came from workshops I led in my doctoral program. The workshops were successful and received great feedback. It was inspiring to see the change process take shape. I thought it would be interesting to join the two together. It would combine an area of personal interest and a possible need for others, plus give participants the tools to incorporate change in their context.

My first conference presentation was hosted by the California Department of Education. The con-

ference as a whole was very well attended; however, my breakout session only had one attendee. As a result, my entire focus for the next conference presentation was to increase attendance. I wanted to create more intrigue around the topic so that attendees would be interested in joining the session. I also wanted to include actionable and clear language in the description so that attendees would know what to expect.

My second conference presentation was hosted by Schoology. My attendance numbers were much better, which signified that my title and description were more interesting and included clear objectives. This allowed me to uncover another area of my conference presentation that needed to be fixed; I was speaking to the wrong audience. My presentation was geared toward classroom teachers, while the audience in my conference presentation consisted of administrators, technology supervisors, and instructional technology coaches. I also thought I should narrow the focus of the presentation to connect the discussion with the design thinking process.

My third conference presentation was a regional coaches conference hosted by the MCIU. Attendance in my session was excellent, and I knew the specifics of the audience in front of me. I also narrowed the focus to try and connect the technology discussion with the design thinking studio. Overall, this third conference presentation was very positive. However, it became apparent that I was trying to cover too much information and multiple topics, which led to a superficial understanding of the design thinking process. This was an idea I wanted to develop for future conference presentations.

Five takeaways came out of this reflection: (a) the audience should be central; (b) the content should be narrowed as much as possible; (c) a conference presentation should focus on a single topic; (d) an action step is an important feature of a conference presentation; and (e) I created a conference presentation protocol (Appendix A) to assist with future conference presentations. The decision tree can be seen in Figure 1.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Viewing my multiple conference presentations through a reflective lens brought to light many important insights that I can apply to future conference presentations as well as professional devel-

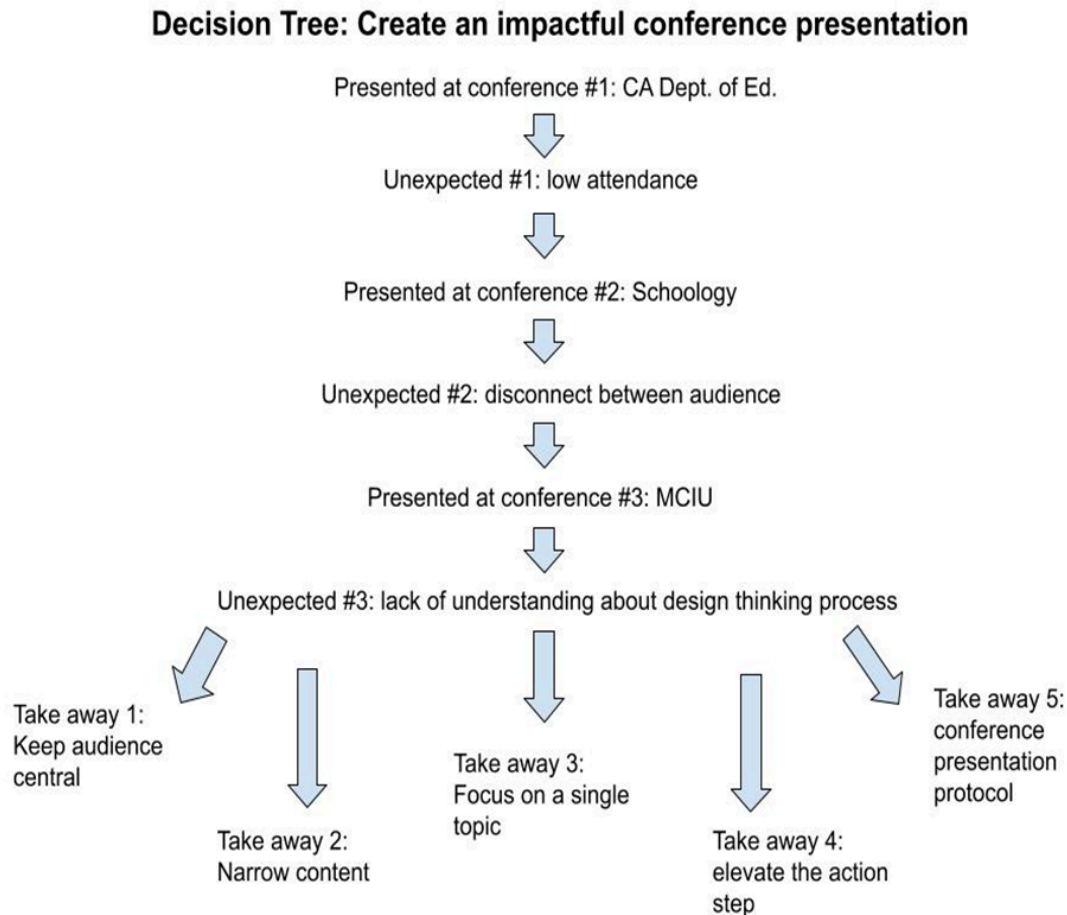
opment sessions that I will be tasked to lead within my current role as a K-8 technology coach.

First, this reflection practice helped me see the nature of my biases and how they impact all areas of my life, even when presenting at a conference. I was biased toward what I thought was interesting and important rather than what the audience would find interesting and important. My biases were seen in the focus of the conference presentations as well as the wording of the title and description. I decided on the conference presentation title “Attitudes and beliefs: The foundation for effective technology integration,” because it was an idea I found interesting from my doctoral research. My biases directed the selection of that topic rather than the interests and needs of the conference attendees.

Secondly, this reflection demonstrated how it was critical to have a clear title and description that did not possess vague language. I clarified the title and description through each conference presentation. It started as “Attitudes and beliefs: The foundation for effective technology integration.” Next, the conference title was “Using Schoology to light the fire of learning and not extinguish the flame.” The third conference title was “Rethinking technology use.” I tended toward using vague language, such as “attitudes and beliefs,” “lighting the fire of learning,” and “not extinguishing the flame.” Even the third conference title, which was the clearest, could have benefited from even more clarity by describing what it meant to rethink technology use. A clear title and description helped attract attendees to the conference presentation as well as provide clear objectives of what they would gain from attending. An easy test for clarity would be to share the title and description with a colleague to see if they understood the focus accurately.

Thirdly, through each conference presentation iteration, I learned the importance of focusing on the content. Following the California Department of Education conference, I understood that my technology focus on attitudes and beliefs should be altered to a topic with greater clarity and applicability to attendees. The Schoology Connect conference showed me that the content was more applicable and relevant but still too broad. I narrowed the technology focus with precision for the MCIU Regional Conference. However, that was still not enough. The conference presentation was split into two parts: a technology discussion and a

Figure 1. Decision Tree



design thinking studio. The multiple topics were too much to accomplish. The conference presentation should have either embraced technology use or helped attendees navigate the design thinking process. Singling the conference presentation to one topic would have allowed the conference presentation to achieve greater depth and potential impact. We cannot be everything to everybody, which is also true when presenting at conferences.

This reflective practice transformed the way I present at conferences. It assisted me in gaining a greater understanding of my biases, clarity, audience, and narrowing focus. One tool I will continue to use is the conference presenting protocol (Appendix A). The lessons learned from this reflection

will assist me with future conference presentations and professional development sessions.

In the future, I plan on shifting the entire focus of my conference presentations to the design thinking process. I want to help other practitioners bring about change in their local context through protocols, support, and guidance. Another area I want to explore is the opportunity to provide additional support and ongoing community for conference attendees following the conference session. This could be done through Zoom, email, or group messaging software.

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Appendix A

Conference Presentation Protocol

1. What is the theme of the conference?
2. Who is the general audience attending the conference?
3. Who is the specific audience that your presentation is targeting?
 - a. How will that audience know that the conference presentation is geared towards them?
What language will you use?
 - b. Is the conference presentation a breakout session or keynote address to everyone?
 - i. Is there a narrowed focus of the breakout session?
 - ii. If keynote, what are the most common characteristics of the audience?
4. What is the title of your conference presentation?
 - a. How is the title geared towards your specific audience?
 - b. Run it past someone to see if they think it is clear.
5. What is the description of the conference presentation?
 - a. Does it include actionable language with clear objectives?
 - b. Run it past someone and ask them what they will get from it in their own words.
6. What is the main idea you want attendees to come away with?
 - a. Is there one topic or multiple topics?
 - b. Is the single topic narrowed?
7. Is a design thinking studio included?
 - a. How are attendees prepared for the design thinking studio?
 - b. How are attendees guided through the design thinking studio?
 - c. How are attendees supported following the design thinking studio?
8. Are you going to provide continued support for attendees following the session? If so, what does that look like?
9. Following the conference, how will you reflect on your conference presentation?
 - a. Are there any changes you would like to incorporate in future presentations?
 - b. Is there anything you would like to try in your next conference presentation?