Organizing your event

Pre-event

Designing your event

"To make sense of a new experience adults first pay attention to components that match in some way to past experiences. Once that occurs, adults are better able to focus on the components that are completely new."
-- Bell and McAllister[7]

In the Women for the Land Learning Circles, introductions of each participating individual are used both as a way for all participants to get to know each other, and to situate knowledge and expertise so that participants can learn from one another and integrate information from technical experts.

Female brains, according to some studies, tend to be well adapted to making connections between analytical reasoning and intuitive processes. Additionally, farm and ranch women bring a wealth of experience to learning events: On average, they are over the age of 50, have diverse on and off-farm work experience, and their identities encompass a variety of life roles.

Learning Circles, whether online or in person, provide a rich environment for the kinds of conversations that allow participants to build on existing connections to integrate new information and knowledge.

More on Learning Circles

American Farmland Trust's Learning Circle model (https://farmland.org/learning-circles-for-women-landowners/) arose out of early partnerships with Women Food and Agriculture Network's Women Caring for the Land™ program, which has been developed and tested, and ultimately proven effective, as a way to specifically engage women landowners and producers in conversations about land management, particularly regarding agricultural best management practices for soil health and water quality.

With no visible hierarchy at these gatherings, everyone is ensured in the security and value of their input to the discussion. Experts are encouraged to communicate their information without PowerPoints, while hands-on, interactive demos (potentially via pre-recorded or livestream digital versions) and in-depth discussion are encouraged.

It can be more challenging to provide those kinds of learning experiences in single-session online offerings such as webinars or meetings. Especially when a technical expert is presenting, there can be a strong temptation to fill a session with as much information as possible. Some strategies for providing learners creative ways to integrate the information include:

- Use break-out sessions to allow for smaller group conversation about some aspect of the presentation.
- Provide a short (30- 60-second) "reflection" break during which learners respond to a simple prompt, such as how the information presented connects with their situation.
- Use the platform's chat feature and/or polls to allow participants to share how they might use what they are learning.
- Include a farmer who is somewhat representative of the group as a co-presenter who provides a short presentation of how the content "plays out" in their farm -- both successes and challenges.
- Show a video of a farm tour or practice for participants to react to and discuss.

Let learners work together to experiment and solve real life problems

Learning opportunities that allow women to work together to solve real life problems are effective approaches, according to Bell[7], because they:

- Make learning relevant
- Allow learners to transform information into knowledge and skills
- Foster increasing complexity in knowledge and skills
- Help learners transfer knowledge and skills to new contexts.

It's also important to give women learners opportunities to do research and synthesize information from a variety of resources before making decisions.

Give learners choice in content, process, and outcomes.
This might mean changes to the content that you cover, the pace of delivery, and/or revisiting your expectations for what your participants will know, believe, and do because of participating.

Promotion & Outreach

As with in-person events, established partnerships with key stakeholders that have pre-existing communications platforms can support the success of outreach and promotion efforts. Set up a spreadsheet or online database to collaboratively track the contacts that you and your team have who can help promote the event. Utilize this centralized place to track who reached out to whom and what the responses was. Consider using the support of interns, students, and other external partners who can help you spread the word on social media, as well as through email newsletters of partner organizations. Recruit participants by promoting registration for at least four weeks in advance of the event.

Registration & Reminders

To ensure security in the online setting, it is best to require participants to register ahead of time and to manually approve all registrants before the event. This can reduce the risk of people with malicious intentions from joining the event and causing a disruption (a.k.a "zoom-bombing"). With this added layer of security, participants will receive a unique link to join the meeting. You can also have them enter a password to join for additional security.

The trade-off to this added security is that registrants may receive the confirmation email from Zoom in their junk email box, so it is good to follow up individually via email from a staff member directly and to call participants a day ahead to remind them of the event, confirm they received the join info, and to clarify the nature of the event. Many people are used to being able to passively engage in online events, such as webinars and meetings, so it is helpful to clarify how your event may be different if you intend to generate conversation, ask for their active participation, or hope to have them on video and audio. Given that many women are often multi-tasking, it is helpful to provide a heads-up that they are expected/invited to participate actively and be focused in front of their computer and webcam for the duration of the event, if that is your aim.

Depending on your target audience, you may need to provide additional support to help women access the online platforms you are using. One week prior to gathering, you might send instructions on how to join the platform along with their registration confirmation. Include tutorials for folks who need support getting their devices set up to use the platform. Potentially host a pre-event call with people new to the platforms to help them work out technical challenges.

Video Tutorials on Zoom Setup for Farmers

In English - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLBaRE9-dVM&list=PL3zWtXzGVCax2IafuATCk_Mru8YLwRVxG

In Spanish - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=du4yKYb1i0U&list=PL3zWtXzGVCayIKFaZGnwxbiwrtFwxEGv5

Practice Session

As opposed to in-person events where an organizer can adjust on the fly, the online event requires a good deal more advance preparation. Facilitators should consider hosting a practice session for co-facilitators and expert discussion leaders prior to the event. During this time, the facilitator can establish guidelines for what to do should the facilitator lose connectivity during the event, who will be designated as a co-host, and the roles/responsibilities for leaders involved in the call. A practice session also allows technical experts to test their demonstrations, equipment, sound, and space, as well as features of the virtual platform in use for the session.

Pre-work

"One KEY thing learned (the hard way) in an unrelated virtual event earlier this year and emphasized in [my online Learning Circle] training, is to PRACTICE."

-Cayla Bendel, PF

To enhance relationship building and maximize interaction during the event, sending key information or asking participants to begin their learning ahead of the first gathering can help them get acquainted with the format, each other, and what to expect during the event. If your event has a theme or plans to share in-depth information on a particular topic, you may want to send some questions to understand participants' baseline knowledge of the topic and what they hope to get out of the event. You may want to encourage some homework ahead of time, such as viewing informational tutorials about the topics covered in the event, to get them excited and engaged prior to the event. Or you may wish to learn more about their relationship to agriculture, the type of operation they run, or their land tenure situation. These can be captured in the registration questions and elaborated on via some pre-work questions.

Along with pre-work, you may consider asking participants to send photos of themselves or their agricultural land/operation. Using a poll in Zoom to get their permission, you can potentially then use these photos of your participants and their land in future marketing. Since in-person events usually yield photos that can be used, this request of participants can be one way to substitute day-of-event photos.

One or two days prior to gathering, send participants' answers to the pre-event questions to all participants via email or in an online group (such as a Facebook group).

"Presenting virtually is a skill set and it isn't necessarily something that is immediately transferrable from other settings – i.e., someone who may do fine presenting in a large room via a PowerPoint on a screen can't just take that same format and run with it online necessarily. PowerPoint slides should be much simpler/less content as attendees are viewing on their computer or even on phones."

- Lisa Kivirist, In Her Boots

Event

Managing people in the virtual space:

It is important to create a safe space for vulnerability and difficult conversations in online learning. Women-only spaces can often elicit deep sharing by participants, and it is important to respect that space. We recommend not recording online sessions where there is deep personal information being shared. A good strategy is to record technical service information or more traditional teaching moments in an online webinar but turn off the recording when folks are sharing personal information and reflection. It is really important to be transparent about when you are recording and when you are not and give folks the option to turn on and off their camera if they do not want to be recorded.

> *"We learned it is difficult (and frankly unnecessary) to try do "everything" in a virtual event. That was a frustrating realization as we can and historically have covered so much ground at in-person field days, including definitely prioritizing and fostering networking and social connections."*
>
> *– Lisa Kivirist, In Her Boots*

Remember that when you are facilitating a group process online or in person you have a special role in guiding the group through the agenda. Consider choosing a co-facilitator to help you in doing the work of managing the group process as it can be a lot for one person to do. In fact, for virtual sessions we recommend having three co-facilitators who can help with the agenda and the technical details. Divvying up roles between facilitators, including having someone on-board for dealing with technical difficulties or other challenges individuals might have that would otherwise derail the group experience, is critical. A facilitator's role is about working in service of the group process so that folks can meet each other, learn, grow, share, and reflect.

Here are some ways you can welcome and engage participants and set the stage for a productive and supportive online cohort. Not every suggestion will apply to every situation – and you may have other ideas about ways to create a safe learning environment.

- Depending on the audience, length of the session, and the season, schedule one or more short (2-5 minute) breaks during which participants can step away from the screen, stretch, use the bathroom, grab a drink/snack.
- Address the limitations and frustrations of technology from the start of the session. Reassure women that at some point everyone will have a screen freeze or talk while on mute. If facilitators acknowledge that issues arise due to technological difficulties and a plan to work through them, participants will be much less anxious about the technology and better situated to focus on the content.
- Allocate time for introductions and facilitate the session to make connections between participants' interests and concerns.
- Provide time in introductions for individuals to share their story in relation to a particular session's content. Allow them to identify things that might be potential distractions for them in that specific time and place. Acknowledge these concerns are real and important.
- Use break-out/small group sessions to give women an opportunity to establish connections with each other and get experience using the platform and technology in a smaller "audience."
- Model empathy, respect, and clear communication. Facilitators may need to work on making their non-verbal cues more visible by bigger actions and reactions.
- Co-create ground rules that set common expectations for how the group will function. Revisit at intervals to fine-tune to meet the group's needs (see Toolbox).
- Create space - through facilitation and ground rules -- that acknowledges and works to reduce power dynamics.

Setting the Tone

An excellent practice is for the facilitator to set the tone by modeling the introduction first or asking an experienced co-facilitator to do so. Set your participants up for success by sending, in advance, a few topics they can use to guide their introduction.

Repeating the guiding questions prior to starting the introductions as well as entering them in a chat box allows participants to both hear and read what is being asked of them. One facilitator should then give their own introduction, keeping the format and time limit they have asked of their participants, concluding with a final repeat of the questions.

Finally, alerting women who will be up next and one person after them allows the next participant to prepare and alleviates some anxiety. Alphabetical by first name is an easy order to follow.

- Set out clear expectations for the session (agenda, start and end time) and keep the session on track.
- With cohorts that will meet multiple times, allocate some time at the beginning of each session for check-ins. Consider using an ice-breaker question that gets everybody contributing, for example: "My favorite thing to do on a snowy winter day is . . ."
- Provide an associated platform, possibly through social media or a blog site, where participants can share bios, photos of themselves and their farm, and contact information (with participants' consent).
- Consider providing childcare/elder care stipends for in-home care, or possibly "replacement labor" stipends. Knowing that these things are "under control" can help give space to focus on the online session.

Identifying and Addressing Assumptions

The women who attend online education will arrive with mental models – knowledge, assumptions, beliefs, and values -- about farming, their land, their role on the farm, and themselves as learners that have been formed by their experiences and that will affect how they engage with the topics you are focusing on. Bell and McAllister[7] observe that mental models are often tacit – individuals are not fully aware of them – and that unless these are known and addressed, new information is unlikely to result in behavior change.

The following are statements gleaned from participants in the AFT Women for the Land program (www.farmland.org/women) that provide insights into these experiences, assumptions, beliefs, and values:

- "Taking care of the animals comes naturally to me, but I don't have a knack for the business plan."
- "My husband is the farmer. I just manage our staff and keep track of financial records."
- "My farm is an integral part of the community in this area."
- "I know I will have a difficult time getting a loan."
- "I never really thought of myself as a farmer before now."
- "I feel like there is some kind of secret society I don't belong to with an alphabet soup of acronyms."

There are a variety of ways to begin uncovering participants' mental models so participants are acknowledged and addressed through the program. Facilitators can include questions about expectations, needs, and what participants are currently doing in registration materials, as a pre-workshop assignment or survey, or embed those questions in the introductory portion of a session. Sharing that information back with the group and asking participants to respond and discuss the information can be a powerful way to get participants to begin identifying and questioning their own mental models.

It is also important to uncover the mental models the facilitator and technical experts hold – and those that are embedded in the curriculum – regarding content, learning, and learners. What experiences, beliefs, values, and assumptions about gender and/or online learning are your participants, presenters, and facilitators bringing to the session? How do they support or inhibit your educational goals? Understanding those things can help shape both content and format for a more successful program.

Post event

Evaluations

As part of the post-event work, we recommend spending time debriefing as a team to think about what worked well and what could be improved upon. For many, increasing the work in the virtual space means learning through practice. This will require iterative learning and an approach that allows for tweaks and changes between events, particularly if planning a series of coordinated events.

As with all group educational events, it is important to think about objectives and the intended outcomes associated with the event or convening. What information are people to walk away with? Is the event designed to help change knowledge, attitudes, intentions, or behaviors around specific practices? Establishing clear learning goals and indicators at the start of your planning process sets the stage for implementing practical and meaningful evaluation activities to document outcomes and identify ways to improve your programs and process. In many cases, these pieces have been developed for in-person events and thus can be modified and adapted for the virtual environment. If you're just getting started developing an evaluation framework or are thinking about updating it, the Gaining Results Through Evaluation Project (https://casfs.ucsc.edu/education/bfrdp/eval-tools.html) has compiled an extensive online library of resources relevant to evaluation of farm and agricultural programs. Included is an Outcomes List (https://casfs.ucsc.edu/education/bfrdp/evaluation-outcomes-list.pdf) that provides example outcomes, indicators, and data collections.

Gathering some evaluation information before the close of your meeting is recommended. This could be done through a virtual poll (see Zoom polling feature, for example) or simply ask folks to reflect and share one thing they learned to wrap up the meeting. Use a chat box feature if time does not allow for a live discussion.
A follow-up evaluation will most likely be wanted, either via an online survey tool or a paper copy that gets mailed to participants. However, mail-in evaluations are costly from a time and resource perspective; an online survey of some kind is recommended with a few email reminders to boost response rates. Anonymity is achievable in an online evaluation tool by not requiring people to leave their name/contact information and for most online tools you can click a box so that you are not collecting IP addresses. It is important to be transparent with respondents if the evaluation tool is designed to be anonymous rather than just confidential. It always helps to explain how the information is used and why it is valuable for planning future events.

Another option is to develop a questionnaire and have staff call participants to conduct a phone interview. With that route, be aware that anonymity is hard to achieve unless an outside evaluator conducts the interviews.

As with all things associated with evaluation, have a plan in place before your event and be thoughtful about ensuring collection of information to aid in tracking intended outcomes. Keep in mind the expectation of a smaller response rate for virtual evaluation tools due to the optional nature of an online survey/questionnaire or do a follow-up interview.

"For me, the loss of evaluation data discerned by watching the participants during the day is very problematic in understanding how effective the training is. Relying only on an online survey means an additional loss of data if participants don't reply."

- Jean Eells, EResources,LLC

Participant Follow Up

The final piece is to follow up with participants. A great deal of work went into developing their relationships in the group, but participants in online programming may find it challenging to sustain these connections without your facilitation. Due to the shortened nature of online events and the lack of built-in networking times such as coffee breaks and lunch, a facilitator has to be creative in keeping their participants connected.

You can encourage continued networking in a number of ways, dependent on the requests of the participants. Private groups on social media can be established for members or a participant email list can be shared with permissions.

In-person learning circles often also provide a resource table for participants to access informational materials. In the absence of this, one of the facilitators should be aware of participants looking for more information on a topic during discussion and follow up with those resources. The same is true for access to the technical experts featured during the session. Time should be allowed after the official session for one-on-one questions of the expert or a method of contact if possible. Most technical experts are happy to share their email and provide any supplemental support to those in attendance.

Facilitators should send a follow-up email to participants (including registrants who did not attend) and provide resources from the meeting. These can include, but are not limited to:

- A recording of the meeting (if you have been transparent ahead of time with participants that this would be shared)
- A copy of slides/handouts and technical information covered in the discussion
- A contact list of all participants to support continued networking
- Links to resources raised during the session
- Contact list for relevant technical service providers and clear information about where to go next for more information, support, resources, etc., including a breakdown of common agency and program acronyms they may encounter when seeking technical support.

Sample follow-up email language and examples of resource lists used by AFT are provided in the Toolkit section of this guide.

Virtual Networks on Social Media

Facebook groups, Google Groups, Mighty Networks, or other online platforms can be helpful ways to support women in staying connected after events. GreenMaps and Google Maps are free tools that allow people to create maps of locations and add details about the locations. These can be good tools for supporting women to self-organize and create a network organically over time.

If these are too onerous to create, continued engagement via your organization's own social media accounts (Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook) can be good ways to keep the conversation going with women in agriculture in your communities. International Women's Day, Women's Equality Day, and other national celebrations are good opportunities for "social media take-over" days when your team can focus on a communications campaign to engage and solicit input from women in agriculture. Efforts like this are good ways to help amplify the women-led farms and ranches online, as well, by leveraging the platforms of your organization or institution to highlight the work and perspective of women you serve. You could also consider doing virtual "office hours" using a social media platform such as Instagram or Twitter or simply have Zoom "office hours" for encouraging people to login and engage.

Informal Engagement Ideas

Check out the Virtual "office hours" that SoulFire Farm hosts with their Ask a Sista Farmer programming on Facebook (https://www.facebook.com/events/614166582543371/?active_tab=discussion) during which every Friday, "experienced Black womxn farmers" answer questions about all manner of farming and food preserving questions.