Methods for Meetings and Webinars: including people with a variety of cultural and skill levels in the working language

IFLA Section 32: Library Services to Multicultural Populations

Introduction

At the heart of our daily work as library professionals is communicating with each other. Even in the age of email, social media, and text message, we still value coming together in real time – in meetings and seminars, both online and in person. We gather our colleagues in meetings with the hope that each person will be able to share their expertise, gain new knowledge and information, build relationships with others, and contribute to future plans. If you are organizing such a meeting or event, here are our suggested methods for being inclusive of people from a variety of cultural and language backgrounds.

We in the IFLA Section Library Services to Multicultural Populations began developing these inclusive methods during our own Standing Committee methods, both at physical IFLA events and online. We ourselves come from many different countries and language backgrounds and it is important to us that everyone feels welcome and can fully participate. We then collected further suggestions from library professionals around the world about how meetings can include people with different skill levels in the working language. With these suggestions, we hope to support the professional development of every library professional by bringing more equity to library staff meetings and library association meetings.

We ask you to consider that most meetings are held in only one language, but yet, in many cases, the people in the meeting have different levels of ease and experience with the working language. This creates barriers to participation, but these barriers can be reduced with our suggestions below. Additionally, it is vital to consider cultural differences such as high context and low context cultures. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall introduced the concept of high and low context in his 1976 book Beyond Culture, and it refers to different norms of how people communicate**.** In high context cultures, communication is mainly implicit, meaning that context and relationships are more important than the actual words, and verbal cues are not as crucial as in low-context cultures. In low-context cultures, the message is communicated almost entirely by verbal cues, and communication is direct, unlike high-context cultures. Consequently, moderators of the meeting must understand cultural and linguistic differences and barriers to facilitate effective and inclusive discussions. Therefore, these tips are even more critical for webinars and virtual meetings.

Practical suggestions

Step 1: Communicate with participants before the event
- Ask people to sign up in advance. If appropriate, ask for their preferred languages.

- For meetings, encourage participants to email their questions or topics in advance.

- Provide the slide presentations and/or written agendas in advance

- Provide any other information (documents, handouts...) in advance

- Use simple language. Use visualizations whenever possible.

- Encourage English language speakers to count to ten before they offer their opinion.
  (Sometimes, it is not the lack of English language proficiency skills but cultural differences.
  Interrupting or offering views right away might be considered impolite in certain cultures.)

Step 2: Plan plenty of people and time to support all participants
- Assign separate people to the following roles:
    1   Moderating the speakers
    2   Moderating the participants
    3   Note-taker
    4   Technical coordinator
    5   Coordinators for small groups in different languages (participants could volunteer)
- Schedule time before the event for participants to log in.
- Plan for small-group discussions, possibly in different languages
- For complex topics, consider splitting the session into multiple sessions.

Step 3: Support all participants throughout the event
- The person moderating the speakers reminds them to use clear language, asks for explanations
  of special terms and abbreviations, etc. (see IFLA guidelines for WLIC speakers)
    1   The person moderating the participants gives everyone time to speak, including those
         who feel uncertain in the working language.
    2   The moderator summarizes/retells what was discussed and asks if it is clear to everyone
    3   Participants keep their microphones off when not speaking.
    4   The moderator indicates who can activate their microphone and speak next.
    5   The moderator gives priority to those who have not yet spoken.
- For the most important questions: the moderator asks the participants one at a time if they
  would like to speak.
- Show the presentation, agenda or other main information on screen.
- Any new information or discussions are visualized or written by the note-taker. For example, in a
  virtual meeting, the notes can appear in the chat or a whiteboard function.

Step 4: Support all participants after the event

- Provide ways to review and revisit the information (video, slides, minutes…)

- Provide or crowdsource transcripts, video captions, or at the very least, summaries in other languages

- Collect feedback from non-native speakers on their experience

Thank you to the MCULTP Standing Committee and the larger MCULTP community, including the Berlin Public Libraries Working Group on Diversity, Lingua Pankow (a coalition of immigrant organizations in Berlin), and the Pikes Peak Library District (Colorado, USA). The suggestions were gathered and edited by Leslie Kuo and Teona Shainidze Krebs.

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