Prosper Canada

Tools to increase participant engagement in virtual settings

Following physical distancing measures and health guidelines, you may be providing programs like financial literacy workshops and client financial support services virtually. If you and your participants have access to internet and a computer or mobile device, there are many tools available to encourage participant engagement in an online setting.

The applications mentioned below are free for use but may also have paid versions that include additional features. Prosper Canada does not endorse any specific application. Use at your own discretion.

Video conferencing

Meeting face-to-face allows us to read body language and facial expressions. This is helpful for communication, and in turn, for building relationships and rapport with participants. When in-person interactions are not possible, the next best alternative may be to use a video conferencing program so that you and participants will still be able to see each other.

Some examples of video conferencing programs include:

- Google Meet (include the Google Meet Grid View Google Chrome browser extension to see multiple participants on your screen)
- Microsoft Teams
- WebEx

Interactive whiteboard

Sketching ideas and thoughts together can be a great way break the ice or further the conversation on a topic. Many ideas in our Top icebreaker activities and Quick warm up activities resources can be adapted onto a virtual drawing canvas.

Some video conferencing programs may already have a whiteboard feature built-in, but if not, the examples below are easy to use:

- AWW - A Web Whiteboard
- Whiteboard Fox
- Google Jamboard (requires Google account)

Collaborative brainstorming

Whether you are discussing a concept with learners during a facilitated workshop or action planning with a client, it is useful to have a tool that allows you to organize ideas visually. Some applications allow you to type ideas and colour-code and move the typedtext into a concept map, and others mimic a board posted with sticky notes.

Some examples of video conferencing programs include:

- Coggle
- Lucidchat
- IdeaBoardz
- Google Jamboard sticky note feature (requires Google account)

(View a sample concept map created using Coggle. Participants can add new branches and items onto the map collaboratively in real time.)

Interactive games, quizzes, polls

Games, quizzes, and polls can be very engaging for groups, especially if responses can be seen in real time by the facilitator and fellow participants. Here are some tools that you can use to create interactive activities for your group sessions:

- Kahoot! for creating interactive games and quizzes
- Mentimeter for creating interactive presentations that include polls and quizzes
- Swift for real time polling

Tips for using video conferencing and virtual tools

Check the features on your video conferencing application

Some video conferencing applications may already include some of the interactive tools presented above. It is a good idea be familiar with all the features that are available in the application that you are already using so that you limit the number of different tools you and your participants need to access. The chat box function in your video conferencing application is great for:

- Sharing links to online resources
- Group discussions where everyone can respond at the same time
- Providing another engagement option for those who do not feel comfortable giving verbal responses
- Allowing participants to ask questions without interrupting the speaker

Use the screen sharing function for:

- Showing a presentation
- Sharing a resource with participants and explaining the information verbally at the same time

Consider the record function for:

- Saving portions of presentations for your participants to refer to later

Do not record any meetings if this is against the guidelines of your organization, if you do not have expressed permission from participants, or if it imposes on participant privacy.

Prepare your participants to use the tools successfully

Dedicate some time before or during your first meeting for a technology session with participants:

- Test the applications you will use ahead of time
- Inform participants which applications you will use for the session and walk through the applications and features with them
- Address any tech support needs and questions
- Have a backup plan in case an application or tool you were planning to use does not work

Establish guidelines for the session and share these with your participants before you begin.

Some examples of items to cover are:

- The meeting objectives and agenda, including timing of breaks where applicable
- What participants should do if they cannot attend or will miss part of a session
- When and how to ask questions to the facilitator (for example, if they are free to interrupt, if they should use the chat box or wait until the end of the session)
- Whether they will be muted during parts of the session in order to minimize disruptions or audio issues
- Any other meeting etiquette or ground rules

Additional considerations

Consider the ease of use and accessibility features of any applications you decide to use. Test any tools, perhaps with a group of colleagues, before sharing with participants. Also be sure to follow the recommendations and privacy and security guidelines set by your organization or governing body.

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