Online "Jams" as a Tool for Professional Development and Community Engagement

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Abstract

This paper describes a teaching project to involve graduate students in nonprofit studies at the LBJ School of Public Affairs in a community engagement "crowdsourcing" effort focused on the topic of short-term volunteering. Students were responsible for organizing a one-day online brainstorming session, called a "jam," in which geographically dispersed participants contributed to a 12-hour online discussion related to the topic with input from experts in the field. Based on a model developed by IBM, jams are sponsored by a variety of organizations around the world to engage virtual communities in online conversations on topics as diverse as global security and video game design. Major goals of the project were to have students explore this topic in volunteerism in depth and to provide experience for future nonprofit professionals in the design and management of community engagement events. Potential applications for similar events are discussed in the context of extending professional development and networking options for nonprofit capacity building and collaboration.

Key Words: community engagement, jam, short-term volunteering

Background

Volunteerism and community engagement are integral to the Portfolio Program in Nonprofit Studies curriculum offered through the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service at the University of Texas at Austin's LBJ School of Public Affairs. In Fall 2013, students in our graduate *Mobilizing Communities and Engaging Volunteers* course were responsible for designing and implementing an online community brainstorming session called a "jam" on the theme of short-term volunteering. The goal of the project was for students to examine this facet of volunteerism in depth, to explore online conferencing as a learning modality, and to work collaboratively to develop a project that would engage the broader community in meaningful, goal-directed work.

The idea for the research project originated with the OneStar Foundation, one the RGK Center's primary partners in local and state nonprofit capacity building work. Based on an IBM model called "Service Jam," OneStar asked the Center to design a project to explore this online option for providing continuing education for our geographically large state.

According to Bjelland and Wood (p. 33, 2008), the "jam" concept originated at IBM in 2001 as a series of online "bulletin boards" to provide a central communication and collaboration site for its many employees who worked from home or client offices. Within the company, this effort evolved into IBM's first online "massively parallel conference" called "Innovation Jam" in 2006, which was designed to gather ideas for taking new products to market. Over the course of this three-day event,

more than 150,000 IBM employees, family members, and other stakeholders from 104 countries logged on to the jam site to post ideas and respond to comments in one or more online discussions. Innovation Jam eventually resulted in over $10 million of investment in new business concepts. A subsequent 2010 IBM "Service Jam," involving approximately 15,000 individuals from 119 countries, was designed as a forum for discussion on a range of social challenges to help develop responsive company service projects. "Systems of Service," a white paper summarizing findings from that event, is available here.

Today, jams are organized around the world by diverse groups, including foundations, international organizations, and businesses, on topics that range from global security, to habitat and urban sustainability and other social issues, to design challenges in the services industry and video game development. IBM's Collaboration Jam web page provides information about some of the larger events held worldwide. The company also now offers Internet-based social collaboration technology platforms for conducting large-scale jams.

Description of the Project

To prepare for this teaching project, we first contacted IBM for technology advice and were directed to a company that has developed an online jam platform suitable for smaller scale projects. Student teams then tackled a range of functional and conceptual tasks to design and implement the event. Major activities included technology training, event planning, marketing, moderating jam discussions during the event, conducting a follow-up evaluation, and reporting results to the project funder.

To identify jam themes for exploration of the topic of short-term volunteering, students first participated in a "day of service" followed by class reflection activities. The students' experiences highlighted the importance of thoughtful logistical planning and communication in designing short-term volunteering opportunities. The students also identified group dynamics, volunteer anxiety, and network-building as key issues for consideration.

Based on these experiences and a subsequent literature review, students defined four key discussion themes for the jam:

- *Best Practices in Short-Term Volunteer Engagement:* Because short-term events serve as an introduction to volunteering for many people, what are "best practices" for this type of service opportunity?

- *The Impact of Service:* Volunteers turn out by the hundreds to participate in days of service, but do they make a difference?

- *Growing Through Serving:* Does participation in a short-term service event lead to greater, long-term involvement, and should extended involvement even be a goal of short-term service?

- *Innovations in Short-Term Service:* Are service days losing their edge, and are there trendier ways to engage the community in critical service needs?

The event was publicized and jam participants were recruited for pre-registration using department and program e-mail mailing lists, information posted on

the sponsoring organizations'[1] websites, word of mouth, and an event Facebook page.[2] A number of experts in the field of volunteerism were also invited to participate in the jam, in part to attract attention to the event and also to ensure a high level of dialogue.

After almost two months of research and planning, the jam, called "Change in a Day: An Online Dialogue About Short-Term Volunteering" took place on November 13, 2013, from 9 am to 9 pm, CST. Participants logged into the online system to contribute to the conversation, and students moderated the online discussions in pre-determined shifts either remotely or in the classroom jam "headquarters" using their own laptops. Students, participants, and experts posted idea threads under the four themes with a defined question or personal example to invite responses and comments. Experts contributed to conversations throughout the day. In addition to posting comments, participants could attach links, graphics, and papers to share with the discussion group.

Over the course of the 12-hour jam, more than 100 of the 200 pre-registered participants contributed to the conversation, introducing 49 idea threads under the jam's four themes and posting over 500 comments. The majority of the participants were staff of nonprofit organizations. Other participants included volunteers as well as staff at for-profit companies. Almost all participants were located in the state of Texas and in urban areas, but there was also some participation from individuals in New York, Maryland, Virginia, Washington, Ohio, California, and Australia.

After the event, students wrote thank you notes, summarized evaluation data, and reviewed the log of participant comments to identify major themes from each discussion topic and prepare a summary report for class credit and for the event funder. (Access the report here on the RGK Center website.)

Outcomes and Feedback

To gather feedback on the event, jam participants were asked to complete a survey and provide insights and suggestions. Approximately half of participants completed the survey, 61% of whom were staff at non-profit agencies or organizations.

The survey asked about the relevance of the discussion to participants' work or volunteer experiences. More than 80 percent of respondents agreed that the jam themes and idea threads were relevant. Participants were also asked to identify an idea discussed during the jam that they were likely to incorporate into their work or volunteer involvement. Nearly all respondents identified an idea or technique they were planning to use. Examples included: more extensive volunteer evaluations, better data gathering or tracking of volunteers, strategies for retention, increasing volunteer engagement, micro-volunteering, better job descriptions, and more effective communication about expectations.

While the survey indicated that the participants had a positive experience overall, respondents also provided excellent comments and suggestions for future events. For example, many participants indicated the need for more detailed technical instructions and more focused topic discussions that were kept on track through rigorous moderation.

Participating experts were also asked for feedback. Reported benefits included

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[1] The event was sponsored by the OneStar Foundation and the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service in partnership with the Texas Association of Volunteer Centers and United Way for Greater Austin.

[2] See https://www.facebook.com/events/644672448900946/?ref_dashboard_filter=past

"surfacing ideas from many different points of view" and "generating buzz" about critical topics. One expert characterized the event as "the wave of the future in sharing best practices," stating that such online events provide alternative professional development opportunities that address the challenge of prohibitive travel costs associated with conference attendance. Another expert speculated that the fact that the event was "time-limited" might have generated a higher level of interest and participation than traditional e-mail mailing lists or other forums for sharing ideas.

Experts also identified the need for moderators to keep discussions on topic. As one expert observed: "to be meaningful, it can't be a free for all." Suggestions for engaging participants in more focused conversations included:

- providing a background paper or research brief for participants to respond to;

- defining an agenda and scheduling expert "appearances";

- integrating polling throughout the day related to event topics; and

- identifying a target purpose for participation at the outset—a broader, open event seeking a higher number of participants or a smaller focused event with targeted participation from identified stakeholders;

Students reported that as an academic assignment, the project was a challenge—while it was extremely exciting to take part in an innovative online event, the lack of models for this type of community engagement activity caused some students anxiety, especially within the timeframe of a one-semester graduate course. Students and faculty agreed that one semester was too constrained a time period for designing and staging the event, and two semesters would provide a more feasible timeline for both organizing the jam and supporting meaningful follow-up activities. Despite time constraints, however, students acknowledged that organizing the jam afforded them a much deeper understanding of the real-world responsibilities of nonprofit leaders and volunteer resource managers. In addition, the time spent on student preparation through the pre-jam volunteer experiences was critical for elevating the level of discussion.

Overall, all participant groups observed that technology shortcomings hindered the jam's effectiveness. Specifically, the online platform made conversations "clunky" and hard to follow. Many participants mentioned the need to be able to generate a quick summary of discussions in real time in order to stay on top of the conversation as it was happening. In future, additional research into jam software options was recommended.

Lessons Learned and Potential Applications

As a class project for prospective nonprofit professionals, the experience provided not only valuable management experience but also heightened student awareness of the value of broader community participation in the work of nonprofits. Both within the nonprofit sector and across sectors, events designed to initiate, capture, and influence community conversations can ultimately impact our ability to effectively address social challenges.

For community participants, this type of professional development approach provides a forum for discussion and exposure to new ideas. Jams can also promote networking within and outside

existing communities, establishing new relationships and extending connections to include a potentially much broader range of stakeholders. More cost-effective and time-saving than a face-to-face event, online conferences can bring more or new players to the table and possibly provide a starting place for a variety of ongoing collaborative efforts.

Researchers who have studied the IBM jam initiatives caution that the real value (and real work) of such events is "making something come of it." As articulated by Bjelland and Wood in their review, "An Inside View of IBM's 'Innovation Jam'" (2008), what happens after the jam is as important as the event itself, involving a significant commitment to "harvest ideas" and follow through. "Where online conversations and live brainstorming sessions can be exhilarating, a Jam is fundamentally a piling up of ideas that will later be evaluated slowly. People enjoy it, but it rarely generates the rapid answers and thrill that some online experiences can

produce," (p. 38). These types of projects need to "do justice" to the collection of ideas. As a teaching project, extending the timeline from one to two semesters would allow for substantive follow-up to disseminate and address key findings.

Our students came away from this class project with an appreciation for the many facets of collaboration and the ways in which citizen involvement, broadly defined, builds social capital and the fiber of the community. For other applications, and as a tool for community engagement or professional development, having a tangible product in mind, such as a research agenda or an action plan, as well as resources to support follow up are additional critical components for making a jam event meaningful in both the short and long term.

References

Bjelland, O.M., & Wood, R.C. (2008). **An Inside View of IBM's ' Innovation Jam'**. *MIT Sloan Management Review 50*(1), pp. 32–40.

Questions about resources that are linked to external organizations or papers should be directed to the author.

About the Author

Dr. Sarah Jane Rehnborg, Lecturer, LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin, has just finished serving as Interim Director of the RGK Center for Philanthropy and Community Service. An expert in volunteerism, Dr. Rehnborg has served as a consultant and trainer to numerous organizations, including the Points of Light Foundation, AARP, the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Texas Commission on Volunteerism and Community Service (now the OneStar Foundation), the Texas Department of Mental Health/Mental Retardation, the Comptroller's Office of the State of Texas, and many local groups. She served as President of the Association for Volunteer Administration from 1979 to 1981. Dr. Rehnborg teaches courses in nonprofit board governance and community engagement in the Nonprofit Studies Portfolio Program at the LBJ School.