CRRF Conferences: Building on the legacy

Bill Reimer and Ray Bollman
March 19, 2013
Bill.Reimer@concordia.ca
http://billreimer.ca

Contents

Introduction

This document is prepared to help new conference partners navigate the challenges of putting on a CRRF Conference. It makes use of the many things we have learned from previous partners over the 25 years of our annual event so that newcomers can see what has worked, what hasn't, and how they might organize events to get the maximum benefit for their community and region.

But it's also more than an 'owner's manual' of dos and don'ts. One of the strengths of the CRRF conference legacy is that each one is a new adventure – with new partners and in new places. Over the 25 years of our history we have collectively visited 25 unique communities – from Twillingate to Nanaimo to Inuvik (and that's not counting the other 20 we have visited for our workshops). In doing so, we have taken provincial and federal policy-makers to the towns and communities directly affected by their policies and we have brought people to those communities that they would otherwise never have the opportunity to meet.

But welcoming 200 or so strangers to a town with only one small motel and limited venues for large meetings is no small feat! That it can be successfully accomplished with our conference participants leaving with big smiles on their faces and new inspiration for rural initiatives is due to the innovative nature of our community partners. In Coaticook, they organized regional billeting so that participants from Germany, Japan, Ottawa, and Toronto woke up to breakfasts with local people. In Twillingate they made use of churches, halls, and restaurants to ensure we had sufficient space for breakout groups. In Tweed, we took over their heritage theatre for our presentations and radio station, then walked across the street to the Legion for food.

For some communities, the CRRF conference was only the beginning. In Coaticook, after turning their agricultural centre into a meeting venue, training the local high school students to set tables, and establishing a network of billets, they marketed themselves as a conference location. In Tweed, after being forced to collaborate with three local towns to meet the challenges of the conference, they realized the benefits of such collaboration so proceeded to collectively market themselves as "Comfort Country" – a regional tourist destination.

These are just some of the inspirational stories that have emerged from our years on the road. So we hope that this document will stimulate you to consider what you may make of the conference that will benefit your community and region. For that reason, you will find more than just organizational tips scattered among these pages. We will include some of the stories that surprised and inspired us – in the hope that they may do the same for you.

General Principles of the CRRF Conference Tradition

There have been few rules to guide us as we made our way from town to town – but we did so with a focus on a few important principles. Some of these are the following.

1. The interests of the local community and region take precedence on the program and direction of each conference.

   We therefore seek an invitation from the community in order to initiate discussion and we take the role of advisors on possible speakers, activities, strategies, and supports. As a result, the extent of our involvement in the details of the conference varies from year to year depending on the local committee's requests.

2. The conference should provide maximum opportunity for discussion and networking over presentations.

   A general rule-of-thumb has been to provide a maximum of 50% of the time for presentations. Most presenters are asked to speak for 20 minutes so that time is available for questions and discussion in every session. As outlined below, we have made use of a wide range of approaches to ensure that discussion takes place throughout the conference.

3. A 'down and dirty' approach to learning about local issues is preferred over the 'tourist' approach.

   Very early in our history we decided that we would meet in rural places wherever possible. This added some important burdens of time and money for our participants, but the value of being in the places which we are studying and meeting with people in their home venues far outweighed the costs involved. This is only the case, however, if we learn about the difficulties they face, the challenges they have, and the ways they have met those challenges for success or failure. The most useful tours, therefore, are those that include the closed mine and the dying mainstreet as well as the struggling library and the lakeside ecotour. It also include hearing the diverse interpretations from the local people most passionate about them.

Some Valuable Traditions

Over the years we have been introduced to some very successful innovations that follow the spirit of these principles. We will identify a few here for your own inspiration and to demonstrate how various communities have contributed to our collective success.

1. An early bus tour – integrated into the conference

   My earliest memory of the Conference local tour was in our 5th conference in Wolfville, NS. By that time, we had noticed the value of these activities at our workshops, so when the Wolfville conference planning was underway, we decided to integrate the tours right into the conference. On the first afternoon of the event – after a morning of introductions and a plenary – we all piled onto yellow school buses and spread out on local tours – guided by local people along the way and at each venue. The rough ride of the bus was itself a reminder of rural life: hundreds of school children spend their first and last hours each day bouncing around in this type of transportation. The close quarters, new sights, and enthusiastic nature of our informants ensures that the ice was quickly broken and thorough discussions were taking place all around us. We discovered later how much that experience coloured the rest of the conference – as many presenters and discussants used examples from the tour to illustrate their cases and challenge others.

   Following those early successes we have encouraged local committees to consider this technique as an integral part of the conference. In most cases, they have followed this advice, but in some, the tours have been relegated to optional add-ons before or after the conference. My feeling is that without the majority of the delegates involved, the value of such tours are greatly diminished.

2. A conference radio station

   We were well our conference program when Ivan Emke introduced the idea of a community radio into the mix. He was experienced in this type of endeavour but to include it as part of the conference program was a stroke of genius.

   

   I think it was in Tweed when he first set up a station in the upstairs room of the Tweed Playhouse. He had already contacted the local high school with a request for material so by the time the Conference began, he had a CD full of songs, stories, and discussions provided by the local high school students. While the adults were talking below, the station venue became a local hangout as the students and their parents realized they could get on the air just by showing up. Ivan would give them a roving microphone and invite them to interview speakers and participants throughout the conference events. I was pleased to see how quickly the timid students developed their skills in approaching strangers, asking questions, and challenging them when the answers were inadequate.

During our walks in town we would often hear the radio tuned to the conference channel in local stores as the townfolk enjoyed a chance to hear themselves reflected on this local version of mass media.In the process, they were also introduced to the comments of participants from other communities across the country – with experiences and perspectives directly relevant to those in Tweed.

Whenever possible, this became an important element of our conferences – providing an extension of the events to the surrounding area. In this age of ipods and wireless, the technology is cheap and the operation of the equipment is simple, but the knowledge takes one far beyond the limits of the conference itself.

3. Facilitate exchanges with rural people elsewhere

The conferences have provided a rare opportunity for rural people from different parts of the country to meet with local people around common issues. This requires proactive initiatives in two respects. The first is to encourage local people and groups to participate. This is often difficult since our conferences do not easily fit into the common rural experience. It is not a trade show, nor is it an event dominated by formal presentations. Our emphasis on discussions and focused exchanges is unusual in most communities so local groups and people are often reluctant to become involved. It is unfortunate that we so often hear attendees express the wish that they knew more about the conference beforehand – because if they did, they would have encouraged others to attend.

The second challenge is with the cost of travel for local community members from other parts of Canada to get to the venue. In recognition of this, we have encouraged local organizing committees to consider special conference rates for volunteer groups, arrangements for family members to make the event part of a travel adventure (e.g. camping facilities for spouses and children), and special fund-raising to support rural community-members' participation.

During the period of the New Rural Economy project we had funds to support such travel – and were able to arrange special events for rural community members to discuss very specific challenges, concerns, and solutions they faced, from technical issues of water supply and roads to more abstract ones like youth outmigration and immigrant integration. Many of these initial exchanges have continued online as the participants discovered shared challenges and innovative responses from across the country (and in some cases, other parts of the world).

4. Local People at Play

We have discovered there are very few limits to the range and enthusiasm of rural people at play. It has also become a tradition of sorts, for CRRF conference-goers to be eager participants in the local customs of play. We have been treated to line dancing, barbecues, theatre performances, square-dances, and barrel-rolling as part of our conference education.

Events such as these provide a welcome 'antidote' to the sometimes heady nature of the discussions, they give an alternative venue for interaction, and they provide useful insights into the local traditions and customs.

5. Use Strategic Invitations for policy-makers

By holding our events in rural places we often face the difficult task of getting (urban-based) policy-makers to attend – but these are the very people we would like to get into the rural areas. One way in which we have aided this objective is by inviting key people to act as Chairs in the various sessions. This gives them an official capacity in the program and a justification for the time (and usually money) that they spend in the process. We always encourage them to stay for more than their session. The choice of these people can be one of the ways in which the local organizing committee can use the conference for their own objectives.

Some Nuts and Bolts

There are also many specific things we have learned throughout the years. Most of these will be very familiar to the experienced conference organizers among you, so you can use them as a checklist as you plan your own event.

1. Start Early

There never seems to be enough time. It takes longer to organize a committee than expected, the meeting venue is missing some important touches far beyond the time you had hoped, and the car breaks down just when it is needed to check out the accommodation sites.

In most cases, host communities have established their local organizing committee at least a year and a half before the event. This gives them a chance to participate in the previous conference, meet with the organizing committee of this conference, take notes along the way, and prepare a presentation for the participants so they will know what is in store for them the following year. Not all committees have been so fortunate, however, so we know it can be done with less time – but we don't advise it.

2. Establish a good list – and check it more than twice

Conference organization is about multi-tasking and delegation. In order to manage all the details it is important to have a way in which they can be shared, visible, and accessible to all the committee members. It also means that the delegation of responsibilities is clear – as is the support for each person responsible. Surprises happen and other demands can play havoc with the best laid plans.

Children get sick, relatives arrive, it snows in Canada, and people need respite from stress. Planning for these surprises is the more realistic way to proceed rather than assume they won't happen.

To help you on your way, here is a list of tasks and issues that are usually found in the preparation of CRRF conferences. I will encourage others to add to this list as this document gets passed around.

- Committee formation
- Establishing Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with CRRF Board
- Identify dates and venues for the events
    - Plenary events
    - Breakout rooms
    - Administration rooms
    - CRRF Board meeting
    - Special events or participants (e.g. media, dancers, young scholars meeting)
    - Banquet (?)
    - Social events
    - Handover event for introducing next year's conference
    - Tours
    - Meals
- Construct an inventory for accommodation options
- Prepare a proposed budget
    - Establish fees and fee categories (early registration, late registration, categories for government, education, volunteers, community members, etc.?)
    - Identify registration procedures, modes of payment, bank accounts, etc.
    - Sources of startup funds?
- Propose a fund-raising strategy
- Recruit volunteers
- Plan program
    - Theme
    - Activities, times, venues, and formats
- Publicity materials and communications
    - Establish a website?
    - Early – "Save this date" information
    - Later – Program and key speakers information (registration details)
    - Program design and printing
- Reserve venues (with initial down payments?)
- If using a "Call for papers" approach – establish deadlines and procedure for selection and notification
    - Consider venue and procedures for poster presentations
- Prepare participant information
    - Pre registration – travel, accommodation, special requests information
    - At registration
    - Plan and order kits
- Organize a system for participant information gathering and management
    - Name, origin, arrival, accommodation, special needs, accompanying people, departure information

- Develop a procedure for gathering and organizing speaker and chair information
    - Identify speakers and chairs
    - Gather biographical information to pass to chairs
    - Prepare protocols for speakers and chairs
- Organize technical equipment
    - Plenaries
    - Breakout groups
    - Translation services
    - Printing, photocopying
    - Presentation equipment (computer-linked, overhead projectors, live feeds, etc.)
- In collaboration with police and medical personnel, make plans for any emergency conditions that might arise

3. Assign tasks – but ensure backup is always available

   One technique I have used – with reasonably good success – is to designate a person as the 'point person' for each of the tasks on my list. At the same time, I designate a 'backup person' for that same task. The backup person's job is to keep informed about the activities and progress of the point person – so that when the surprise occurs, they are up to speed and able to manage through the crisis. Each backup person is in turn a point person for some other task – with their own backup person to help along the way.

   I have found a number of advantages with this system. First, the support is readily available should the need arise. Second, in the process of remaining well-informed, the backup person also contributes to the communication process – an essential part of successful organization. A third benefit is that this system provides motivational support for all the members. When the demands become overwhelming, or the member is just having a bad day, the availability of a backup (or a point person) who knows about the challenges provides a welcome confidant with a minimum amount of explanations.

   Finally, I discovered a surprise benefit as a committee chair or leader. Since there were at least two people who were up to speed on each task, they naturally turned to each other to discuss and resolve the many decisions that had to be made along the way. The level of demands on the committee leader automatically drops, since they are no longer the only person available for consultation and deliberation. This gives them more time for the co-ordination role they must play.

Ray's Notes on organizing CRRF conferences

Ray Bollman

Some of the obvious stuff:

1) The conference needs one chair (not co-chairs);
2) The conference needs numerous strong vice-presidents in charge of various sub-aspects of the conference;
3) Strike a budget

Some specific recommendations:

a) **CRRF conferences should have concurrent sessions for the presentation of research results.** CRRF conferences have historically suffered from the lack of time slots and room spaces for researchers to present research in concurrent sessions. In my view, every CRRF conference should have a few time-slots for concurrent sessions. Each time-slot might have up to 10 concurrent sessions wherein interested researchers can present the results of their research. Often, the only way for a researcher to attend an event is if s/he is presenting the results of her/his research project – because then the costs of attending the conference is part of the expenses of the research project. Regardless of how many or how few the number of concurrent sessions, someone will complain that s/he was not able to hear all the research presentations that s/he wanted to hear. Just accept that this will always happen. The purpose of having concurrent sessions is <u>not</u> for all of us to hear all the research presentations – rather the purposes of concurrent sessions are:
   - We become aware of the research topics that are being researched. (At any conference with concurrent sessions, everyone learns of research that is underway that could only have been discovered via the mechanism of concurrent sessions at conferences.)
   - Consumers of research results have an opportunity to meet with these researchers during the conference; and
   - Researchers are able to mingle and meet with other researchers with an interest in rural.

   Papers should be accepted on any topic (not just the theme of the conference) with one proviso – the word “rural” should appear in the abstract. Recall the purposes of concurrent sessions noted above.

b) **Negotiate a fixed sum “speaker’s fee” with each speaker for whom you are paying expenses.** If you are paying the expenses for someone to come to the conference, make a calculation of the expected costs of attending the conference (airfare, car rental, accommodation, meals) and negotiate with the speaker for a fixed “speaker’s fee” that is close to this amount. For the Vermilion conference, Shelly drafted a contract for a “speaker’s fee” for each plenary speaker. This reduces risk and reduces transactions costs. This method prevents surprises such as the case when a speaker books a last minute high-price flight and expects to be compensated. This method reduces the need for going through each receipt to justify payment. And when a speaker cancels her/his appearance, no payment is due to the speaker.

c) **Continue the practice of having tours on the afternoon of the FIRST day of the conference.** Tours provide networking opportunities that are not (very) useful if the tours are at the end of the conference. Tours provide key observations that are typically used as illustrations of key points by speakers later in the sessions.

d) **Since the CRRF conference is an unknown quantity to community residents, one needs to provide a raison d’etre for community residents to attend the conference.** CRRF conferences are notorious for their inability to attract community residents to attend the conference. The Twillingate conference was an outlier observation. Also, the Vermilion conference was a success – the chair of the organizing committee was not able to meet his commitment for a case of champagne for Shelley and Darlene – in fact, a bottle of champagne in a case was the conference chair could afford. Thanks to the entrepreneurship of Shelley and Darlene, each breakout session was chaired by a community resident. The Vermilion conference had more community residents attending the conference than any other CRRF conference. These community residents had a reason for attending the conference – specifically, they were on the program. This strategy should be repeated in all future conferences. In addition, you might ask community residents to “ask the first question” in each concurrent session and thus each concurrent session would provide the raison d’etre for two community residents to attend the conference.

e) **Free conference registrations for individuals lacking funds.** The conference announcement should provide the name and contact information for one person who is prepared to received and review one-page letters from interested potential attendees who do not have the funds to attend the conference. The budget should allow for some (maybe 3 or 5 or 10) such free registrations. For an example of the vocabulary, see the conference announcement for the Vermilion conference.

f) **Early ➔ get a bilingual conference announcement that can be circulated far and wide to our e-mail networks.** {Some of us cannot circulate an announcement unless it is bilingual.} This announcement would point to a conference website which would provide updates – such as registration forms, accommodation information, program details, etc. as they become available.

The conference organizing committee is ‘on its own’. Various individuals and organizations, including CRRF itself, can provide networking and advice. **The bottom line is** that the conference organizing committee does everything – if an organization is needed to anchor the committee, the committee has to find this organization.