

Research Memo: IBL Community History
The Value of the Annual Legacy of R. L. Moore—IBL Conference

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Summary

The annual Legacy of R. L. Moore—IBL (Legacy—IBL) conference has had an important role in developing and sustaining the growing community around inquiry-based learning (IBL) in mathematics in the United States. The conference, now in its 18th year, is sponsored by the Educational Advancement Foundation (EAF) and Mathematical Association of America (MAA). Interviews conducted by our team suggest that the conference fosters heightened exposure to IBL pedagogy and materials, strengthens existing connections and creates opportunities for new connections among mathematics instructors using IBL, and provides a rejuvenating, energizing experience for those who attend each year.

The Interviews

Data for this brief report come from a series of research interviews, the Inquiry-based Learning Community History Interviews, conducted by E&ER beginning in fall 2014. At the time of this analysis, 19 individuals connected to the annual conference had been interviewed. They were selected because of their prominent roles in the IBL mathematics community, and some were referred to us by other interviewees. We asked interviewees how they perceived the value of a variety of programs on IBL mathematics; here we offer a preliminary analysis of responses about the Legacy—IBL conference, which was often mentioned as a particularly important program for developing and sustaining this educational community. The analysis is intended to be useful to community leaders in planning the future of the Legacy—IBL conference and other activities.

Results

The two aspects of the Legacy—IBL conference most strongly valued by respondents are exposure to new ideas and materials related to IBL (mentioned by 13 of 19 speakers), and opportunities to network with other IBL practitioners (mentioned by 12 of 19). In addition, six interviewees valued the role of the conference in growing the IBL community and five

championed its energizing function. Below we summarize interview data on each of these topics and offer illustrative quotations.

Exposure to New Ideas. These comments focused on the opportunities to learn about new ideas and materials that the Legacy—IBL conference provides to those who attend. For one instructor, the value of exposure centered around variety: “I think the greatest value is seeing the variety of approaches, the ideas people are coming up with... the situations in which people are trying things out, types of courses that people are trying out, just the variety of experiences.” Another respondent similarly valued seeing and discussing the course notes that other instructors used.

I’ve gone to many sessions [where] there were people have written new notes, inquiry-based, just to see what they’re doing. For example, one of the courses I teach here from time to time is an inquiry-based geometry course.... I use my own notes but I certainly try to steal as much as I can from everyone else when I see something good—of course, I talk to the people involved about it. I think that’s one of the great things too, is you don’t have to reinvent everything... others certainly have ideas as good or better than yours.

Here, exposure to other perspectives helped this instructor to improve his own courses and develop a well-rounded understanding of IBL methods and their application to specific content.

Others shared the desire to not “reinvent everything.” For example, one interviewee really liked feeling like he knew where he could find materials, answers, and other people related to any course he might want to offer using IBL.

You don't want to have to try and reinvent the wheel and figure it all out for yourself in the beginning. You want some resources and people to model your IBL classroom after, and then as you get more experience, you tailor it for what works for you and for your students in that class. [Having] an initial starting point... was really valuable for me.

Moreover, because the conference enables instructors to consider courses that are new to them as well as improve those that they already teach using IBL, it offers value to veteran and novice IBL instructors alike, as the following quotations suggest:

For me, it was the first time I got to see real versions of IBL.... People give talks about, “Oh, this is how I run my IBL classes, and then this is how I set up my syllabus, and this

is how I call on my students.” They actually talked about nuts and bolts things, enough so that for someone like myself, I was able to go and just try it with the help of a mentor.

Whenever I go to one of these conferences, I pick up some idea that I think is worth thinking about. Even if I don't actually implement it in my classroom, I think, ‘Okay. What is that doing, and how would that change things, and could that make things better?’ That's a very useful thing. I think even very... seasoned practitioners, if they're paying attention, are learning something new about inquiry-based learning every time they go to one of these conferences.

Such an environment fosters community growth and enrichment for all conference attendees. Because exposure to new ideas and materials is directly related to the people sharing them, it is not surprising that many of those who discussed the value of exposure also emphasized the networking they do at the Legacy—IBL conference.

Networking. The second highly valued aspect of the Legacy—IBL conferences is the chance to develop a network of contacts within the IBL mathematics community. As one interviewee explained, the conference offers ample and diverse opportunities to interact with others: “At the conference, you're exposed to lots more people, but you're bouncing around and you're meeting them all, and maybe it's [a] periphery experience with one person [and] slightly deeper with someone else.” Another interviewee directly connected the value of networking with exposure to new ideas and materials, saying, “For me, that kind of stuff is mostly about building more networking. It's about meeting more people and having off-hand conversations about how things go and how to improve.” Thus the conference provides both formal and informal opportunities for interaction about and exposure to IBL strategies and techniques.

The extent and nature of networking varies from attendee to attendee. For those who work with an IBL Center, the conference is an opportunity to interact with one another and share ideas and practices: “It does help the network; it's a place for [the] Centers to get together.” For others, the conference fosters collaboration on publications or projects and enables a chance to reconnect with people they have met at workshops and other IBL meetings.

For me the benefits of the conference have always been the same, which are, one, to connect with the people with whom I may be working on projects with, [and] two, to

serve as an example and a mentor to people who wish to implement some form of inquiry-based learning.

As part of a growing, national group of practitioners, instructors who regularly attend the conference value any chance to interact with colleagues and collaborators. One speaker explained that the conferences helped her develop a very strong, small core network with whom she works on IBL scholarship or organizing IBL events throughout the year.

[Because at the Legacy—IBL conference], that's the only time I see them, except for maybe the Joint Meetings or MathFest. I'll run into these people—there's this core group, and they tend to be the ones organizing an IBL-related session at MathFest or Joint Meetings, and those kinds of [collaborations] happen.

Thus, though some individuals do have other opportunities to interact, having an annual conference devoted to IBL methods in mathematics is very important in helping to keep the group interacting and working together throughout the year in ways that further promote IBL to others.

Growth. A role of the conference from the beginning, according to those interviewed, was in growing the IBL community, and that role appears to continue. One interviewee credited EAF with having an eye to the future:

[Originally] I think the publicity really just amounted to contacting all of the known students and people that they might suggest. ...Harry Lucas did have in mind that... what we're really going to try to do was try to make Moore's method of teaching more widely known and available as some kind of model, or example, to more people.

Over the years, the exclusive focus on R. L. Moore has slowly diminished in favor of a balanced conference that remembers Moore's method and also promotes a wider array of inquiry-based teaching practices.

Indeed, the growth of the conference is directly connected to its abilities to expose new faculty to IBL-based mathematics pedagogy. Many mentioned the influx of early-career faculty from Project NExT and elsewhere to the Legacy—IBL conference as crucial to that development. For example, one speaker suggested that “the key was always getting the young Project NExT people.... I think whoever dreamed that up..., [it] was a really good move.” The

growth of the conference in both size and scope is apparent to those who attend:

It started to gradually transform the way that the group—people that go to the Legacy conferences, people that are now giving talks at IBL sessions at meetings, and people going to IBL training sessions, and so on—they're gradually evolving in the way that they think about pedagogy. I think that that's happened in a remarkably healthy way that I would not have bet [on] when I was first involved in this.

In this way, the Legacy—IBL conferences facilitate the numerical and pedagogical growth of the community over time. Though these interviewees met with other IBL-practicing faculty elsewhere, the Legacy—IBL conference is a primary way for people both to meet up with existing colleagues and to network with newer and younger members.

Energy. Some interviewees mentioned that the annual Legacy—IBL conference provides them with an energizing, refocusing experience every year. The following excerpts capture this energy and its connection to the other valued aspects of the conference.

There's a tremendous energy at the EAF conferences. You come out of those really energized and eager to think about what you are doing in your classes.

I leave [the conference] thinking of all these millions of things that I can try—and it's nice to be re-energized that way and not be stuck in a rut and trying to do the same thing every year.

[W]henver you have a community of people that share a common goal, there's something rejuvenating about getting together and thinking about those things together. Clearly, by having a larger and larger community of people who are thinking about these things, we have more and more ideas generated that can be practical tools in our classrooms.

The Legacy—IBL conferences, then, provide those who attend with opportunities for professional growth and inspiration that help keep community members' teaching fresh, focused, and inquiry-based. Such replenishment is especially essential, we suggest, to retaining within the community the expertise and wisdom of experienced IBL instructors who can in turn mentor newer instructors.

Conclusions

Based on the knowledge and experience of core members of the IBL community, the annual Legacy of R.L. Moore—IBL Conference is vital to the continued growth and health of the community. When asked toward the end of the interviews what their hopes for the future of the Legacy conference were, nearly all participants hoped it would continue to take place so that the exposure, networking, and growth that it has facilitated over the last decade continue as well.

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