

This Case Story was submitted to the 2016 CLA Case Competition. The competition was open to individuals and organizations affiliated with USAID and gave participants an opportunity to promote their work and contribute to good practice that advances our understanding of collaborating, learning, and adapting in action.

Turning a Gathering into a Party: the DME for Peace Community-Building Conundrum

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Participants combine online and in person learning. *Search for Common Ground Kyrgyzstan.*

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

Since 2011, Search for Common Ground's DME for Peace online learning platform has grown to become the largest community dedicated to the collection and curation of the scattered information, evaluations, tools, templates, and knowledge on design, monitoring, and evaluation (DM&E) for international peace and development.

The professionalization of the peace and development fields has been accompanied by a growing recognition of the need for rigorous monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of programming to help the community better understand "what works" and to promote learning and accountability. Taking an adaptive, responsive approach to our content and activities keeps DME for Peace relevant to our audience, making it possible to shape the narrative around key issues of DM&E. When DME for Peace launched, there was no dedicated online space on DM&E of peace and development. In 2016 DME for Peace has more than 4,900 members from 191 countries and 1,000 resources, and is applying evidence-based management to adapt to the needs of a truly global community.

In 2015 DME for Peace staff recognized that to grow in useful and sustainable ways, we needed to better understand our audience members' contexts, attitudes towards our topics, and expectations for community, resources, and services. In response to this need, DME for Peace undertook an expansive review of our audience, content, and engagement, the results of which realigned our approach to content creation and management. This review was so effective that we have transformed it into a continuous learning process focused on evidence-based decision making.

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

DME for Peace must be agile and responsive to the needs of its members, and adaptive learning does not happen without intentional design. Rather than allowing responsive learning to become a one-off activity, DME for Peace uses built in-mechanisms that enable and encourage a continuous learning process focused on evidence-based decision making.

The data from the 2015 review demonstrated that DME for Peace was successfully serving its original purpose as a resource hub, and that were 97 percent of users gaining new knowledge, with 77 percent able to apply what they were learning from DME for Peace in their work. (See <http://dmeforpeace.org/learn/dme-peace-review>.)

The review also revealed where DME for Peace was struggling — that users were accessing and using resources without actively engaging with one another. The community aspect of DME for Peace was not being used, but the findings offered some clues about how to respond. The overwhelming majority of our most-used resources focused on practical applications of DME in real-world examples; this was echoed in the comments and questions collected from our M&E Thursday Talk webinar.

DME for Peace needed to emphasize content that responded to the need for examples. This meant creating a two-pronged approach that considered the type of content and the activities used for content delivery — not only the message, but also the messenger had to appeal to our audience.

DME for Peace's challenge was one of timeliness and relevancy: How to respond to the needs and interests of a global community to remain relevant, so that members would feel compelled to actively engage in building a community? What data has to be collected and analyzed to gain a better understand our community? And what processes would allow us to move from monitoring to understanding, to implementing?

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

Objectives: In the spring of 2016, DME for Peace began a content and activity management restructuring, informed by evidence-based decision making. The aim of this new strategy is to manage



and incite the community in a way that facilitates active engagement with DME for Peace resources and activities. Active engagement is defined as resources submitted to the library, comments made on resources and discussion pages, attendance of DME for Peace webinars, engagement with DME for Peace’s social media channels, engagement with the DME for Peace “Coaching for Peace” mentorship program, addition of new registered members, and addition of new organizational partners who support and promote DME for Peace.

Tools: Evidence-based decision-making for DME for Peace relies on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Beginning in February 2016, DME for Peace moved from quarterly to biweekly collection of web analytics on:

- Number of page views
- Number of unique visitors
- Increase in number of registered members
- Origin of traffic originating from the Global North and the Global South
- Number of blog posts by organizational partners
- Number of new and pending partners
- Number of offers for collaboration
- Number of newsletters sent, their respective open rates, and click-through rates
- Social media engagement and growth on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn

This data is complemented by the initiation and tracking of quarterly calls with all organizational partners to better understand partner interests and perceptions about the pressing issues in the field, and to align content across partner networks to increase the reach and relevance of content created and promoted by DME for Peace.

Through this data collection and analysis, DME for Peace is increasingly moving away from a rigid structure to a fluid mechanism that allows DME for Peace to be responsive to the needs of the community and monitor developments in the field to maintain our widespread relevance.

The types of resources, types of activities, and topics that inspire the most active engagement are noted and used to inform immediate iterative decisions on content and activities, creating rapid feedback loops. Using organic marketing techniques, combined with increased and more consistent social media presence that places a greater emphasis on user experience and engagement, advances DME for Peace’s strategic goals.

With the increased professionalization of the peacebuilding and development fields, the DME for Peace team recognized that as the platform matures, there is a need to reassess future goals and strategies and develop overarching goals for DME for Peace’s trajectory. Drawing on the experience of organizations from different sectors, including nonprofit and private, it became clear that DME for Peace’s success depends on diversification of the services and activities offered by the platform.

The next stage in the community’s development is the establishment of e-learning modules in conjunction with higher education institutions. This will represent a significant step toward achieving



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the goal of establishing M&E as a cornerstone of good practice. DME for Peace will not only host the shared knowledge in M&E, but also begin to shape the ideas that define future M&E practices.

DME for Peace is undergoing a content audit that will allow for a greater understanding of the resources at our disposal and ultimately permit the development of a more comprehensive knowledge repository for peace and development professionals. By understanding our deficits, DME for Peace can better respond to the needs of the M&E community.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?

DME for Peace's adoption of the CLA approach was enabled by a combination of serendipity and design. As a result of the 2015 review, DME for Peace staff were aware of the changes necessary to increase monitoring and rapid responses to lessons from monitoring. In 2016, new staff joined the team, bringing new ideas and increasing capacity to apply an evidence-based decision-making approach to move DME for Peace to the next level, making the visioned changes possible.

In addition to having the necessary resources to successfully implement a CLA approach, new staff had specific skills that facilitated the shift to CLA. Their familiarity with human-centered design and reflective practice proved invaluable to champion this way of operating. DME for Peace's journey to CLA also benefited from new staff with a background in the private sector and new media, both of which strengthened DME for Peace's ability to choose indicators intelligently and respond to changes quickly.

The organizational culture surrounding the project was also integral to implementing CLA. Housed at Search for Common Ground, the project was in a professional environment that actively encouraged innovation and transparency in all projects and offices. The supportive culture provided a safe space to envision a new path full of changed approaches and pursue that path with rigorous attention.

The outcomes have been better than expected, with noted increases in attention and contributions from existing and new audiences of users and partners. Increased engagement with resources, and diversification of voices contributing to content through blogs, webinars, discussions, and partnerships have resulted from greater attention to understanding what is working and why for DME for Peace.

A CLA approach has required an increase in financial resources to cover additional time spent by staff and management. Management has increased from 1–2 hours per week to 8–10 hours per week for the manager to help provide input and work through new ideas and exercises. The flexibility in how DME for Peace uses its resources is pinned to the flexibility of our major donors, who are open to new approaches and have been crucial in making adaptive learning and evidence-based decision making possible.



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We have also been challenged by this approach. CLA requires time, when time is perhaps what we have the least of in our work. It also requires momentum to maintain and to deploy the right resources at the right time. For example, tracking our user experience had shown us that DME for Peace needs to complete wide-sweeping updates to the online platform, and that users crave more interactive opportunities. These technological and programmatic updates need funds. Gathering evidence on the community comes with an imperative to respond in meaningful ways.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

The challenge we faced was increasing user engagement. Data from the 2015 review of DME for Peace demonstrated that although people were using the platform to access and use resources, their wider engagement was minimal.

Through the development of a monthly thematic communications calendar, DME for Peace has established an overarching framework that supports external outreach for the platform. Staff chose themes according to their importance to the field and their overlap with popular peace and development conferences and other events to ensure DME for Peace's presence in the conversation.

Looking at the issue of engagement, we shifted our focus from the facilitation of discussion forums to interactive events, such as webinars, and wider social media channels, and placed a greater emphasis on improving user experience on the website. DME for Peace has begun to employ organic marketing tactics from different sectors, primarily from political communications, to improve user engagement.

These marketing tactics include email testing (subject line and name of sender), which has led to a 6.7 percent increase in user engagement with our biweekly newsletter since January 2016. On social media, DME for Peace tested content and content scheduling, again drawing on marketing information from the private sector. While this information was useful in developing an overall communication strategy, the uniqueness of DME for Peace's audience (practitioners, academics, donors, and activists) required an iterative testing process.

This process also included conducting an audience content analysis, based on the question, "how can we maintain the quality of our content while engaging the 'activist' audience?" As a result, we diversified DME for Peace's blog to engage beginner, intermediate, and advanced audiences.

If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?

DME for Peace's goal was to increase community engagement while maintaining the high-quality content housed and produced on the platform. Using Google Analytics to build on the information



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obtained through the 2015 review, we are able to track user behavior on the website and on the channels that lead to our site. Combined with more consistent use of social media channels and a better understanding of social media content, social media platform user behavior, and social media analytics, we are able to further develop the amount of information available to us as we make decisions about the future of the platform. These analytics are used in conjunction with the data available, from attendance at Thursday Talks (DME for Peace's bi-weekly webinar series), attendance at in-person events, and application numbers for the DME for Peace Mentorship Program.

Since adopting these strategies, the number of sessions on the DME for Peace site from March to June 2016 that were acquired via social media improved by 194.6 percent. In addition to the increased traffic, the open rate of the biweekly newsletter has improved to 22.5 percent (vs. 15.8 percent in the last quarter of 2015), and social media followers increased by between 2.5 percent and 5 percent per month.

What were the most important lessons learned?

Our most important lesson learned was the need for active outreach to increase active engagement. Through testing and experimenting with our large-scale outreach efforts (email, social media, webinars), and through in-depth conversations seeking feedback from partners and members, we gathered evidence on what community users respond to and how essential messaging is to inspire active engagement.

On social media, we discovered the importance of identifying and collaborating with M&E and peacebuilding micro-communities to share information about the latest updates on DME for Peace. The ability to share our posts with external groups expands DME for Peace's reach and has facilitated greater engagement. With regard to content, after significant testing on the different platforms, we discovered that humanization of M&E and the platform, through quotes and live coverage of current events, prompted the greatest engagement. After conducting an audience visibility analysis, we ascertained the most successful times, topics, and frequencies to post; on Facebook, posting between 1 p.m. and 1:30 p.m. Eastern time generated the most engagement, and on Twitter, due to our greater following, posting between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m. Eastern time promoted the greatest engagement.

Feedback from our organizational partners and contributing members reaffirmed the value DME for Peace provides the community, with multiple organizations expressing their appreciation for the platform and providing examples of how individuals and entire departments have regularly shared DME for Peace newsletters, blogs, and event information over the past year. However, this affirmation came with a call to action: Partners appreciated and used DME for Peace, but they need to be prompted through regular communications and invitations to connect. This demonstrates not only the relevance of DME for Peace, but also the continued space for growth into a self-sustaining community.



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Any other critical information you'd like to share?

Governments, institutions, and civil society are leaving behind the idea that violence can only be met with violence to achieve peace. This shift is a huge growth opportunity for the peace and development fields. It also means that, like never before, it is vital to prove that peace and development programming works.

Flexibility, responsiveness, and adaptability to the needs of the community that we support are imperative to the future success of DME for Peace.

DME for Peace has achieved the initial goal of providing a knowledge-sharing resource hub, but it is clear that the platform has the potential to be much more.

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