

Just put it on Zoom!: Effectively Fostering a Virtual Intellectual Community

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Abstract

During a pandemic, the digital communities we create to maintain our social ties, to foster emotional well-being, and to feed our intellectual curiosity may be even further obscured. In this session, we offer our own experiences and invite playful sharing of software tools, events, and organizations that participants use to facilitate the development of their intellectual communities, foster emotional well-being, and maintain social ties. Guided by the principle of playfulness (Huizinga, 2016) we will identify, record, and reflect on our experiences to help us recenter intellectual communities during a socially-distanced reality as well as to rethink the future. In the first session we will curate a list of experiences and resources to be followed by an active, playfully reflexive second session. Attendees can expect to contribute their experiences of digital tools and walk away with resources, tips, experiences to build their own virtual communities online.

Keywords: Virtual community; Zoom; digital tools; strategies

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1 Description

1.1 Purpose and Intended Audience

We designed this event to reach out to any members of the broader iSchools community who are thinking about or engaging in intellectual community-building. Our goal is for participants to contribute to and learn from each other's experiences with community building. We expect that participants will come away from the event with a greater sense of the options available for community-building within their iSchool. We also anticipate collecting the resources discussed in a short report that we will circulate after the event.

1.2 Proposed Activities Including Agenda, Ramp-up (Development), and follow-through

We will host two playful sessions open to any members of the iConference community. In these sessions we will build a playspace for sharing strategies and tools used for fostering intellectual communities online.

The first session will be organized around identifying strategies and digital tools currently used within Information Schools to foster online intellectual communities. We will offer our experiences (some successful, some less successful) with the tools and strategies we have used within our community. We will create space for participants to share their own tools and strategies and then lead a playful activity to engage attendees with these tools and strategies. The aims of this playful exercise are to share knowledge and to elicit energetic discussions focused on innovative and meaningful community-building strategies. Together we will curate a reference list that will inform a later report. We have a short report about our own tools and techniques that we will share with participants and use as a model. We invite participants to contribute to the drafting of the report.

The second session will be devoted to reflecting both collectively and individually on the strategies and tools we curated in the first session, as well as the experience of preparing for and attending a virtual conference. Reflection is an effective practice for developing insights about one's own experiences of the world as well as for facilitating learning in particular (van Manen, 1995). As a community we will reflect on the strategies, tools, and experiences currently in place across Information Schools. We will work towards reimagining future landscapes of digital, intellectual communities. We will encourage participants to reflect and reimagine how these tools can be used within their own communities where appropriate. Of most importance, we will discuss and reflect on the value of invisible labor such as intellectual community building. We will hold space to recognize and appreciate each other's efforts while exploring ways to advocate for greater recognition within academic institutions. Overall, we hope to leverage guided reflection to facilitate new imaginings of our virtually engaged world.

1.3 Relevance to the Conference/Significance to the Field

The forced social distancing of a pandemic like COVID-19 has implications for the day-to-day interactions of academics. With these implications comes opportunities to co-work, co-create, and commiserate during

challenging times. Like many others, we as doctoral students started by offering digital replacements for in-person activities such as writing groups and happy hours. Those digital replacements were a kind of stopgap; a way for us to bring some semblance of normalcy to our community. The work of organizing these digital replacements is a form of service to the academic institution in which we work. It is essential that we recognize this labor of love and help give others tools for recognizing it. Service and community-building work is heavily gendered within academia (Anantachai and Chelsey, 2018, p. 302, footnote 5) and intersects with race and disability status as well. Honoring the labor is one step towards bringing service forward as a key part of academic work.

This pandemic offers a time to think beyond the constraints of in-person intellectual communities. What can we gain by abandoning the things that didn't work well before? How do we use the affordances of the new technologies to be generative rather than exhaustive? How do we commit to ensuring that our virtual communities are inclusive and welcoming?

Playful engagement is a particular kind of engagement where we re-enchant the real world through our negotiated relationships with one another and with the systems we use. Scholars of play and games like Huizinga, Geertz, Juul, and Malaby point out that play is somehow removed from the everyday even as it takes place within it. By stepping into the "magic circle" of the playspace, we step out of our quotidian life and into a realm of shared fantasy. By invoking play, here, we do not suggest that we are simply gamifying the work of building or participating in an intellectual community. We focus more broadly on playfulness as a guiding principle to help us recenter intellectual communities in our socially-distanced lives as academics.

In these two playful sessions, we will explore some of our own practices and those of participants. We will record the practices mentioned to serve as a resource for all participants and any others who were not able to attend.

1.4 References

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1.5 Virtual Technologies

We will primarily be using Zoom. We may also use Google Docs, other web-based resources including a modified tool based on the board game *Codenames* (Chvátíl, 2015), and Slack.

2 Duration

This event is designed for two 90-minute sessions, one week apart. Participants will commit to attending both sessions.

3 Special Requirements

None.