CoLabS: Sustainable Community Development

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The poster presentation will showcase our CFI-funded project, CoLabS, which is a virtual space currently in development that will enhance research collaboration in sustainable community development. CoLabS will be a space for civil society leaders, activists and practitioners working towards sustainability to meet and share knowledge in between face to face meetings. In terms of tools that allow large groups to meet virtually and share information, we find that there is as yet no all-in-one virtual space that can accommodate the needs of ongoing, iterative research collaboration or learning between communities often engaged in the same issues, for example, land-use conflicts and climate change adaptation and mitigation. CoLabS is designed to fill this gap by hosting virtual meetings, messaging, and file sharing on the same webspace as our community resources, library, and wiki. Following testing, we will be available for any community group in Canada to use. CoLabS will contribute to positioning Canada as a leader in virtual online collaboration, co-learning, and leading edge learning technologies, given RRU's expertise in this area.

Sustainable community development and climate action are complex problems that go beyond any one sector or discipline. Sustainable development paths are often reactive and occur on a one-time basis, and are not documented, evaluated, or shared. CoLabS aims to open up access for smaller municipalities who do not have climate plans, and who are often hit harder by climate change damage. If we can facilitate a space for communities to document their efforts and communicate directly with citizens (without transaction costs and delays), we can help civil society leaders to more effectively collaborate.

In terms of the design of the space, we will feature learning technologies, video calling for large (12 or more) and small groups, private and group messaging, a library and file sharing system, a notepad and text editor, as well as online e-Dialogues. Upon signing up (we will be free and web-based), each community or group of communities will make a profile that provides project management features. Each group's information-sharing space is within this private profile, but communities are encouraged to contribute to the public face of CoLabS by way of our wiki, blog, social media, and publically accessible multimedia library. Communities will also contribute feedback by adding a case study.

Our timeline to launch is in two main phases, first in summer 2017 and second in Fall 2017. For our first phase we have a case study community in Ottawa who will use CoLabS to meet virtually around an opposed development plan. From this first phase, we will then reassess which features on CoLabS were most used, which features are redundant, and what needs have not been met. Our second phase is a more open, large-scale case study and gathers together civil society leaders to share action plans for a carbon neutral economy in Victoria, BC, by 2030. From our experience with large scale e-Dialogues, the benefits of meeting virtually include 1) open access to a published transcript of the meeting, 2) real-time engagement on social media (live tweeting), 3) the inclusion of an e-audience (such as students) who can chat and share ideas, in addition to the central discussion by civil society leaders, 4) the immediate sharing and uploading of research to a private collaboratory, 5) faster follow up and increased synergy between face to face meetings, and 6) greatly reduced transaction costs. Prior to and alongside CoLabS, our research team at RRU hosts e-Dialogues as well as peer-to-peer learning exchanges which are successful in creating virtual networks among communities and across multiple intersections of civil society.

We feel that a poster presentation would be the best way to demonstrate our virtual space to fellow researchers who prioritize collaboration and community accessibility. Especially since we are in development and showcasing a demonstrable web space, a poster and live demo would be more suited to our project than a paper or panel discussion. We are looking forward to feedback from the digital humanities community, and to interacting with groups that share our collaborative goals and open-access values. By August 2017, CoLabS will have completed the initial design and it will be an ideal time to demo the space.