**Designing participative and engaging on-line sessions**

Back in April I assembled my first blog from bits and pieces of early experiences, and nuggets of advice from experts on designing and running on-line events. Since then I’ve been knee deep in application, so I thought I’d take a bit of time out to capture more learning and inspiration from the (virtual) road. I’ll build on the core principles I outlined in [my first blog](http://saltire/our-organisation/blogs/Pages/Linda-Stitt-Hunter.aspx) and explore practical techniques and resources that you can use to encourage and bring depth to participant engagement in your sessions. As I said last time, I’m no expert but a keep explorer, so if you’ve got ideas, practice and experience to share I’d love to hear more.

**Deepening into the why - what that means in practice**

The most repeated advice I have received is “take time to build a shared understanding of why you are doing this.” As the COVID-10 crisis has unfolded, the ethic of approaching people’s time as a finite and precious resource has taken hold and become ever more important. It feels important to optimise those rare moments when our availability and potential to act aligns. If you want to think about this more and develop sessions where participation is more than a gimmick, I’d strongly recommend [Chris Corrigan’s work](http://chriscorrigan.com/Chaordic%20stepping%20stones.pdf). Taken seriously, this framework provides prompts to help you contract, plan, shift control across a group and step beyond existing power structures. [Read more](http://www.chriscorrigan.com/parkinglot/) on how Chris draws on these ethics to inform his antiracist and inclusive stance as a facilitator, including work with first nation peoples on decolonisation in Canada. Chris offers a framework and some inspiration but let’s face it, the important work is ours to do.

**Discerning choice of methods**

Once I’ve invested in this kind of ground work, I find it much easier to be discerning in the methods I chose to apply. One thing I often do to get me off the blank sheet of the design process is to use [clean language](https://www.cleanlanguage.co.uk/Clean-Language-Revisited.html) by David Grove. Here’s his process - think about the perfect session, the one you really want to offer people. If it were a thing, what would it be? Chose the first metaphor that comes to mind. I’ve been designing and hosting community of practice sessions lately and the metaphor I’ve found useful is a special dinner with friends. Now you’ve got your metaphor, ask yourself what kind of ‘insert metaphor’ it would be. Then ask that question again. For example I might land on an anniversary dinner and then reflect, ‘what kind of anniversary dinner is it?’ A life, a loss or a partnership? Next ‘where is this dinner party? what’s happening there? what lead up to this event? what happens next?’

Then it’s time to nurture my inner magpie. I collect images, processes, music and ideas for digital spaces that match the metaphor. My favourite places to root around in for inspiration are [Liberating Structures](https://www.google.co.uk/search?sxsrf=ALeKk02OZkauln7Ky-tUfm1-ndEOshe-1g%3A1592566987118&source=hp&ei=y6TsXpPfBI2mUO3UuqAE&q=liberating+structures&oq=liberating+&gs_lcp=CgZwc3ktYWIQARgAMgQIIxAnMgQIIxAnMgQIIxAnMgUIABCxAzICCAAyAggAMgIIADICCAAyAggAMgIIADoFCAAQgwE6CAgAEIMBEJECOgUIABCRAlCFAVjPCWDZHGgAcAB4AIAB4QSIAYUWkgEJMi00LjIuMS4xmAEAoAEBqgEHZ3dzLXdpeg&sclient=psy-ab), [Art of Hosting](https://www.dropbox.com/s/rb3txlx4kxq4vy2/Online%20AoH%20Manual%20CoCreation%20Practices%20for%20Meaningful%20Participatory%20Virtual%20Engagement%20V1.0.pdf?dl=0) and [appreciative inquiry.](http://myhomelife.uws.ac.uk/scotland/resources/) If you’re newer to this I would say start with Liberating Structures and get yourself booked onto a [digital meet up or intro course.](http://www.liberatingstructures.com/news-and-events). There’s an impressive [network of practitioners in Scotland](https://blog.chezleskrus.com/2020/02/08/liberating-structures/) and in Government, so reach out to us.

**3. The difference is material**

So the next trick I’ve learned is to shift my thinking - from digital as a platform that I put things ON, to a toolkit of resources I can weave together and adapt to meet the group’s purpose. This blog about creating [a digital microhabitat](https://fullcirc.com/2018/11/15/moving-offline-liberating-structures-practices-online/) gets it spot on for me. If you’re wondering what I mean by that in practice, it breaks down like this. I write down a list of all the ways people interact with their online environment and design each one with intention. What they will see, what they will hear, the space between them and their tech, the spaces to work together within the tech, the pace and rhythm of the conversation and flow. It’s a must at this stage that you include inclusive design and build an understanding of how people’s assistive tech, access to being on-line and home environment might shape their preferences and experiences.

For example, I think hard about what the first minute of the participant experience will be like. I put up a holding slide with an image of a place that resonates with the tone we’re working to create – a place where that group have done some really good work before, a beautiful open space that exudes wellbeing, a picture of a kitchen sink that signals the ‘between session networking’ so many talk about being missing from on-line. I include verbal and written descriptions of the images so that people who can’t access the image can also experience that sense of immersion. I have a practice of piping birdsong or music alongside the welcome slide and put up prompts to ‘take a stretch, get a drink, sit back and chill’ to help show I see participants as humans that deserve comfort and care. As leading appreciative inquiry experts Gayá Wicks and Reason are quoted as saying, [first steps are fateful](https://research-for-real.co.uk/facilitation-2/). A good start can give you access to people’s grace and goodwill when the work gets trickier.

You can find a basic example of my approach to session design on the [Transformers Yammer](https://www.yammer.com/gov.scot/#/threads/inGroup?type=in_group&feedId=4227106&view=all) page. Here’s also an example of another session I designed using the [whiteboard tool Mural](https://app.mural.co/t/explorationofmural0515/m/explorationofmural0515/1592325170504/bdcd55cac390b1f30e6fd8022465df13b32fd193) – feel free to play about and experiment with it. It’s a test board that you can’t break you can definitely improve upon - I was still in the early stages of making my work more accessible and I’m working on that right now.

**3. Using our system constraints as an asset**

It can be easy to think that there’s too many hurdles to bring participative methods into our ways of working digitally. I felt like that in the early days. Then I got bored and started fiddling. Over the last month I’ve been testing ways to turn the constraints of our systems into enablers for connection. Here’s my run down of ways to work the system to your advantage.

**Myth 1: no video means = no personal connection.** Well that’s not strictly true. Have you ever noticed how much easier it is to tune into a podcast or a person’s story when you’re sitting next to them on a train journey or on a long walk together? Being alongside each other opens possibility and connection in conversation. It takes away the performative element of video conference and can reduce our hyper awareness of how people react to us. The trick is spot the points in your session where deep connection is important and then radically simplify the communication channel you are using around it. Ask people to turn off any distracting tech, pop in earphones, go on mute, actively doodle/note take, stop the chat in chat box and turn off visual aids. You can also give people the option of working in pairs on the phone in a different space from where they have been working. As well as a practical set of actions, these processes can become symbolic for a group. String them together and repeat them in the same order each time you gather, so that they become your new rituals of connection. There are also great collaborative tools on Skype – Skype whiteboard beats Zoom, Webex and Mural for simplicity and functionality. Take time to check out the full functionality of Skype before you call it out short.

**Myth 2: you can’t do break out groups on Skype.** Eh, yeah you can. You just don’t get to be an omnipotent, omnipresent, all summoning Being of Zoom. All you need to do is set up your full group Skype, create a list of your participants and then split the list into groups of three of four. We use the chat box to communicate the groupings our to participants. Ask the person whose name comes first on each mini list to set up a separate skype call with their group. When they’re finished, they simply resume the large group call and voila! There’s a few instructions slides on how to run a breakout on skype in the [Transformers slide deck](https://www.yammer.com/gov.scot/#/threads/inGroup?type=in_group&feedId=4227106&view=all). Feel free to reuse and refine them to meet your needs.

**Myth 3: Slowing down takes time*.*** Well, OK yes it does if you want to get all Daniel Kahneman on me. Yes, I am a strong proponent of slowing down to speed up, but what I’m trying to say is that you don’t always need lots of time to slow things down. As a reminder, people and group process need ebb and over time to do good work. Ideally, you should design sessions so that decision makers can sleep on and test their thinking before committing the group to next steps. This improves decision making and potential for collaboration, but most importantly increased our ability to spot and counteract biases. If that’s all a step too far (and I’d encourage you to really push this if you can) here’s my top tips to bring some slow to fast paced sessions:

**First, do your homework and show your working:** write up and share the key questions and process you will be working on together in advance. I know it’s a pain and more work, but that’s the way it goes. It’s important for accessibility and reduces the amount of cognitive load people need to carry as they navigate the session, deepening the quality and inclusivity of the conversation

**When you’ve 1 minute to spare** and people are starting to flag, invite them to turn off their mic and put their pen down. Turn their chair to face away from their device, have a stretch and then move their focus to the darkest spot in the room, the lightest spot in the room, and finally the furthest point they can see. This process is based in neuro-biology and enables people to reboot their attention when fatigued.

**When you’ve got 2 minutes** build in a 2 min quiet arrival to your session and offer the time back to your participants so they can make themselves comfortable and bring their focus to this session. In my opinion, this is possibly the quietest and kindest disruptive acts in our power as session designers and hosts.

**It can only take three minutes** at the beginning of each chunk of the session to improve it’s impact. Post the question you’re going to work on together and give people 3 minutes of privacy and quiet to write down what it brings up for them. Invite them to underline or circle the parts of their notes they want to bring to the conversation.

**If you can squeeze 10 minutes slots into your design** and people have had a particularly hard schedule that day or the work is tricky, you might want to introduce something more structured, like spiral journaling (see the Transformers session for instructions) to amplify your care and connection for the group.

Alternatively offer people a **10 min task free break**

**If you have some flex and more than 15 min,** try adapting the [conversation café method](http://www.liberatingstructures.com/17-conversation-cafe/), inviting people to each speak together in small groups for a minute in turn without interruption, repeating that cycle but this time for 2 minutes and only then entering into open discussion. This process encourages deep listening, equality and quality of air time and make the most of short time slots. Until you’ve tried this it’s pretty hard to imagine just how much land a group can cover – I’d encourage you to give it a go.

**When we pioneer, we run the risk of appropriation**

As I go about this work it’s struck me how much I owe to the group process specialists, community educators, activist and inclusion movements, digital trail blazers. This got me thinking about how easy it can be to get carried away by pace and opportunity when working in new territory, to be distracted and miss opportunities to acknowledge and represent the people who have taken the photos, developed the process or shared their wisdom. So as a parting shot I’d like to invite you to think and mark that in your work too. To ensure copyright and ownership is acknowledged and to mark the people who broke this ground, whose stories we capture and whose rights we need to respect in our work.