Making Opportunities for Social Connections during an Online Conference

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In summer 2020, mainstream conferences participation is online.

The current global pandemic has led to social distancing. One result of that is that many conferences have been canceled, postponed, or moved online.

In the past, online conferences have been a bit of a fringe activity. An in-person conference may sell web access where people can watch presentations, but in the vast majority of cases, the online component has been secondary to the in-person conference and has tended to be just a video livestream. And webinars are often similarly conducted as just a presentation. What's new about the pandemic is that in summer and fall of 2020, really key conferences and the core participation in those conferences has gone online. For the first time, for many conferences, the speakers and the people with hefty travel budgets are all attending online. And for the first time, conferences that haven't had an online component in the past are now open to people who might not have had the travel budget to attend the same conference in person with hotel and airfare.

Social connections that characterize in-person conferences should be a focus of online conferences, too.

One of the benefits of conference attendance is making people connections: networking, meeting others working in your specialized area within a larger field of people working in related areas, and making chance connections that can lead to interdisciplinary collaborations later. As an Electronic Resources Librarian at St. Mary's, which was my previous job, I had ready access to mentoring within the library when it came to legal research, teaching, or reference activities. When it came to specifically the electronic resources part of the job, I could contact my counterpart in the main library and had some overlap with the Technical Services Librarian, but often, in order to be in touch with people who had worked with similar issues in the specialized area, I had to reach out outside of the organization. Conferences were a uniquely effective way for me to make connections who I could tap later. And those connections are not made during the part of the conference where you sit and watch a presentation. Instead, those connections are made getting to presentations early and mingling, talking to people after a presentation, and making chance connections at coffee breaks, receptions, and during breaks. That really unique value of a conference that you can't get from a video recording—the real time people connections—is often completely unavailable at webinars and online events.

Recently, I worked with the Islandora Foundation's Islandora Coordinating Committee to plan four Islandora Online events. These are online events arranged on short notice in lieu of an in-person conference, Islandora UPEI, which was canceled due to the pandemic. One of the really interesting things about planning is that in getting the logistics together, the committee has tested out various social activities that can be done in an online conference. The meta-level planning of this is that when we've held regularly scheduled meetings, we've done typical conference things like go over topics and schedule. Beyond that, we've then also taken 5 to 10 minutes of each meeting to play a small game to test out how social it is. Since we are meeting online for conference planning, this makes for a series of trial runs for social activities that can be done during a conference. So far, we've played Pictionary and done a group crossword puzzle. For any group involved in planning for an online conference, taking the time and effort to explore and test out online social activities as well as arranging the educational and presentation content is a worthwhile goal. Online social activities allow exploration of making social connections in an academic online conference. In planning the events, time has been split between substantive content (presentations), logistics of managing an online event, and social events. That's a similar breakdown of time to planning an in-person conference, with planning for each area. The key thing is that social connection is a focus, and emphasis on social connection can map to an online conference, even though a recep-

tion or coffee break doesn't map well to online. Having the social events as a focus increases the chance that the entire culture of conferences can shift to allow meaningful chance connections in an online environment.

For anyone involved in taking an in-person conference into an online format, the time spent planning for social connections is well worthwhile. If online events could lead to the same chance connections as in-person events, there is tremendous potential for a long-term shift toward more equal chances for career development. It may be possible to work toward a future where time and attention is the limiting factor, but networking is not pay to play in the same way that in-person conference attendance is with hefty airfare and hotel fees.

My hope is that anyone else involved in planning an online event would actively focus on the logistics of making social connections and try to very intentionally make space in an online conference for the social activities and chance meetings that characterize in-person conferences. Then, when something works well, share it out. Post it to the AALL groups, share it out to listservs, and share it out to others who you know are involved in conference planning.

We are in a moment in time when all social activity is online. If we can find ways to connect socially, beyond the educational aspect of conferences, it can help to open up participation so that online attendees get a truly full experience and can change how connections are made long term.

Sample activities that you can plan into an online conference.

Here are some possible social activities to try online in a conference (Instructions are adapted from online social activities planned out by Melissa Anez with the Islandora Foundation):

Crossword Puzzle
2 moderators; teams of 5 to 10 people each.
Recommended time: 10 to 15 minutes.

Moderator 1 starts a crossword puzzle from https://www.washingtonpost.com/crossword-puzzles/daily. Moderator 1 clicks the "Play Together" icon and shares the link with Moderator 2. Both moderators are going to type. Moderator 1 screenshares to the group. Participants can see Moderator 1's screen on the screensharing software.

Moderator 1 and Moderator 2 are in their own web browsers looking at the crossword puzzle. Moderator 1 (who is screensharing) is going to type the across words, and Moderator 2 is going to type the down words. The audience is looking at the screensharing software and is told to say "32 down," "15 across," etc., and then the word. The audience calls out number-direction-word/phrase, and moderators fill in words until the puzzle is done.

The entire puzzle won't show on the screen at the same time, so Moderator 1 should periodically scroll to new areas of the puzzle and new clues. Once guesses/answers from the audience start to slow, the moderator can scroll up or down to a new section of the puzzle to keep it moving.

Pictionary
One moderator. Recommended 8 – 14 players (allow 2 minutes per round, so 6 rounds would make a 12-minute game; a game can end without everyone having to draw).
Recommended time: 10 to 15 minutes.

Divide the group into teams. Turns alternate between teams. (Recommend to split by alphabetical username displayed in the screensharing software, so that each person can quickly know which team they are on.)

The moderator goes to https://www.thegamegal.com/word-generator and generates a word. The moderator gives the word to the participant in private chat.

The participant can either use Microsoft Paint, GIMP on Linux, or built in whiteboard in the screensharing software. (Conference planners should make sure the moderator has instructions on how to share a whiteboard in the screensharing software.)

The moderator starts a 1:00 minute timer when the player is ready and shares their screen. As they draw, teammates use voice chat to make guesses. A point is scored if anyone correctly guesses the word/term.

Gameplay concludes when each team has taken an equal number of turns (someone has to go twice if numbers are not even).

Tips:

It's important to give the word to the participant *before* they share their screen, as they may lose access to the chat once they are sharing. The moderator should get verbal confirmation that the participant has their word before starting the round.

The moderator should remind each team who its members are at the start of each round ("Guessing this round: Jeff, Rosie, Danny, David, and Martha") because it can be hard to keep track in a virtual format.

If moderating, using a phone for a timer and a pen and paper to keep score is easier than trying to do these on the same computer where the game is running because with the phone timer, you don't have to click away from screensharing.

Boggle
One moderator; group of 4 or 5.
Recommended time: 5 to 15 minutes.

Moderator pulls up a smaller puzzle at https://www.puzzle-words.com/boggle-4x4/. Moderator shares screen.

Participants call out answers, and moderator clicks through them.

Karaoke
Two moderators; group of up to 25.
Longer session; 1 hour.

Moderator 1 takes request, and locates karaoke videos on YouTube. (Moderator 1 should also be aware of the end time and song length and stop taking requests when time will not allow participants to sing.) Moderator 2 screenshares. When it's a participant's turn, Moderator 1 sends the song to Moderator 2. Then Moderator 2 plays the videos while the participant (or group) sings.