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Humanizing Online Meetings

By Mary Raygoza, Raina J. León, Aaminah Norris, Chris Junsay (Saint Mary's College of California), and Cliff Lee (Mills College)

When the shelter in place began in the San Francisco Bay Area, Drs. Raygoza, León, and Norris co-authored [Humanizing Online Teaching](#). In a similar spirit, we offer this document, Humanizing Online Meetings. As we joined more and more online meetings and heard stories of other folk's online meeting experiences over the last couple months, we reflected on the art of facilitating meetings, and particularly the humanizing practices we have sought to establish in our Single Subject Teacher Education program meetings at Saint Mary's College of California. We offer the ideas below- which are also applicable for in-person meetings- but may be especially helpful in this time to honor all colleagues' humanity. If you have additional ideas or feedback, please email Mary Raygoza at mcr13@stmarys-ca.edu.

Building and Maintaining Beloved Community

- ★ Take time to establish norms for being present, mindful, and safe with one another. You may bring a set of norms to the meetings and/or co-create norms. Some examples of norms (*Adapted from Saint Mary's College of California Single Subject Teacher Education program norms and [East Bay Meditation Center Agreements for Multicultural Interactions](#)*):
 - Keep your mind, hands, and heart where your feet are. Allow yourself to be **present**.*
 - **Being present while working at home, especially being in a care-taking role, can look different than under usual circumstances; allow space and time for anyone to attend to what they need to in the moment as normal, not a distraction. **Normalize care-taking; it is not a distraction.** Those we care for can surprise us in how they inspire our compassion and innovation.*
 - We (do our best to) **start on time** and **end on time**.
 - Demand of yourself **openness of mind and heart**.
 - Practice **mindful listening**.
 - **Make space, take space**. Be aware of the air time you take up. Challenge yourself to speak more if your tendency is to not speak up much.
 - **One mic**. Try not to interrupt, and if you do, apologize. Mute your mic when not talking.
 - At the same time, you have a **right to pass**. Only share what you are comfortable sharing.
 - As you share, **speak to your experiences** (e.g. personal/familial/educational); don't assume universal narratives or experiences or speak for someone else.
 - Use **personal pronouns** and **gender-conscious language**. One way to support this is through using the "Rename" function to use the name and pronouns that you would like others to use.
 - Understand the difference between **intent and impact**. Try to understand and acknowledge the impact.
 - **Be comfortable with being uncomfortable**. Take opportunities to engage in critical self-reflection to understand why you engage and respond as you do. Consider power dynamics and positionalities and whether and how you should engage in discussions.
 - **Refrain from blaming or shaming** self and others.
- ★ Engage everyone in a "temperature check" or icebreaker at the beginning of every meeting. It is harder to tell how colleagues are doing when you are in a virtual space, so this can help to get a read of the virtual room. It can also help participants to feel more comfortable. You may get creative and come up with a check-in prompt that both allows colleagues to share how they are and is related to your meeting content. Doing this does *not* "take away" time from meetings; it allows people to build community with

one another, trust one another, and feel comfortable. It is not a waste of time. When we know and care about each other as the whole human beings we are, we are way less likely to have hostile meeting environments. *We have found that consciously including joy or gratitude practices can also help to energize and focus the group and that consciously allowing space to ask for help can support a swell of community support and collaboration.* Some general examples of temperature checks:

- What is one joyful practice that is energizing you (as a professional or human in the world)?
 - A high and a low
 - A rose and a thorn
 - Represent your week in an emoji or hashtag
 - Share how you are doing in the form of a weather pattern or forecast
 - Fist to five (fist being a ranking of zero, up to all five fingers) on how you are doing and explain why
 - *In particular to honor how the pandemic is affecting people:*
 - What is on your mind most in this time?
 - What support do you need, and do you have what you need to get it?
 - A care practice you've engaged in that you haven't shared with anyone else yet
 - What is something or who is someone bringing you joy and hope in this time?
 - Identify a [basic human need](#) you have, and how you are already fulfilling it or can fulfill it
- ★ Consider starting your meeting with a short Mindfulness practice if you have been trained to lead one or utilize any number of guided mindfulness tools online. Just because you are online does not mean you can't do things like mindfulness practices to center the meeting.
- [Liberate Meditation app for People of Color](#)
 - [East Bay Meditation Center's Dharma audio recordings](#)
 - [UCLA's Guided Meditations](#)
 - Short mindfulness practice ideas: Mindful breathing, walking, or eating; Body-Scan; Loving-Kindness; Visualizations; Use of stories
- ★ You may also invite announcements or celebrations at the beginning of the meeting- these are things we usually share with each other in person as we walk into a meeting, so it can be good to make intentional space for them. You might even use a tech tool like <https://pinup.com/> to asynchronously post affirmations, announcements, or celebrations before or after the meeting for a set time.
- ★ Considering how many Zoom meetings that one might have in the day, it also might be beneficial to incorporate a break with a specific physical activity. State this explicitly at the beginning. Examples might be:
- During this break, you can take care of biological needs.
 - You can also go to the fridge (or your bookshelves) and bring back one item to, with no explanation, represent what you are most thinking about these days.
 - Go to your front door or open a window and actively listen to the sounds of the street. What do you observe? What sounds had you been ignoring only to now re-hear them as if for the first time? Post in the chat before we start again.
 - While on this five minute break, if you have a Smart phone, track how many steps you can accumulate by walking in your house. Post in the chat the number and what surprised you about suddenly becoming aware of movement and yours specifically in your house.
- ★ Take time for colleagues to share appreciations with one another at the end of the meeting, for anything big or small, related to the meeting or not. Again, this helps in fostering community when you are not in person.
- ★ Ask participants to all use the video to help to maintain human connection. In an online environment, we may still connect through body language and eye contact, though limited. However, communicate that because of connectivity issues, care-taking responsibilities, etc. it is ok to have the video off, too, without

explanation/justification. You may want to establish community norms around what is acceptable to have/use in the virtual space. We would suggest discussing shared safety standards.

- Is it ok, for example, to be driving (and be hands-free) while having a meeting?
- Is it ok to have an alcoholic beverage on screen during a meeting (that is not a shared happy hour)?
- ★ Remind participants to use the “mute” feature when they are not talking. This will help ensure that every speaker is heard clearly.

Be Prepared

- ★ Prior to the meeting, develop and share an agenda in a google doc that people can follow along
 - You may wish to invite colleagues to add to it or comment on it prior to the meeting
 - Ask participants to have the agenda open while you are meeting; this can be helpful over screen sharing so participants can arrange their screens to still see one another
 - Include times on the agenda so the meeting will flow well and everyone has a sense of the scope of what needs to get done
 - Incorporate a designated process checker and/or time keeper to ensure that all voices are heard and that the flow of the agenda continues as scheduled
- ★ Note what must be done in the context of a meeting, what preparation should be done beforehand, and what mutually agreed upon tasks can be completed after the meeting is done. It can be useful to circulate the agenda to all participants ahead of time to receive and process feedback and to make sure that the priorities for the group’s work will be addressed.

Foster Equitable Participation

- ★ Have rotating group roles. Some adults react to this with- “Really, for adults?! We had roles in elementary school!” If you have been to any meetings with adults and think about how they go down, they tend to not go very well if you’re not intentional about how you engage with one another. Give it a try. Some examples are:
 - Facilitator- moves the group through the agenda
 - Note-taker- the primary notetaker in the google doc
 - Equity manager- pays particular attention to how everyone is making and taking space and intervenes to invite voices
 - Harmonizer - if there is a disagreement of ideas, this person jumps in to acknowledge it, welcome voices, and propose a way forward
 - Time checker- keeps an eye on the clock and raises if an agenda item should be wrapped up or if agenda times should be modified
 - Process checker- reflects on how the group did in relation to the norms set, at the end of the meeting
 - You might have other roles, too: the DJ to offer an empowering song during a 5 minute break; the Visionary to strategically ask participants to pause and engage in radical imagination practices together; the Affirmer who provides an inspiration text at the beginning of the meeting and or leads by example at the end of the meeting to offer affirmations of what was learned in the meeting and who led that learning process; etc.
- ★ For topics where everyone should get space to be heard:
 - Do whole group go-arounds; doing this is better than leaving a topic open because the same voices jump in and take over conversation
 - Participants can say the name of the next person to go, to tag them in

- The raise hand feature is helpful too; someone in the role of equity manager can have the job of tracking the order of raised hands
- ★ Utilize chat box, polls, and google forms/docs for collaboration
 - For example, have everyone chat in a response to a question and invite everyone to read the chat box; this is a quick way to scan collective contributions
 - For longer writing, have everyone respond in a google form or doc and all can access one another's thoughts
 - You can also just invite everyone to type directly into the meeting notes next to their name or initials
 - After people share their ideas via writing or poll, ask things like: "What do you notice?," "What is something someone else wrote that resonated with you?," "What has seeing the responses made you wonder?" These questions intentionally invite participants to engage with one another's ideas as opposed to just focusing on thinking about and speaking about their own ideas.
 - When you incorporate writing or collaborative tasks, make sure to include time to think and then to write. You might even consider incorporating time for small breakouts so that meeting members to share with one another some ideas, which may generate other innovations. This acknowledges that there are different learning and communication styles present in the group
- ★ Utilize breakout rooms for small group discussions; this allows for people to have more time sharing and creating
 - Be sure to be clear before breaking out: 1) how much time the groups have, 2) what the goal of the time together is, and 3) what the group needs to come back to the main session to share.
 - Also, make sure to note that it is ok for the group to have wrangled with a question and return with, not answers, but more questions. This, too, helps with ideation and collaboration. We need each other to grow.
 - If you are using the breakout feature, plan for this ahead of time. Be aware of how many "rooms" or groups you will need and which participants will be in each room. If you decide to manually assign rooms, give your participants a bio break if it is a large group.
- ★ Be aware of power differentials
 - This means making more intentional space for those on the margins and/or those most impacted by what is being discussed to share their experiences and ideas, to center them
 - This may also mean sometimes inviting anonymous feedback on ideas so folks feel safe to contribute
 - Sometimes this means inviting folks to a meeting space who usually are not even invited in the room
 - Remember that emotional safety is a form of safety. Ensure that you foster emotional safety as a facilitator. If someone is taking up too much space be sure to address this. You can do so by reminding everyone of the group agreements and redirecting if the conversation goes off topic before it devolves.
- ★ When selecting meeting times, prioritize the available times of those with care-taking roles, and consider not making meetings longer than 90 minutes as it is challenging to look at a screen and stay engaged online for longer than that

Finally: We've all seen the saying, "I survived another meeting that could have been an email." So, don't meet if you don't *need* to. Prioritize essential meetings in this time. So many people are dealing with a lot of life right now. That said, be mindful of unilaterally canceling a meeting, particularly if you are the leader of that group. Sometimes leaders need our own time to

process; that is authentic and valid; the group may still need to meet. As leaders, sometimes the best leadership we can give is through delegating and knowing when to step back for the good of the group and the self. Remember you cannot give what you do not have; when we work together, whether in person or through asynchronous support, depending on our needs, **we can be restored to give more abundantly and joyously.** When we meet: **make the time with another count! Make it meaningful, driven by purpose, and honor one another's humanity.**