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Virtual programming during COVID

What we wished we had known in advance

The University of Wyoming (UW) Libraries received two grants to provide African American poetry programming in the spring and summer of 2020, one from the Library of America's Lift Every Voice project[1] and one from the Wyoming Humanities Council Spark Grant. As part of the grants, the library partnered with Albany County Public Library and the Laramie High School to create a slate of programs celebrating African American poetry and music that would appeal to all generations. The initial programming was intended to be a series of month-long face-to-face events with a balance of programming types: lectures, poetry readings, poetry slams, children's programming, and panel discussions. The fact that multiple people worked together to plan the programming enriched the series and was extremely helpful when we realized that we would have to pivot to a virtual program series because of the coronavirus pandemic. This article will discuss how we turned a face-to-face program series into remote programming in a very short timeframe.

Planning and collaborations

From the start, the planning committee collaborated with campus professors to provide panel discussions, coordinated a poetry slam (a competition of original poetry) with the UW Black Studies Center, and recruited readers to read poems during a poetry café event. In addition to the programs using local presenters, the university library hosted two external presenters—Timothy Ashew, recommended by UW's chief diversity officer, and regional poet Camille Dungy. Because the committee members used their connections with different segments of the university and the local community to create a larger network of partners, we also had a wealth of skillsets to rely on, from programming to marketing to technical skills.

Flexibility was essential in pivoting to remote programming as many things had to be adapted as COVID-19 kept throwing monkey wrenches into our plans. For example, although the university had created a safe plan for a small group of students, staff, and faculty to return to campus, an outbreak of COVID-19 cases sent the university into a five-day pause, which was then extended to an eight-day pause. Some of our collaborators had to juggle COVID-19 restrictions as well. Despite these kinds of kinks in our scheduling, we were able to provide our community an entertaining and educational experience.

Events

Café of Poetry Readings

The event that required the most advance planning was the Café of Poetry Readings, a salon showcasing the history of African American poetry and music.[2] The face-to-face event would

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have required selecting music and poems, writing a script that integrated the history and culture with the music and poems, and sending out a call for poetry readers. Turning the café into virtual programming meant scheduling and recording all the performances as well as video post-production.

Originally, we created a shared Excel file available only to the internal university community for scheduling and poem selection. This master spreadsheet was used to track readers and the poems they selected, to provide links to the text of the poems, to schedule recordings, and to note progress towards the completion of the recording of each poem. We color-coded each poem on the spreadsheet to keep track of the various stages towards completion—yellow for poems that were chosen, orange for poems that had readers scheduled, blue for poems that had been recorded. In hindsight, we should have used a Google document so that all members of the community could have accessed the file of poems for selection.

The café project required a lot of emails as we communicated with people about their participation in this project. For the most part, we did not have many scheduling problems. However, we had an instance where we had two readers scheduled to read the same poem because the emails were not copied to all people involved, and the master spreadsheet was not updated properly. We even had people cancel when they tested positive for COVID-19 (and were appreciative that they did).

For the background music, we partnered with the local high school jazz choir to perform four songs to supplement the event. When the program became a virtual event, there were copyright issues to resolve as none of the music chosen was in the public domain. We worked with publishers and composers to obtain permission to share performances on Facebook.

We used a green screen when recording, so we reminded all readers not to wear green to avoid the "talking head without a body" problem. Audacity, Adobe Premiere and Photoshop, Handbrake (to compress the video), One Drive, Editors Manifesto, and VidGrid were used as production tools. Since we displayed the text of the poems on the screen, we did not insert captioning for those portions of the video to avoid screen clutter.

Youth Poetry Slam

The poetry slam was a partnership between the university library and the university's Black Studies Center and involved middle school, high school, and college students sharing poems they had written. For the participants under the age of 18, parental release forms were required, and we had to obtain signed video recording release forms from all attendees. We created a signup sheet that contained the rules and required paperwork. As there was such an age range of participants, we made it a rule that the poems had to be PG-13 in terms of content and that no hateful, racist, or homophobic language would be permitted. Poems had to be under three minutes in length and we created an online voting survey to judge the poems. After we had people test the online sign-up sheet, we clarified it so it made more sense to external viewers and made sure that people off campus could access it easily. We prepared to mute poets if their poems contained material that was

Promotional poster for the Lift Every Voice program.

against the guidelines. Ultimately, muting was not necessary. In hindsight, we should have sent all registered participants the Zoom link in advance to make it easier for them to join the slam session. Amazon gift cards were given as prizes.

It was hard to line up a moderator for the poetry slam. Due to COVID-19, many professors needed to focus on shifting their courses to an online format, thus they were unable to moderate as they already felt overextended. Additionally, student groups scaled back their programming so one group bowed out of a commitment to facilitate the slam. This event had the most disappointing turnout. We should have worked more with local secondary school English teachers and college professors to recruit students to participate.

Poetry Sucks Panel

This program was envisioned as a fun yet educational response to those who think poetry is hard to read and hard to understand. Three professors and one graduate student served on the panel. One of these professors, the director of the Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research, served as the moderator of the event. Before the event, we set up a Zoom meeting in advance with all panel members to review intended questions so that panelists could prepare thoughtful answers. The advance discussion helped the panelists prepare and get to know each other so that the program had a more relaxed and warm tone. We were very grateful that we installed strict social distancing protocols when recording the panel discussion, as one of the panelists later learned of a positive COVID-19 test, but no one else got it due to the precautions that were taken.

Accessibility

While using Zoom exclusively to serve as the main platform to deliver the Youth Poetry Slam and Poetry Sucks Panel programs, we determined that in order to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, we needed to provide closed captioning. Zoom has a closed caption option. Zoom hosts can type in the captions while a presenter is speaking, but it is not user friendly as the captions are not produced by any kind of short-hand system used by many who do live closed captioning. The Zoom system also does not have any kind of machine-based, voice-recognition/translation capabilities. The providers of Zoom could improve this portion of their product, especially in light of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our subtitlers preferred the Typewell platform because it allows them to use shorthand in real time so they can transcribe the presentation more quickly. We provided a link in the chat box to the Typewell platform to direct people to the closed captioning.

At first, we tried using UW's special Webinar Zoom license. The Webinar license acts in Zoom like a class lecture. Participants cannot ask questions of the speaker in real-time, rather they can ask questions via the Zoom Chat feature. The license for the Webinar setup is very limited, so we had to reserve the license and have it assigned to us during the window in which the speaker was presenting. We could not practice with the license in advance. We also found that we could not give the captioner the right permissions with the Webinar Zoom license. Additionally, the first speaker video would not display which was problematic. After the first program, due to the complications caused by the limitations of the license, we decided to use the regular Large Meeting Zoom licenses over which we had more granular levels of control.

Publicity

We created QR codes to provide easy access to the Zoom links on the publicity poster for the events. The marketing coordinator from the university library administration designed and spearheaded the program publicity. We created a special website so that all Zoom links were consolidated in one place and posted this on the library website. This proved very helpful when we needed to change details such as Zoom links.

We obtained permission from the speakers to coordinate with the Wyoming Public Media for advance interviews. When we offered to the Wyoming Public Media (WPM) the opportu-

nity to do advance phone interviews with the two external presenters, we were careful not to copy the email to the presenters in case the interviews fell through. In the end, WPM was able to successfully interview one of our participants, Camille Dungy.

What we learned

Allow ample time for post-production to ensure the best quality of the final project. Expect changes in your timeline. For example, file sizes for videos tend to be large, so making simple last-minute changes (like correcting typos or adding a video clip) requires the entire project to be rendered, which can add dozens of unexpected hours of downtime to your schedule. Adding captions to your video is time-consuming. VidGrid is useful for adding captions, but last-minute edits can easily misalign the text, so adding captions should be your final step. Lastly, creative decisions can increase the time requirement, too. In our case, instead of filming the poetry readers for the café program in front of a static blank wall, the staff decided to use a green screen background and create unique graphics using Photoshop with text and hundreds of curated images. This choice took considerable extra time, but it appreciably improved the quality of the program.

Another small, but very important lesson involved paper. Poems printed on white paper caused glare against the green screen for those wearing glasses, so we began printing the poems on yellow, cream, or tan paper. The use of a high-quality microphone is also important. We inserted images to make the narration more visually interesting and to provide a more dynamic flow to the program.

It was convenient to have the information technology librarian as part of the planning committee. At the last minute we had to revise the landing webpage for the Café of Poetry Readings with the Zoom links when we discovered that people outside of the university domain wouldn't be able to see the Zoom presentation. We were able to alter the library website to direct off-domain viewers to the Facebook version. Zoom also froze during one of the presentations. It choked about 12 minutes into the session while it was drawing from

VidGrid, which was the only way we could get the subtitles to display.

Since two members of the planning committee members had left UW by the time we began to produce the Café of Poetry Readings video, we used Google Drive and YouTube to share rough drafts. Despite the production issues of coordinating an event with so many moving parts, this program turned into a resource that we will be able to use long after the program series is over. For example, the UW Black Studies Center requested sharing this program on their website.

Conclusion

Even with vaccines rolling out across the country, we cannot be sure how much longer universities will be under COVID-19 restrictions or what those restrictions will look like. Despite restrictions, universities must continue moving forward in serving their students and communities. Our sudden flip of a major programming series from face-to-face to virtual is one example of how the UW Libraries are doing this by attempting to provide access to a diverse aspect of American culture and history.

Attendance at our poetry series was down, compared to previous library programs. We attributed this to Zoom fatigue and the fact that many students, faculty, staff, and community members were just beginning to get their footing with COVID-19 restrictions and practices which, in and of itself, can be overwhelming. The programs, which were virtual and often recorded, will provide future access to individuals who seek it. Further, we can also choose to host aspects of the series again as a repeat program. We learned important lessons during this series: be creative, stay flexible, communicate well, and to pay attention to detail. Ultimately, we learned that, as a team, we can accomplish what seems impossible.

Notes

1. See https://www.africanamericanpoetry.org/about and https://www.loa.org/news-and-views/1664-49-organizations-in-24-states-receive-grants-under-loas-_lift-every-voice_-initiative.

2. A recording of the Café of Poetry Readings program is available at https://uwdigital.uwyo.edu/object/wyu357955. ⅋