

Allie Ai, Anna Grallert, Laura Graveline, and Sarah Smith

# The gift of compassion

## A Listening Forum at Dartmouth College Library

Tools like Zoom and Slack helped to facilitate regular work during the self-quarantine period of the pandemic. However, stress was increasing among staff. The informal, everyday interactions among colleagues was missing, including the stress relief those informal interactions provided. A small group of Dartmouth College Library staff were inspired to explore a different avenue to help staff deal with stress and offered a Listening Forum. The goal was to actively listen to each speaker, not to respond with ideas, suggestions, or other forms of dialogue. It proved to be a special gift for participants.

At the start of the pandemic, during the winter term finals period in March 2020, the college sent its students home, and proceeded to implement remote learning for the following spring term. In the Dartmouth College Library, a core group of staff volunteered to work in person to maintain document delivery and other services as much and as safely as possible. Meanwhile, the majority of staff in the library and across the college began to work remotely.

The speed of this transition from working together in person to working remotely from home was shocking. Library staff tried to adjust to new working situations while caring for loved ones and their own physical and emotional wellbeing. As spring turned to summer, increasing stress was felt across the library staff. The lack of informal contact and conversation was a factor, taking a toll on the morale of many staff members.

The library implemented a Slack channel for staff, including departmental discussions and channels for more general discussions, a place for staff to have informal dialogue. Laura Graveline, Dartmouth's visual arts librarian, shared an honest and thoughtful response to what was happening in the world and how it was affecting her work and her family. Allie Ai, part of the library's web development team, was moved by what Graveline shared and inspired to suggest that a Listening Forum could be a way for people to connect. Ai had experienced the healing power of listening while studying psychology at Salem State University. She took a cross-cultural counseling class with Mary Ni, professor at Boston University, and what she experienced in that class helped to inform how to structure the Listening Forum. The concept was surprisingly unfamiliar, as the goal is compassionate listening not dialogue. This is the opposite of most committees, working groups and outreach efforts, where conversation and

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dialogue are the desired engagement. Ai reached out to Anna Grallert, Baker Berry, access services student supervisor; Sarah Smith, book arts workshop manager; and Graveline to help develop and organize a compassionate Listening Forum for the library staff.

The group had some reservations. The staff at that time had close to 200 members with diverse backgrounds and opinions. There were concerns that it might be difficult for people to accept all viewpoints and feelings that could be shared. Smith suggested we contact Cynthia Monroe from the Institute of Writing and Rhetoric on campus. Monroe had experience running a compassionate listening project in her home state of Alaska. It was extremely helpful to hear about her experience as we developed some ground rules for the forum.

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## Listening Forum Ground Rules

This is an open Listening Forum for anyone in the library to take a few minutes to speak about how the changes in our work and our world are affecting us.

This is not a therapeutic forum, or a problem-solving session, or a discussion group. Just a chance and space for all of us to take a few moments to check in with each other and to share what we are dealing with, without judgment.

A few ground rules for the start of the forum:

- We are asking everyone to practice intentional listening with each speaker.
- Just listen, without verbal response.
- We will not be using the chat feature of Zoom, so we can all focus on listening.
- We ask everyone to respect the privacy of each speaker.
- During the forum, we will offer different prompts.
- Speakers will have up to five minutes to share.
- We will call on people, if needed.
- You may choose not to speak and to listen only.

We are going to use the roses, thorns, and buds model for this first forum. We would like to spend the first 15 minutes on roses, if anyone would like to share some aspect of their work at this time that they consider a rose: an unexpected win, a success, a silver lining.

For this second 15-minute round, please share any aspects of these past few months that have been the most challenging for you.

For this last 15-minute round, if anyone would like to share any buds: things that keep you going, things you are looking forward to, things you would like to explore.

*Wrap up: Does anyone have any comments on this forum or suggestions for this kind of Listening Forum going forward? You can also email us with comments and suggestions.*

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Our first forum was held in August of 2020. We attached the ground rules to the email invitation and reviewed the rules at the start of every meeting. We decided to take turns facilitating the forum, using the roses, buds, and thorns model that Graveline had seen employed to great effect at an academic department meeting. This model provides prompts for participants to share, asking first for any roses they encountered working in this new quarantine model, then moving onto thorns, and ending with buds, anything hopeful that participants wanted to share.

As one of us facilitated the discussion, another kept track of the time. We had worried that not everyone might have a chance to speak, but this turned out to be a nonissue. Some staff shared good and bad things about working from home, while others shared wider concerns about the pandemic and their families. It was heartening to hear our colleagues express the same fears and sometimes the same joys as we all adjusted to this new world.

The hardest part was encouraging participants to just listen. Many people wanted to verbally express support or suggest solutions. Perhaps some of those who shared also wanted that kind of dialogue. As we held more forums, we could see that the act of listening and compassionate acceptance of what was shared without comment was a struggle for some.

At the start, our forums had more than 30 participants, but over time, there was a core group of about ten who attended regularly. We did vary the time to work with different schedules, and it was gratifying to have staff who are often silent in other meetings feel comfortable sharing their experience. We offered our last forum during summer 2021. In the fall we transitioned back to a full in-person work setting and the Listening Forum was allowed to quietly fade.

We sent out a questionnaire to staff in December 2021, to see if there was a desire to schedule more Listening Forums. The response was small, only seven staff replied, but their comments were moving.

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## **Share How (Or If) the Listening Forum Was Useful To You**

*I liked hearing others' concerns and joys.*

*I think it was good to hear how other people are dealing with life and know I'm not the only one feeling a certain way.*

*I thought it was a great opportunity to share and listen, and the format worked really well--allowing for sharing/listening and support but not too much back-and-forth. It felt healthy and respectful.*

*It helped foster the skill of listening with full attention.*

*Allows the ability to share thoughts and concerns with no concerns that it is being repeated.*

*I found it cathartic. I felt it created a sense of togetherness.*

*It helped me feel more connected to my colleagues and less lonely during the isolation of the pandemic.*

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Overall, the forum was a success. We did have one incident, where someone had shared thoughts about their work and that was repeated by another participant outside of the forum. That was addressed with the individuals and at the start of the next forum the ground rules were reinforced, along with the knowledge that if privacy was not respected, the forum would not be held again. As we held more forums with the same core group attending, it did become more difficult for participants not to respond, so we adapted and tried to keep the

majority of the forum for compassionate listening, with ten minutes at the end for informal conversation. In some ways, this signaled that there was less need for the Listening Forum, especially as we were about to transition back to an in-person work setting.

As summer 2021 wound down, we held our last Listening Forum in August. Most staff would be returning to full or partial in-person work for the start of our fall term. The return to a full schedule of in-person classes and services, conducted with some precautions in place to minimize the transmission of COVID-19, presented new challenges. While many departments continued to conduct Zoom meetings, staff had more opportunity to consult and connect with colleagues in person. Interest in having a Listening Forum during the fall was minimal. It is possible that the informal contact and conversation that in-person work enabled eliminated some of the need to share individual news and struggles. The small response to the feedback survey also indicated that staff no longer felt a need for a group Listening Forum. However, the comments indicated how vital it is to provide staff with time and space to be heard, especially in this situation where so many staff were isolated from colleagues.

The opportunity the Listening Forum presented to work at actively listening was an enlightening experience. Individually, it allows one to stop multitasking, stop thinking of a response and jumping ahead of the speaker. It also offered a rare gift to speakers, to be fully heard. This is a different kind of acknowledgement, of acceptance, that is not often found in our daily interactions and conversation. The Listening Forum provided a valuable lesson about the gift of compassion to all who participated. In our current cultural climate, hearing and listening to each other's perspective and experience, especially when they are different or opposite, often feels impossible. A Listening Forum could be helpful to promote and build more inclusive communities based on learning from each other's experiences. ✍