

Performing community: an online tea break as a radical act

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The challenge

Solent Learning and Teaching Institute (SLTI) occupies the top floor of Solent University Library; a suite of offices and a kitchen filled with houseplants and sunlight. Responsible for guiding and supporting all online, face-to-face, and blended learning and teaching activities of the university, the Institute is comprised of four teams: Learning and Teaching, Instructional Design, the Learning Technologies advisors, and the systems developers. Working practices, environment, and dispositions have conspired over time to coalesce individual trips to the kitchen into a communal tea break. This informal gathering around 10am each day allowed members of disparate teams that did not work together day by day to get to know each other better, making it easier for them to collaborate effectively on projects such as curriculum development, problem solve any issues lecturers might be having, and share concerns about students. Productivity also benefitted, in that if there were non-work-related news/photos/ideas they wanted to share, they would 'save it for the tea break'.

Despite the value of the morning tea break, recognised in business – as in our own experience – as essential for networking, reduced stress levels, and relationship development (Sharma, 2020), my manager confronted me with figures of working hours lost over a week, suggesting it 'didn't look good'. What did not look good to me was an L&T space without a community. How could we talk to our staff and students about belonging and co-creation when we did not do it ourselves?

Team A tends to work closely with Team B and Team C, Team D works only with Team B, and other configurations are rare, meaning those people were unlikely to see each other

formally; interactions tend to be more ad hoc. In the physical space, this sufficed. Anything that brings people together and maintains them in dynamic relation can be termed 'social glue' (Churchill, 2010), and the morning tea break acted as that glue. The move to lockdown disrupted that relation and we required an alternative means of keeping the group together: alternative glue. Without the ability to pass by an office door or a help desk, a team's relations can come unstuck, not through deliberate neglect, but rather a gentle fading away from lack of use. It is the casual conversation that drives workplace culture, supported by 'informal awareness' (Neustaedter, 2020) – knowing what people are up to, how they are, what their mood is, and therefore whether they are available, approachable, or likely to need support in turn.

The response

When we were sent home in March 2020, without knowing when we would be back, we left a social hub that had become an important means for keeping in touch with a wider reach into the rest of the university community. Our solution was an online tea break. A 30-minute meeting invitation titled 'Daily Catch-up' sent to everyone in SLTI gave them the option to join a 10am meeting online (at first in Zoom, and then later in Teams).

More intentional than a casual drift into the kitchen, this online tea break attempted to recreate its physical equivalent by being marked out for informal conversation – the social glue that would keep us functioning together, even when apart. And unlike other meetings, which are characterised by start and end times, agendas and speakers, this one was entirely voluntary, open-ended, free-wheeling, and flexible. Sometimes it started at 10am, sometimes at 10:20am, or, not at all. Sometimes it lasted a few minutes, enough for two people to check in with each other; sometimes it lasted hours, the three or four people present choosing to work alone together in a simulation of the office environment. It carried no obligation to attend, only the opportunity to see a different face. It became the open door passed in the corridor. The lack of certainty over who would be there each day, if anyone, lent a temporary air that marked it out from the burden of other online meetings. Freedom to ignore the meeting counterbalanced the new online demands we faced.

It also represented freedom of another kind. For a shared, regular, semi-formalised tea break is a radical act in a performative environment. My manager's concerns derived from a focus on measurable outputs (Olssen and Peters, 2007), and a devaluing of 'nonmonetary values' (del Cerro Santamaria, 2019 p.1), i.e., those values centred on community, collaboration, and connection, which the tea break embraced and strengthened. As he could not measure the benefit of the conversations quantitatively, he assumed there were no benefits. The neoliberal university similarly confronts its staff as 'units of resource whose performance and productivity must constantly be audited so that it can be enhanced' (Shore and Wright, 1999, cited in Ball, 2012, p.18), an attitude that cannot help but impact upon our social relations (Ball, 2012). By taking time out for conversation that might be professionally useful but was not designed that way, we held onto the humanity that allows us to relate better to the people we support.

Recommendations

Although a timetabled meeting lacks the spontaneity of a casual encounter in the corridor or the convenience of a question called across the office, the online tea break nevertheless gave space for casual conversation and connection. Importantly, it also signified the importance of that space and protected it, in amongst the pressures we faced during an uncertain period. This ethos has spread into our working practices, with 'checking-in' at the start of meetings becoming a regular feature and a more task-based approach to the day replacing the traditional time-based one. So successfully has our team culture evolved, the tea break is no longer required.

Ultimately, taking the opportunity to spend casual, informal time with colleagues is not about increasing productivity or networking. It is about social relations within the wider community, seeing the humanity in others, and being seen in return.

Recommendations for your own online tea break:

- Give space to the informal.
- Remember good working relationships take time to build – so give that time.
- Keep these meetings optional. Nobody likes enforced fun.

References

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