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# Performing communi-tea

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## *Presentation abstract*

The morning tea break performs several useful and evidence-based functions, in providing a space for networking and exchanging information, for building relationships, and for reducing stress. However, in a higher education context predicated on outputs and performance, the time spent in talking to colleagues over a cuppa is often considered a wasteful indulgence, and even harder to organise meaningfully with our post-Covid hybrid patterns of working. In an audit culture, how can the qualitative value of social relations be recognised, cultivated and strengthened, so that we might all benefit from the productivity that inevitably follows?

## Questions:

1.    How do we make space in our week to get to know each other as people?
2.    What are the best methods for developing and maintaining a collaborative workplace community for hybrid workers?
3.    Is coffee ever an acceptable substitute for tea?

## *Community Response*

> *Question 3 should be: Is tea ever an acceptable substitute for coffee!*
>
> *In response to the previous contributor – I agree – coffee every time! :)*
>
> *I think ALDinHE should lobby for a compulsory tea time in all institutions!*

This session highlighted an important consideration about the value of informal chats in the workplace as a way to enhance relationships and wellbeing, and encouraging collaborative working. As the author suggested, this is something that often goes under the

radar but it is actually an important part of work life, so it was great to have a discussion. This was a wonderful opportunity to pause and reflect on why stopping for an informal break over a cuppa/coffee is in my opinion so vital.

During the pandemic, I actually really enjoyed working from home in almost every way – I was more productive, had a better work life balance and could easily access tea just a few short steps away from my desk! The only thing I really missed was those serendipitous conversations with colleagues which I found impossible to have online. These moments allow us to connect with the people we work alongside, beyond our projects and to do lists. So many ideas and collaborative projects have come out of an initial lightbulb moment over a cuppa - its power should not be underestimated! I think its importance has been emphasised though Covid-19 where we have lost this face-to-face activity. In a wider sense, I have really missed the informal discussions with colleagues; as a learning developer I find I often ask colleagues for their viewpoint and that has been harder with Covid.

I think it is also important to acknowledge that the same can be said for students too. It is no coincidence that the Returning to Learning programme, which my colleague Helen Briscoe has developed to support students who have had a break in their learning, is always well stocked with refreshments! Asking students to open up, share concerns, look for advice is always easier over an informal cup of tea (coffee for Helen) and some biscuits.

As individuals and communities move towards more hybrid ways of interacting in the workplace than was the case before the Covid-19 pandemic, a variety of physical and virtual spaces are increasingly being explored and used in combination for their different affordances. Navigating these spaces is both challenging and exciting. For example, our team have frequent informal chats in the office, but also a regular scheduled time off-campus immediately prior to our CoP (Academic Skills Advisors only) (approx. every 6 weeks). We meet for breakfast/coffee and a catch up before the official CoP meeting takes place. The opportunity to meet off-campus has been a positive experience, and with new team members starting recently, has also been invaluable in building those relationships outside of a formalised work setting. During Covid we established a whole-team online coffee morning every week on a Wednesday at 11am, and again this was a very informal

drop-in. This has fallen by the wayside with the return to more office-based working; however, it was a bright spot in the middle of the week when we all felt removed from our colleagues, and missing regular interactions. Whether online or offline, these informal chats have continued to nurture positive working relationships, and many inspired ideas, projects or ways of approaching challenges have developed out of these settings, rather than formal work-based meetings.

One point I would like to make is that for me, it is an informal, organic process as opposed to something that should/needs to be formalised. The discussion helped me to realise that formalising these interactions does not often work well and can feel quite artificial.

I am lucky to work in an institution where informal chatting over tea (or more likely coffee!) is not only recognised as important, but actively encouraged. It was discouraging to hear about barriers preventing this in some workplaces. With a seemingly ever-growing focus on wellbeing in the workplace, allowing time for a tea and chat seems like an easy win. I was surprised at how many other LDs in the discussion did not have similar experiences at their institutions. I wonder whether this is reflective of the culture of institutions. I work in a relatively small, campus-based university, known for its strong sense of community. Having taken part in this discussion, I do feel that the values of my institution are reflected in my team's ability to build relationships and network informally, knowing that our managers see the value in these exchanges and ultimately encourage them.

## *Author's reflections*

I enjoyed opening this topic up for conversation, mainly because it is one of those areas of working life that go relatively under the radar, but which can nevertheless carry significance for an individual's experience of that working life. As such, I was really pleased to see every chair taken on each iteration, and also that the conversation each time was so different, as this means different things to different people.

These conversations certainly opened up my own thinking about the subject. I see that I have noted words like sense-making, serendipity and developing trust, which must be understood within both formal and informal contexts, the subtext carried within those, and

the institutional culture that shapes it all. Ultimately, I think my conclusion was that these moments outside of formal work, yet still within a work context are a way – amongst many other ways – of extending our own expertise through connections with others, and that therefore allow us to leverage the expertise of those others. Why not do that over a cuppa?

One delegate suggested – possibly half-joking – that we need to do a workshop called The Art of Taking a Break. Whether she was joking or not, I intend to get in touch with her and follow this up. Never has it felt more necessary or more welcome!

## Acknowledgments

## Author details

**Carina Buckley** is currently Instructional Design Manager at Solent University, responsible for the on-going development of the VLE as a student-centred, active and inclusive learning space. Her research interests broadly connect to collaboration and community, and have evolved recently to explore ideas around leadership and professional identity. She serves as the Treasurer for ALDinHE and also sits on the steering group for the International Consortium of Academic Language and Learning Developers (ICALLD). Following a PhD in Archaeology in 2006, she has since added Advance HE Principal Fellow and Certified Leading Practitioner in Learning Development to her post-nominals.