

Angie Cox and Jaycie Vos

Virtual staff teas

Connecting and growing

With the quick shift to remote work in spring 2020 due to COVID-19, we experienced a lot of change in a short period of time that disrupted many aspects of our lives, including our working way of life. To adapt to the unexpected shift, we quickly repositioned our service models at the University of Northern Iowa Rod Library to 100% online or asynchronous. We found creative ways to increase access to our physical collections while upping the marketing of our online resources. We put our patrons' needs before our own.

Once we got settled into our new COVID-19 normal, a need arose to connect more. We no longer saw our co-workers face-to-face when we were used to passing them in the hallway, waving across the open study spaces, or chatting while in line at the library coffee shop. We were forced to engage online in Zoom spaces, and only at scheduled times. Overwhelmingly in meetings, people mentioned that they missed people the most—those informal interactions that served as a way to touch base about a project, check in about the health of a loved one, or share a personal story. To meet that need, we needed to be intentional. Thus, the informal virtual staff tea was born.

Why it started

Many staff at our library have a particular affinity for tea, so the first virtual staff tea was suggested, and it took off from there. Colleagues were invited to grab a tea or other favorite beverage and join an online Zoom session, without any agenda other than to check in with one another. Because the first tea was well-received, staff requested additional teas as a time to connect, and we began to schedule them every two weeks through late spring and into summer of 2020. Attendance was optional, and the group tended to range in size between 15 and 25 people or about 33 to 50% of our organization. Each hour-long virtual staff tea had a different theme, but all were geared towards the positive aspects of life we were experiencing. Some topics included: showcasing pets at home; book, television show, and movie recommendations; outdoor activities we enjoy; new hobbies or activities we started during the pandemic; and moments of gratitude.

Initially, the teas were structured with a facilitator who kept the conversation going and allowed for everyone to speak who wanted to. Themes were an opportunity to provide a prompt and serve as an icebreaker for individuals to speak more comfortably within the

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group. Every individual had an opportunity to speak but could decline if they chose to do so. Individuals generally spoke to the tea theme but also included a life (work or home) update. Those updates ranged from discovering new ways to style one's hair due to the pandemic shutdown to news of loved ones passing away. In a span of any given virtual staff tea, the conversation ebbed and flowed between lighthearted anecdotes to more difficult life updates.

The beauty of these virtual staff teas was that they created a space—a community—where people felt comfortable. People shared hard, sometimes very personal, information so easily and so early on. In this newly created community, people responded to the shared difficult life experiences with empathy to the extent that this new shared vulnerability was embraced, validated, and encouraged. The level of vulnerability people demonstrated was unexpected. The teas served a greater purpose than originally anticipated. This joint understanding and a renewed sense of care for each other spilled over into our everyday work. We had an increased understanding of where people were coming from or perhaps recognizing that some underlying factors unrelated to our work (e.g., loss of income, loss of loved one, loneliness) may be impacting one's ability to focus in a meeting, respond promptly to an email request, or even fully participate in an online meeting.

How we kept it going

As we headed into the fall semester of 2020, remote learning and working persisted for most of our colleagues. With so many people still working in physical isolation, the library needed a way to help staff feel connected. Library leadership recognized the popularity and benefit of the teas as a way to connect, both to offer something fun and relaxing during a stressful period and to make time for colleagues to check in, vent, and see a friendly face when things felt particularly hard. Because of these benefits, library leadership asked the Organizational Development Committee (ODC) to formalize these teas for the academic year.

Beginning in October 2020, ODC began coordinating monthly virtual staff teas over Zoom. These were optional, and staff could join as they wished. The committee members took turns hosting and setting a theme or an activity each month. In some months the themes centered around seasonal events, such as a Thanksgiving-themed tea in November where staff took turns sharing a favorite dish or holiday tradition. In other months, we embraced staff interests or talents, such as a “craft(y) tea” in January, hosted by one of our colleagues who is a talented knitter. Others included a “lunch and learn” lightning round for staff to share recent professional development training they had attended, and a gratitude tea where we created Jamboards with notes of thanks to student employees and library colleagues.

Even as the teas evolved to include more learning opportunities and specific activities, there was always room for lighthearted and casual conversations, as well as time for colleagues to share how they were doing, including open acknowledgment of rough days and space to vent about challenges during the pandemic. This time together continued to help staff better understand one another and build trust as we shared and learned from each other.

Keeping the teas relatively informal was beneficial as it kept staff from feeling like they were obligated to attend yet another meeting. Colleagues could join late or leave early as needed, as it was simply a time to check in with colleagues and learn in a social capacity. It was meaningful to have these monthly teas supported by library leadership, since they were a bit of a departure from regular library work. Recognizing these relatively informal, social

Zoom meetings as a worthwhile use of time demonstrated to library staff that collegial, interpersonal relationships were valued and supported. It was a small way for library leadership to recognize the staff as people with the need for social connection, an opportunity to build trust, and lighthearted, low-stress, unstructured time.

As of June 2021, the monthly virtual staff teas paused for the summer. Campus reopened and most staff returned to work in person full time in the fall semester, but the need to provide a virtual, informal space to connect remained. While we have not continued monthly teas in the same format, ODC continued offering virtual attendance options during social staff events, such as welcome hours for new colleagues, and a special virtual Thanksgiving tea that replaced our traditional in-person Thanksgiving staff meal. While the future of these teas in their existing format moving forward are unclear, there are still some useful lessons that we want to take with us moving forward, whether our colleagues work remotely or in person:

- We appreciate the opportunity to talk to our colleagues about things big and small, work-related and personal.
- This time has allowed us to build trust in one another on a more personal level.
- It is meaningful and encouraging to have the values of care and togetherness demonstrated and supported by library leaders.
- It's okay to take a little break to interact with colleagues. We are humans in addition to library employees, and there are things outside of work that we think about, need to deal with, and want to share with our colleagues.

Why it matters

Reflecting back on work before COVID-19, we realize we felt a mix of things that could prevent us from making time for social interactions at work. In some cases, we avoided casual conversations with co-workers because we worried that we would be perceived as not working, or we felt guilty for talking about personal topics at work. In other cases, we felt too busy to make time for nonwork conversations with co-workers because our to-do lists seemed more important. When we get back to the grind in a post-COVID-19 world, whether we are working in person or remotely, activities such as these teas may seem irrelevant or unnecessary, and the need for them may be minimized, as a result. But living through the pandemic underscored the importance of community, which we now realize we took for granted.

If there is one thing we have learned from COVID-19, it is that our connections are essential. We should actively work to nurture them because they benefit us, as library staff and more broadly as people. We hope that, both personally and organizationally, we remember the significance of these social connections and we continue to make time and space for these interactions to take place in the workplace. Virtual staff teas provided opportunities for us to foster interpersonal relationships, build trust through both lighthearted and difficult conversations, and grow as an organizational community. Libraries have the opportunity to not only allow but support their staff in making space for these interactions and to recognize their potential to enrich their organizational culture and to honor staff as whole people with concerns, needs, and a desire to connect and share beyond simply work. 🦋