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Cohorts Building Community

Fostering Connection in Virtual Cohorts

Research can be a lonely endeavor; yet it is a requirement for many academic librarian jobs. Additionally, some librarians in positions where it isn't required are also interested, but not all library schools prepare librarians to engage in research.[1,2] As such, on-the-job training and mentorship can be effective strategies for gaining research experience. Without help, librarian researchers may feel they need to conduct projects based solely on institutional need or use only the methodology with which they feel most confident. They may also allow imposter syndrome and a lack of confidence prevent them from beginning a project. Conducting research doesn't only require training and top-down guidance; researchers also benefit from engaging in a community of peers.

A peer community is important to help a potential researcher to better understand how to investigate an area of inquiry. While it may sound simple, creating a genuine community requires intentionality and a willingness to belong. As technology has advanced, one would think that the COVID-19 pandemic would have made us experts in building virtual communities. However, people's desire and willingness to build and meaningfully participate in a virtual community greatly varies.

Librarians have written about creating virtual communities and cohorts. However, many of these virtual communities were created after the members had met in-person at least one time, perhaps at institutes and conferences, before meeting virtually to continue their work.[3,4,5] During the pandemic, there was an increase in articles discussing remote work and maintaining a team in a virtual environment.[6,7] Building virtual spaces for librarians to collaborate continues to be important, and this article discusses a fully virtual cohort from across the United States that built a community.

Institute for Research Design in Librarianship

The Institute for Research Design in Librarianship (IRDL) is a program that helps build knowledge and confidence of librarian-researchers.[8] The IRDL co-directors and advisory board select the members of the cohort for this year-long research program and provide support based on applicants' research proposals. IRDL began in 2014 and until 2019 had a two-week in-person workshop followed by virtual check-ins. However, in 2022, IRDL moved to a completely virtual format. The virtual program maintained a highly structured and interactive two-week virtual workshop followed by monthly check-ins where IRDL scholars would report on their research progress. Being a part of the first online-only

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cohort, we had wondered how we would build a community among people we'd never met in person. Both of us emerged from the program with skills to help build the community of scholars—by scheduling meetings, participating in chats, and reaching out. We didn't do this alone, by any means! Our entire cohort built our community, and our experiences can be beneficial to anyone participating in a virtual-only group.

IRDL 2022 Cohort Virtual Community

As we were accepted scholars in a formal program, our cohort had mentors, co-directors, and faculty. However, the scholars needed an informal space to process or "be in the muck" together, and the IRDL co-directors encouraged us to connect with each other. The IRDL co-directors encouraged connection, but the program didn't steer participants toward any particular structure. This created opportunities for peer-to-peer support and eliminated any official power dynamics of the program. Even though members of the cohort had various levels of experience with research and time within libraries, by virtue of being a member of the cohort, we were equal.[9]

As a cohort, we established multiple informal ways to connect, from email to Zoom to Slack. When creating informal spaces, we found it helpful to allow for both synchronous and asynchronous connections. Synchronous space can replicate in-person meet-ups like hangouts or lunch breaks and provide space for aloud thinking or brainstorming. However, this requires everyone to be available at the same time, which is difficult even before you consider the spread of four time zones. Our cohort internally decided to meet synchronously and organized monthly Zoom support times, with the availability based on the organizers' schedules, that were separate from IRDL director-run meetings where individuals provided updates on their IRDL projects. This drop-in synchronous time allowed for people to join when possible, but also did not shame anyone who was unable to attend. An hour-long session created space for individuals to check in, ask questions, provide point-of-need assistance, share concerns, and support each other.

Our main asynchronous communication was via a Slack workspace. Slack is a communication tool often used by teams and has the elements for creating an ideal online community such as a private and safe space, ease of access, advanced search functionality, frequent activity without overwhelming users—since users select frequency of notifications—and independent of social media.[10] Within Slack, we created various channels such as "Traveling Scholars," "General," "Research Talk," and "Project Input." These channels allowed for individuals to opt-in to content they were interested in as well as to engage with fun channels in addition to more professional channels. Fun channels such as "Traveling Scholars" were used to connect individuals who were traveling to professional conferences or considering a conference, and "General" was used for everything from research memes to scholarship opportunities. We used a free version of Slack's platform, so posts and files shared that were older than 90 days were hidden. Slack aligns very well with needs identified in a previous survey of IRDL Scholars: it provides a private, easy-to-access space where participants can share and connect.[11] We've used Slack to ask for help testing research instruments, sharing calls for participation, commiserating about hiccups in the research process, and sharing our successes. Slack's functionality to use GIFs and reaction icons has made it easy and less overwhelming to provide support to each other.

Recommendations for Those Engaging in Virtual Communities

Make connections: Yes, this sounds like the old phrase "just network." Connecting in a virtual community could be as simple as reading an email or Slack post, reacting to a Slack post, sharing a meme, asking a question, or attending a Zoom call. These connections don't need to be daunting or frightening, they can include reaching out to an individual or a smaller group for feedback or sending an article that you think might interest them or relate to their research. Even if you are doing different research than the people you are interacting with, everyone can enjoy a cute pet picture, and you have the similarity of being in the same field. You can uplift another person by reading their article. However, to connect, you must participate in some capacity at some time. It's usually not as awkward as one may fear.

Make a safe space to be your authentic self: We were fortunate that IRDL was set up as a safe space, and we recognized that we were novices learning and growing. Creating a sense of psychological safety where people can share without the worry of their questions and responses being shared widely enabled us to bring our authentic selves into our community. During the Summer Research Workshop, we discussed topics such as the ways that structures sideline minoritized voices and the way having an entirely online session could level the playing field for neurodivergent individuals. Raising these issues in the main sessions opened the door for us to hold expectations of acceptance and encouragement of each other, and this translated well to our later online spaces.

To create an online community that is both supportive and encouraging, members of the community should not be worried about information being shared outside of the group without consent nor shamed by lack of knowledge or progress on their research. Additionally, setting the expectation to be helpful, supporting, encouraging, and uplifting creates a clear guideline for the community in all virtual spaces. Fortunately, every IRDL scholar has met these expectations. Our theory on why there have been no unfortunate incidents is that we know each other personally through the interactions and various group presentations during the two-week virtual workshop and the professional elements of the IRDL space. Everyone in the community should feel empowered to explore new options and opportunities. By creating and maintaining a space that is safe for everyone to be their authentic selves, everyone's experience is enriched, and no one needs a persona.

Consistency matters: Creating a habit takes time, and it is easy to discard or forget irregular meeting times. Slack was available 24/7. However, for Zoom calls, consistency was very important, from having the same Zoom link and password, a predictable meeting pattern, and sending email and Slack reminders. Our virtual community met monthly with predominantly one individual handling the logistics of these calls. Instead of trying to find a good time for everyone, which would be overwhelming, the organizer just picked the second Thursday of the month at noon as our meeting time. When this didn't work for everyone, another member organized a second session for those who were unable to attend the regular meeting.

Be a good human: After making connections, maintain them. You may find it helpful to check in on individuals within the group. Don't forget that the organizers are people too. It never hurts to ensure the organizer isn't being overwhelmed and can continue in their role. As a member of a cohort, you can control some variables. However, one variable that you might not be able to control is others' personalities and how the personalities mesh. Everyone doesn't need to be best friends. However, it is important to have general comparable

expectations of the community, such as helping one another and uplifting each other. As members of IRDL 2022, we were fortunate that Marie Kennedy and Kris Brancolini did a great job in the selection process, and there were several scholars in our cohort with overlapping interests, both personal and professional.

Think about the size of the group: Writing Accountability Groups discuss how having smaller groups (4–6 participants) ensures that everyone shows up.[11] However, there are many different types of research methods, and it can be helpful to have a larger group (20–30 participants) to increase the pool of knowledge and support. This size group allows for there to be lurkers, individuals to come and go, and someone to be available. Additionally, a larger size keeps the group afloat when the realities of life happen from overloaded workdays and major life events. Our cohort had many experiences—including welcoming children into their families, changing jobs, getting sick, moving, adding caregiving responsibilities, and the like. We are not robots, and our cohort was understanding of one another's personal lives and the impact on our capacity to participate. Think about how long your virtual community might last—is it created for a reason, a season, or a lifetime? The size of the community will be impacted by its purpose and the members' life happenings.

Conclusion

Just like all communities, members of virtual cohorts need to be intentional to create opportunities to connect with one another. As members of the 2022 IRDL program, we found it rewarding to continue these connections after the Summer Research Workshop and plan to keep in touch beyond our year as scholars. The success of our virtual community has been due to intentionality and dedication, and we are excited to see how our group functions in the future. ✎

Notes

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11. Kimberly A. Skarupski and Kharma C. Fourcher, "Writing Accountability Groups (WAGs): A Tool to Help Junior Faculty Members Build Sustainable Writing Habits," *The Journal of Faculty Development* 32, no. 3 (September 2018): 47–54.

Acknowledgments