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Checking in with Our Colleagues

Exploring Speed Dating to Enhance Library Staff Interactions

I've always been interested in work culture research, and in my role as subject liaison to the psychology, sociology, and anthropology departments at the University of California-Irvine, I've had many research consultations focusing on happiness, professional development opportunities, positive work environments, and the measures that allow such a culture to grow. Whether the research is focused on environmental and organizational structures or from a social psychologist lens, the theme of improving workplace dynamics is ubiquitous. Establishing constructive partnerships,[1] increasing diversity in groups,[2] and mixing introverts and extroverts all tend to have positive effects.

Making friends as an adult can be hard, but creating a friendly environment among colleagues at work can be a more manageable goal. At times, this could be as easy as knowing a simple fact about someone from a previous conversation. This fact can open up new discussions or lend to new collaborations. Little facts like whether your colleague is a runner, has an adorable puppy, or likes to camp or vacation in Hawaii are all inroads to talking about different topics that might help your next program run smoother, align your passion projects, or build momentum for a burgeoning idea.

For many in our society, the last 15 years, and the last few in particular, have been an epic struggle. Anne Helen Petersen, in the article "The Librarians Are Not Okay," explained it well, noting that we "just worked through a pandemic, and an ongoing reckoning with systemic racism, and a contested election, and an insurrection, and several climate catastrophes."[3] To add fuel to the fire, library workers have absorbed job duties from missing employees, waiting and hoping additional staff will be hired. In the meantime, we're expected to take on these added responsibilities with complacency. All this to say, we likely don't have capacity to reach out or offer ourselves for budding friendship as we may have in years past.

Finding an avenue to build up community, even for an hour, is incredibly undervalued by our institutions. Having the opportunity to set up events to engage outside our silos is healthy and helps improve interpersonal communications. There is something to be said about unsupervised socializing that just doesn't happen enough in workplaces, including libraries. Let's fix that.

Last fall I heard about an event (that sadly was canceled due to double-booking) where a cohort of researchers were going to set up an Academic Speed Dating event. Their goal was to pair two researchers. The first would talk for three minutes about their current research or passion project, followed by three minutes of discussion. Then the next academic in the

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pair took a turn. When each researcher had spoken, one researcher in the pair moved on to talk with the next person in the queue.

This sounded like an amazing alternative to lightning talks, and my curiosity was sparked. Although I hadn't heard of this academic version, I was immediately brought back to my one gutsy evening trying out classic speed dating in the early aughts. As harrowing as I remember that night being, I almost immediately started thinking about ways to implement the professional version in my academic library.

Developing the Plan

The overarching goal of speed dating is to take a chance in a controlled environment to meet another person within a short interval, quickly move onto the next person, and by the end of the event, having made several short introductions, be armed with sufficient information to determine who among those met are best matched. The concept of speed dating was applied first in the late 1990s by Rabbi Yaacov Deyo for young singles in a Los Angeles Jewish community for the purpose of romantic dating.[4,5] Since then, this social engagement concept has been transformed to fit into a variety of settings, even academia.

The Diversity Team in our library was struggling to find events without reverting to another talk or webinar. I suggested we create a type of socializing event based on the speed dating concept that would break our library employees out of their silos and help them get to know each other outside of a Zoom window square.

It wasn't going to be easy, so of course, I tried to find examples of academic speed dating, speed networking, and research speed dating.[6] I was not too surprised to see variations used in classrooms[7] for peer-review activities or as an informal icebreaker. After a short review of Google results, I had myself convinced I could pull this off in the library setting as well.

I decided we needed an introductory phase of icebreakers for those in attendance to create a fun-filled event where library workers could get to know their colleagues better. Earlier in the year I had participated in a leadership program for women in technology. In one orientation session led by a theater professor, we were introduced to icebreaker concepts to warm us up. One exercise split us into portions of the room by how we identify, such as where we grew up or our place in a family structure. Then each group was asked to come up with three things their members had in common in 90 seconds. This activity was the perfect introduction to get the crowd talking.

For the main speed dating part of my program, I pulled together a set of questions to give the attendees ready-made prompts about a range of interesting, yet not-too-personal concepts (see appendix below). Now I had a plan for the event.

Sadly, I started this review and planning as a party of one, until a willing soul from the Diversity Team offered to work with me on the event. The new team member reviewed the draft proposal and gave administrative advice.

The approval process from our administration only took a day of waiting, from ask to budgeting. The request and event happened in the summer session when there were fewer students on campus, which helped with administrative approval. An encouraging comment from administration—"This sounds like a fun community-building event."—was a wonderful kick starter!

I quickly edited the proposal into a public announcement, including the all-important "lunch will be provided" factor, and sent out the call for RSVPs to all library employees. A few excited

notes came back almost instantly from colleagues (known and not yet known) about their interest in the event. The first week, 10 responses on the RSVP lunch formed the initial group.

Next, reminder emails went out to encourage the attendance goal of 20–25 participants. These actions were repeated up until it was necessary to place our lunch order. Two participants had an unforeseen change of plans and were unable to make the event after all, leaving us with a total of 20 participants, including the master of ceremonies.

Putting It into Practice

The day of the event went smoothly. My co-lead took on the tasks of lunch ordering and reimbursement and asked another participating colleague to help pick up the lunches. We had extra snacks and drinks available from a prior Diversity Team program as well.

The icebreaker ended up being a wonderful space in the program, and the timing allowed a few of the late arrivals to easily join in with the activity in progress. First, we divided up the participants into groups in quadrants of the room based on where they had grown up: (1) Southern California, (2) the rest of California and Western states, (3) other US regions, and (4) international. The international section was empty, and the Southern California section was quite filled. Each group was asked to come up with three things they had in common in roughly 90 seconds. Next, we shuffled into new groups by (1) eldest child, (2) youngest child, (3) middle child, and (4) only child. The only child section was empty, and the majority of participants were split between the oldest and youngest of the families, leaving two in the middle child section. Throughout this part, the room was alive and happening, with the buzz of socializing.

Next on the agenda, we asked the entire group to sit at a long table, and we ran over the rules of the game. First, pair up with the person seated across from you, find a prompt you want to ask or answer, and take 2–3 minutes. Then the other person takes a turn. This timing left each round of library speed dating about six minutes long. By the end, each person was able to meet eight employees in their speed dating experience!

The entire event took one and half hours, including lunch, which was held after the speed dating program.

Learning in Place

In my desire to run an event like this, I overlooked a few key measures. First, the noise was incredible! While people were talking and engaging and being awkward, they also had to deal with noise from the pairs next to them as well. And they had to talk loud enough over the next conversation so they could be heard across the table. Were this event to happen again, I would add many additional tables to spread out the participants and minimize the feeling and need to talk over each other.

After the program, reviewing research on academic speed dating, I found that another academic and community speed dating event[8] paid special attention beforehand to the spacing and lighting of the room—something better learned ahead of time! It certainly always pays to do your research, said the librarian to herself. The speed-dating nature in this article was proposed to create a matching game to bring together a community leader and a researcher whose goals addressed the local needs of the community-based participatory research.

Second, during my event, I rang a bell halfway through the allotted time to make sure the pairs had equal time to speak. However, after the first few rounds it was noticeably not

needed to make sure both individuals were sharing. Instead, it just startled the participants mid-conversation, so I quickly retired the warning bell and just rang the bell at the end, signifying it was time for the next round.

Lastly, people changed seats the same way they would during a traditional speed dating situation: One side of the table moves, while the other remains seated. In a traditional setting, this works because participants often only need to meet half the room. For example, women may be attending to meet men, not other women. Once the unneeded misogynistic oversight was pointed out, we decided to mix up the final round, when we asked those sitting next to each other to turn to talk to each other. A different rotation solution should be explored for future events.

Next Steps

Although we only had one event, it felt like it had great momentum, and we wanted to capture whether the attendees felt the same. We sent out a simple Google Form survey with the following questions:

- Did the event meet your expectations based on the invite?
- Would you attend a similar event in the future?
- Would you recommend to colleagues a future event like this?
- Do you have any suggestions for improvements?
- Comments!

With a 50% response rate on the survey, we received 100% affirmation that the event met the expectations set out on the invitation and that the participants would recommend a future event to colleagues.

Responses noted the noise problem discussed in the improvements section and offered new ideas on how to rotate individuals from different buildings or departments, event locations, and inevitably lunch options. Overall, the comments received expressed a general sense of thanks for organizing this type of event. One individual shared, "I was initially unsure about participating in this event (I'm shy and don't like talking about myself), but I ended up having a lot of fun and am really glad I went!" Herein lies the goal achieved: to initiate a program that puts our interpersonal strengths on edge, and in doing so, helps individuals ultimately win and grow.

Now that we've shown that this type of event can be used in the library setting to improve interpersonal communication and increase employee engagement, please convince the administrators in your library that this is worth the time and small expense. Speed dating in the library environment can be implemented in a variety of ways, some more academic than others—explore, enjoy, and experience the joy of getting to know your neighbors. ✏

Appendix. Question Prompts for the Participants

1. What fictional world or place would you like to visit?
2. If you were a wrestler, what would be your entrance theme song?
3. If you could have a superpower, what would it be and why?
4. If you could hang out with any cartoon character, who would you choose and why?
5. What is one hobby you've always wanted to try?

6. If you could live in any historical period, which one would you choose?
7. What did you want to be when you grew up?
8. What movie have you seen recently that you would recommend and why?
9. What professional passion project are you working on recently?
10. If money and time were no object, what would you be doing right now?
11. What is your favorite vacation destination or dream vacation destination?
12. What's the best advice you've ever heard or wish you'd heard sooner?
13. Do you have a favorite charity you wish more people knew about?
14. What two things do you consider yourself to be very good at?
15. Have you ever experienced a natural disaster?
16. Name a cartoon character, a color, a car, and a cuisine that best describes your personality and explain why.

Notes

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3. Anne Helen Petersen, "The Librarians Are Not Okay," Culture Study, May 1, 2022, https://annehelen.substack.com/p/the-librarians-are-not-okay.

4. Olav Muurlink and Cristina Poyatos Matas, "From Romance to Rocket Science: Speed Dating in Higher Education," *Higher Education Research & Development* 30, no. 6 (2011): 751–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2010.539597.

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6. Mindel van de Laar, "Research Speed Dating: Breaking the Ice to Build Capacity & Networks," UNU-MERIT, March 21, 2019, https://www.merit.unu.edu/research-speed-dating-breaking-the-ice-to-build-capacity-networks/.

7. "Speed Dating," ablconnect, 2015, https://ablconnect.harvard.edu/speed-dating-description.

8. Melanie T. Tucker et al., "Community-Based Participatory Research–Speed Dating," *Health Promotion Practice* 17, no. 6 (October 13, 2016): 775–80, https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839916673612.