Virtually Viral Hangouts: Reflections on the role of community during crisis

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I reflect on two key aspects of my membership in the online community known as Virtually Viral Hangouts (VVH). First, I reflect on how membership in this group helped me professionally, providing important, in-time instruction as I learned to make the switch from in-person to remote learning in the early days of Covid-19. Next, I reflect on how membership in this group helped me personally, as I struggled to find my identity as a teacher through a computer screen. I conclude by reflecting upon what it means to be a member of a community and why such membership matters in higher education and beyond.

Keywords: *professional development, educational technology, digital literacy, communities of practice*.

INTRODUCTION

The Like so many of my fellow educators, my world turned upside down that day in mid-March when Governor Jay Inslee of Washington announced the shutdown of our public schools due to Covid-19. As a teacher educator, my job relies on the partnerships I have built with our local school district, and the teachers and students therein. In fact, none of my pedagogy classes are taught on my university's campus, but rather out in those schools, those schools that were now closed indefinitely. Without access to our partner middle school teachers and students, or even our own campus, my university students and I were thrown into a world that was new to all of us the world of online learning. Quite literally overnight, every pedagogical technique that I had relied on for nearly 30 years had been tossed out the window. No more in-the-moment feedback for my students working with small groups of 6th graders. No more immediate debriefing sessions after they taught their lessons. No more hands-on, tactile interaction with representing theory through drawing/mapping exercises. Now it was just each of us on our own, isolated in our own homes, staring at one another on our screens. One of my students even displayed a weekly series of online university logos as her Zoom background, indicating that my university, too, had switched modes for the foreseeable future. What on earth was I supposed to do now?

THE PEDAGOGY:
A HARSH TRANSITION TO ONLINE LEARNING

Luckily for me, as a critical media literacy researcher, I was familiar with the work of Dr. Renee Hobbs of the University of Rhode Island and familiar with her Media Education Lab.

At one point, I must have signed up for a newsletter, because not long after our public schools shut down, I received an email invitation from the Media Education Lab to join a new group, playfully titled "Virtually Viral Hangouts." Intrigued, I registered (for free) and joined the group as they began their second week together. And not to sound overly dramatic, but what I learned in Virtually Viral Hangouts (VVH) would go on to change the way I thought about online learning forever.

The first thing I noticed upon joining was the practicality of the format. Each hour-long Zoom "hangout" went something like this:

- 10 minutes of an emotional check-in activity (the "Mood Meter," Ruler [n.d.])
- 20 minutes of a "mini-lesson" from an "expert" in the group
- 20 minutes in small breakout rooms engaging with the topic of the "mini-lesson"
- 10 minutes of whole group synthesis and closure.

This format was built upon an assets-based approach to content, recognizing that the room was full of experts, from university faculty to librarians, from classroom teachers to graduate students, from community organizers to media literacy entrepreneurs. Right away, it was acknowledged that there was a lot of expertise at the table, and each day Renee would ask a different person to present a little bit about what they know. For example, one day I talked through how I like to teach middle school students the art of reading a photograph. Another day, someone shared with us how she runs a non-profit organization in a virtual world. Another day, we heard a master storyteller walk us through imaginary worlds. And on yet another day, we learned how to hack Netflix codes. This attitude of "Everyone a teacher, everyone a student" was enacted each time we met.

As time went on, I began to learn more and more about the art and skill of participating in a digital space and I discovered the features of the technology that best facilitate that participation. Prior to attending VVH, I had never heard of Zoom, let alone all of its features, most notably the breakout rooms. This feature I found particularly valuable in that it allowed for more in-depth processing among a small group of us and invited those of us who may not feel comfortable speaking in the larger group to engage and share our ideas. Additionally, I had never before seen Google slides or Padlet or VideoAnt, or any number of other tech tools that were new to me. I never could have imagined that so many digital tools existed to make in-time, online interaction not only possible, but so engaging and fun!

Many times, I would learn something in VVH in the morning, then turn around and use that same tool with my university students, via Zoom, in the afternoon. The online whiteboard app Miro is an example. It was so fun to play with during VVH that I decided to use it in the afternoon with my class as a new opening activity, and my students loved it. This in-time pedagogy both the format and the associated tools saved me during my spring quarter 2020 classes. In fact, my students went out of their way to thank me at the end, because now they, too, had a toolbox full of digital tools to use with

their own future students regardless of whether they were face-to-face or online. Everybody wins!

THE PRACTICAL: CRITICAL LITERACY AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Critical literacy invites us to consider questions of power-questions of who benefits and who does not, who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged (Freire & Macendo, 1987; Janks, 2010). More specifically, Janks (2010) encourages us to think deeply about how texts are *designed*, by whom, and, as such, *re*-designed. In my case, I am using the term "texts" broadly to include curricula, which is what we spent a good deal of time discussing in our VVH. Each day, we were invited to participate in not only the creation of curricula, but delivery of curricula, with each of us drawing on our own unique strengths and areas of expertise, as well as using an array of digital tools that were new to many of us.

We were also consistently challenged to not only re-design what we previously might have thought of as our curricula, but also to *re-imagine* how digital tools could shape our products considering our newfound positions as distance-learning teachers and practitioners. For example, how might students use images as text to tell a story? Or how might students be invited to critically analyze YouTube content creators? Throughout our time grappling over these issues together within VVH, power was equally distributed among participants, with equal weight given to all ideas.

Within VVH, our work with re-designing and re-imagining what our roles were as educators and members of various digital communities was inherently and necessarily social. Janks (2013) reminds us that "literacy as a social rather than a school practice is quintessentially about using literacy for reasons that matter to the reader/writer," (p. 238). The reason that many of us came to VVH in the first place was to see how we could leverage the use of digital tools in our online teaching. In other words, the reasons I showed up mattered to me. I was in search of ways to navigate pedagogical terrain that was new to me, and as such, a bit scary. However, because of the social nature of our meetups, not only was my need for pedagogical intervention met, but also my need for engaging with other media literacy enthusiasts in a safe and rewarding community. Again, "Everyone a teacher, everyone a student." Everyone wins.

THE PERSONAL: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN THE MIDST OF A CRISIS

Whenever there is a crisis, it is natural to seek help from those around you. I went into that first VVH meeting wanting to learn all about the "hows" associated with online learning. How do I teach remotely? How can I engage students via Zoom? What tools can I use to make sure my students are active participants in their learning, even at a distance? What I was not expecting, however, was how much I came to rely on this VVH group socially and emotionally. Perhaps it was because of the sudden, physical isolation we were experiencing, or perhaps it was because we, as media literacy professionals, always felt a little bit "fringe." Perhaps it was because we were scared of the virus, of what would happen to our students, or to us. Whatever the case, we bonded as a group like few groups I have ever known. From the start, we were encouraged to check-in emotionally, using various forms of a "Mood Meter." In fact, the first 10 minutes or so was always dedicated to this emotional check-in. At first, it felt odd to me (someone who is not particularly "emotional" by nature) to engage in what I considered to be a "performance" each day. But as time went on, I began to let my guard down and allow myself to be present not only physically, but emotionally as well.

I credit this dismantling of my own emotional wall directly to Renee Hobbs, who led us each week in our various topics and activities. I learned by her example that it was okay to display anger, frustration, joy, and love in VVH. Goodness knows the virus and its effects were the elephant in the room each day. Together, Renee and VVH created a virtual space where we had the freedom to mourn-mourn the very real loss of loved ones to this horrific virus, but also to mourn "the way things used to be," to mourn not being with our students, our colleagues, our families. We mourned not being able to go out to eat, not being able to go see a movie, not being able to receive a hug from a friend. Some days, we needed to vent. Other days we needed desperately to laugh. Some days, we needed to dance. Much to my delight, we did all of those things, in addition to learning a whole lot about remote teaching and learning.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Throughout the spring of 2020, I came to look forward to weekday mornings at 10 AM PST, to check in with my new friends and know that whatever I was

going through, I was not going through it alone. What VVH had become for me was a safe space, where it was okay to participate or not, to turn my camera on or not, to feel utterly safe to try something new and fail. Failing, in fact, was encouraged, because it meant that we had the courage to at least try.

During this unusual time, I participated in the strongest community of practice that I have ever been a part − virtually or in-person. Even a year after its inception and away from our frequent springtime meetings, I am still learning from my new colleagues and friends via social media. Twitter, especially, has become the platform where I engage with other education professionals and can continue to feel connected. I think, ultimately, what VVH did for me was force me to consume and produce knowledge that I might not have consumed or produced otherwise. It encouraged me to "stretch my edge," and allow myself to be vulnerable enough to try something new.

At the end of the spring term, my university students expressed their appreciation for me for having made the transition from in-person to online teaching and learning so seamless. In fact, during the fall term, I received some of the highest teaching evaluations I've ever received in my 20 years in higher education. I was sure to give full credit to my VVH colleagues, citing them as my model for how to pivot when called upon and to not be afraid to try something new. And fail. And then try again.

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