

9-21-2022

Making Virtual Meetings Engaging: Creating Community in Virtual Settings Beyond the Pandemic

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Recommended Citation

Newman, M., & Torretta, A. (2022). Making Virtual Meetings Engaging: Creating Community in Virtual Settings Beyond the Pandemic. *The Journal of Extension*, 60(3), Article 10. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.60.03.10>

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Making Virtual Meetings Engaging: Creating Community in Virtual Settings Beyond the Pandemic

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Abstract. When in-person programs were suspended during the pandemic, Extension professionals quickly embraced virtual learning platforms to conduct programs. One of the more popular platforms was Zoom. In addition to the standard features that come equipped with Zoom, there are several other free or low-cost online resources that can be used to enhance virtual programs and create a greater sense of community virtually.

INTRODUCTION

For years, the Cooperative Extension System has been urged to embrace online learning (Dettenmaier & Locklear, 2018; Rich et al., 2011). The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic bolstered those calls and made it practically obligatory for Extension professionals to pivot and adopt virtual delivery methods, albeit with anxiety and hesitancy. Educating participants initially proved challenging in some cases, but as we have seen over time, virtual programming has its value in the wheelhouse of Extension programming. It has become a permanent approach alongside the hands-on, in-person, and face-to-face offerings that are standard within Extension and will likely prove valuable well beyond the pandemic, especially when distance is a factor. This article aims to provide Cooperative Extension professionals and volunteers with a toolkit of resources to mitigate and overcome the challenge of implementing a virtual program that is as engaging and valuable as in-person options.

Lobley and Ouellette (2017) found that Zoom tended to be the most reliable and accessible for those who had slow or no Internet connectivity. In addition, they argued that the screen sharing feature and breakout rooms of the platform added flexibility to their volunteer trainings. There are several video conferencing platforms available such as Microsoft Teams and Webex; however, we found Zoom to have a shallow learning curve for those not familiar with virtual platforms.

Virtual programs conducted on the Zoom platform provide both students and teachers opportunities for engagement that are not available in person. Utilization of the chat box, screen sharing, and breakout rooms are just a few of the features embedded in Zoom. Although the program on its own is a helpful resource for teaching virtually, the quality of education can be increased even further when using additional resources. In what follows, the authors have identified free online or low-cost resources for creating more engaging virtual programs, as well as some ideas of best practice.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Jamboard (<https://Jamboard.Google.com>): Jamboard provides a group of users a space to simultaneously type and share ideas for free. Extension professionals would need a free Google email address to use this tool as workshop hosts; however, participants in your virtual workshop would not. Hosts can access the tool by clicking on the dots in the top-right corner of the Google homepage and scrolling down the list to an icon labeled “Jamboard.” Once the app is opened, the host can send a link to participants to allow them to co-create content or only view the content without editing privileges. There are many online tutorials on how to use Jamboard’s various features.

One feature we found useful was the “sticky note” (Figure 1) where hosts put one letter on each sticky note and participants rearrange them to form words. Another feature of Jamboard is the Google image search button, which allows more versatility within activities. We combined the sticky note and Google image search in an activity, as seen in Figure 2.

Padlet (<https://www.padlet.com>): Padlet offers an online “bulletin board” for groups, providing features such as password protection and privacy. It is easy to navigate and allows for sharing photos, links, and messages (Figure 3). Padlet Basic is free and allows users to make up to three Padlets. This version contains ads and limits the Padlet to 10MB. Padlet Pro is \$8.25 a month (\$99/year) and allows users to make an unlimited number of ad-free Padlets up to 250MB per upload.

Bookwidgets (<https://www.bookwidgets.com>): Designed for use by schoolteachers, Bookwidgets allows users to design quizzes, exit slips (where students can answer questions based on the lessons in that session), timelines, and white boards. For informal education sessions, we found the Puzzle Maker and the Match Game to be fun and engaging tools. For an icebreaker at the first meeting, hosts can input participants’ names in a Bingo game. Subscriptions start at \$9/month.

Kahoot! (<https://www.kahoot.com>): Kahoot! is a game-based learning platform that allows participants to answer questions in a simple and fun way and compete against each other. Unlike other resources listed here, this product is costly. The “Kahoot! 360 Standard” subscription starts at \$204 annually and there are higher priced packages that provide more features, making the platform more attractive and versatile. Users can create their own learning game based on their program topic or access games from their extensive library.

Mentimeter (<https://www.mentimeter.com>): Mentimeter allows users to build interactive presentations with an online editor. It allows for the creation of questions, polls, quizzes, slides, and more. The authors are particularly fond of the word cloud feature that allows participants to share thoughts, sentiments, and ideas visually, with the most popular words written in the largest font. Mentimeter allows for Cyrillic letters as well, which was a useful feature when working with international audiences (Figure 4).

BEST PRACTICES FOR MANAGING VIRTUAL ENGAGEMENT

In addition to the tools outlined above, we have found the following practices to be effective in establishing community and reinforcing learning outcomes when conducting virtual programs:

- Determine the best format for your virtual experience. This can include a webinar format, meeting, or kind of interactive session.
- Log in at least 15 minutes prior to the start of the program. This length of time allows presenters an opportunity to go over last-minute details and work out technical glitches.
- Employ the waiting room feature. This allows facilitators to bring all participants into the room at once for a hard start of the program.
- Decide if you want to mute participants upon entry. For larger groups, this can help minimize disruptions.
- Start program on time.
- Use an intro slide (see figure 5). An intro slide may include the following:
 - » The title of the session.
 - » Guidelines for the webinar, such as to remain muted, raise hand to talk, “webinar rules,” and other expectations of participants. According to Torretta and VanderWey (2019, 3), this “declaration of working rules or principles ... set strong expectations for behavior in a group educational setting.”
- Have a dedicated host (if meeting is an interactive webinar). This allows the presenter to focus on their presentation rather than virtual classroom management.
- Use the spotlight feature to showcase individual participants who are demonstrating proficiency or accomplish a task.
- Encourage use of the chat feature. This allows for multiple ideas to be shared in real time. The chat feature can also be used to add documents, links, and other resources for later reference and use.

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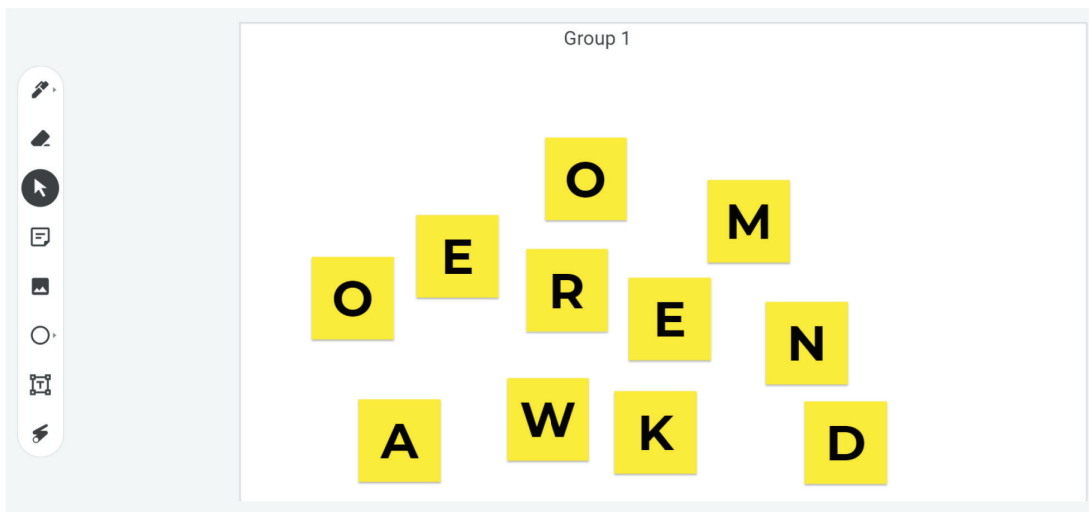


Figure 1. Example of a cooperative Jamboard activity.

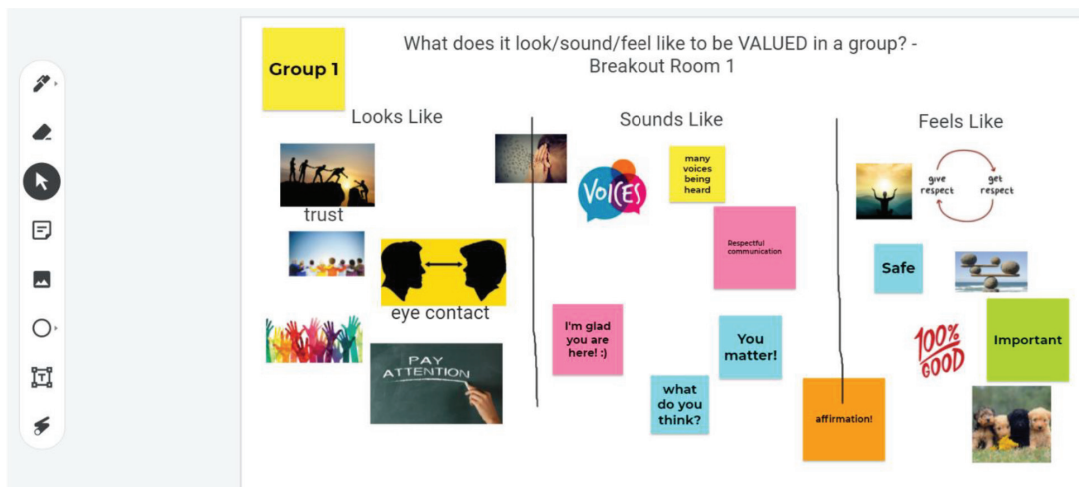


Figure 2. Example of a Jamboard activity using Google Images.

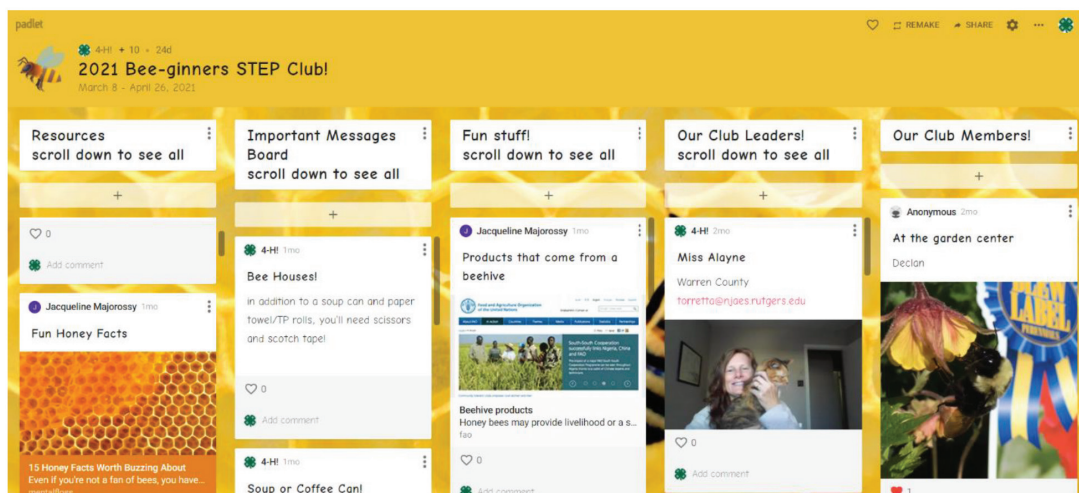


Figure 3. Example of a Padlet's bulletin board feature.

What did you like best about the Jr. Explorer's Club



Figure 4. Example of a Mentimeter's word cloud.



Figure 5. Example of an introductory slide.

CONCLUSION

Although the creation of programs that are interactive, engaging, and educational has always been a top priority, it is essential in a virtual setting. The shroud of mystery over this type of learning has been lifted. As the public has become more familiar and comfortable with virtual platforms, Extension professionals can successfully include robust online offerings in their overall programmatic outreach.

Whether the program creates a safe space for youth to learn, demonstrates new approaches to old problems, or provides necessary hours to earn certificates, virtual programs can effectively enhance the kinds of learning that Extension offers while also creating a sense of engagement within the community. These virtual tools create an environment in which participants are compelled to dive even deeper into a topic in order to learn and retain more information and log in again. Though it is difficult to match the kind of connection that can be made within in-person sessions, virtual platforms have the potential to bring people together and keep them returning for more opportunities to learn.

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