

Voices from the Field: The Need for Transformative Hybrid Online Spaces

Amid our twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racism, we're building virtual gathering, grief, conference and educational spaces. Can we learn from this to create hybrid spaces that allow access for all?

by Elandria Williams

Since late 2018, I have been the executive director of [PeoplesHub](#), an online social movement school that takes popular education online and makes it accessible and available for maximum participation. Of course, faced with COVID-19 and an ever increasing call for Black liberation, the content of [our trainings and offerings has shifted too](#). We have learned a lot over the last three years—and we are also learning as we go. And we welcome your contributions to the discussion.

The initial spark for the school came from [Sarah Van Gelder](#), founder of *Yes! Magazine*, who attended a workshop about online training led by Jeanne Rewa and Matt Guynn through Training for Change. A few years ago, Van Gelder traveled the country, logging over 12,000 miles while doing so, and published a book about what she learned about community practices in a book titled *The Revolution Where You Live*.

In reflecting on her travels, van Gelder identified the following as some of the key barriers that keep us from forming the practices of liberation we desire:

- Meetings so boring you want to tear your hair out
- Conflicts that exhaust everyone
- Lack of focus and nothing gets done

- The isolation that cuts us off from the support of our community
- Lack of confidence, because we believe we aren't up to the challenge or that others could do it better

Many of these barriers were lifted up by people that formed the initial advisory committee for People'sHub, including myself and a host of others. I have been involved in popular education and community organizing for much of my life, including many years that I spent at the [Highlander Research and Education Center](#). Part of what motivated me to get involved in online education—long before I began to work at People's Hub in 2017—were the health challenges that I have had during much of my life.

Back when I was a sophomore in college, I got really sick. I was working multiple jobs and going to school at the same time. One of my jobs was as a receptionist and then a tax preparer at H&R Block. I was at work in the back, printing out checks, and all of a sudden, my whole right side couldn't move. And I looked down and my arms were three times the size everything's supposed to be. I had to call my father to come get me and take me home because I couldn't drive. I couldn't walk. I couldn't move.

I had to leave the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Over the years, I have attended online university programs and have even come within a couple of classes from completing a degree or certificate. I have a ton of information, albeit none of the papers.

A lot of the things I have done have actually been online because I couldn't drive, or I couldn't be in places. Online learning has actually been a huge part of my life because that's the only way I've been able to really deepen in, except, of course the experiential learning that has been a huge part of my life.

With People's Hub, the training is asynchronous or at your own pace. We started with our collective knowledge around how anti-oppressive popular education methodologies and understandings are conducted and asked ourselves, how do we put it all in an online format where you don't lose the richness of the relationship and knowledge building?

We're not skimping on the work of learning, deepening, and growing in all ways. We root our work in PeoplesHub's 4R Framework that of rootedness, resilience, restoration, and reimagination. And I have come to realize, "Oh, this is a way for the incredible organizers, solidarity economy practitioner/creators, trainers, and other people that we know from all around the world to come together and share with each other."

People can really dig into questions such as, "How do we do really good methodology? How do we dismantle the Far Right and take down White Nationalism? How do we ask the right questions and not just do games and activities? Or, how do we get the money or practice shift we need so we are ready to truly create the world we wish to live in?

And it doesn't matter if your kids are running around. That's up to you. You don't have to go anywhere. In our movement, if you can't travel, if you can't leave your house, if you can't go to the rally, our movement has thrown people away and said you are not wanted or needed and that it is your problem. Here and in our work with disability justice activists, organizers and organizations we are saying no!! You do have a place and your insights, experiences, and just who you are is necessary and that's okay.

Now of course, this requires a fight for internet access. We know that's there and how in our fight for internet access we are also fighting for internet freedom, digital security, and privacy. The thing that I think is really important is that we're at a moment where people that are disabled and are

chronically ill are being listened to more.

I have also heard from people who really want to go back to the pre-COVID moment, when they could have their gatherings in inaccessible places with fragrances and scented spaces that people with scent allergies like me can't go into... they want to go back to a way of doing work and gatherings that has literally pushed a bunch of people out of our movement.

So, the question I'm sitting with is "How do we create spaces where everybody can be in?"

What needs to be considered and included? What needs to be let go? And really, it's a question of hybridization and innovation. For me, it is not about being in person or not in person. It is about if we are "on-site" or "remote" because due to all of the incredible video technology we are mostly "in-person," just remotely.

How do we do a both/and?

How can some people be on their devices remotely and other people be on site? It is really, really important for us to not think we're going to go back to something because what we were doing wasn't actually working for our movement. There's no need to go back to unfunctionally. The question is, how do we use our radical imaginations to do what actually would be the most equitable, beautiful, liberating thing for everybody? Let's craft that—and not have some random Pollyanna notion that what we had before was great.

I have had someone tell me, "Why would I want to join a movement of depressed people? If I already have a hard day, why do I want to go to meetings?"

That makes me want to run away. If your movement does not look fun, your thing does not look interesting. You're not hospitable or welcoming and you use words that I literally don't understand.

Like I'm tired. I've had a long day. If we're going to craft different ways of moving, then we need to think about all the regular people we know. And if you don't know any, go meet some, you know, all the regulars, people in our stores. How do we create something new? That actually allows for maximum participation, maximum joy, holding place.

Yes, we still have a fight on our hands and transformation needs to happen now. And we could have some beautiful implementations, rooted in wins. Let us dream of what's possible.

What does transformative space online look like? To me, online transformative spaces are spaces in which, when we leave, we are actually more restored.

Here is an example. I remember doing a session, we were doing a workshop with some church leaders. They were of all ages—in their 70s, 30s, 20s, and 40s. The leaders who were in their 70s were saying, "I can't do this, I don't even know, I barely even joined on. I just I was going to just watch and not participate, you know."

But, in the end, it was different. We started with spectrograms where people put down how they felt on a scale from 1-10—I totally agree, or I totally disagree. Participants got a chance to say: "I feel this way" or "I feel that way."

We said to people that you can either say it out loud, or you can put it in chat, or you can move your little number—and tech support will be here to help you. There is no right way and no wrong way. You have got options. One woman, at first, she wasn't comfortable using the slides. Then later on, she said, "Hold on, maybe I'll try this." By the end, she was posting pictures in the slides. She said, This is so much fun. But it was fun but because there was no one right way to do it. At the end, she said, "This was really fun. I've learned a lot. I feel more excited. I got to hear people share their

stories. I wasn't talked at for more than a couple of minutes, and I have ideas for what to do in my organization."

We did some meditation. I got to really share what's happening in my local community with about two other people. I got to journal. We had a dance break. We actually took a for-real bathroom break. We cut off the video some. We did lots of different things in an hour and 20 minutes. Who knew? Right?

But this to me gets to what it means for us to be proper educators. There are things we know as facilitators. There are things we know that are important. As popular educators, you know, the desired end result is *action with reflection*. It is not "I learned a thing."

Everything we do right around online transformative space must have a direct impact on what you're going to do when you go home. So, we're in a moment where people have decided to skip everything but theory and information. People are bringing 500 people, 4,000 people, together—real people—and have we actually learned from each other what is possible?

We're in a moment in which we have forgotten, in some ways, our own practice. This is a call to remember our own training and classes. We know how best we learn, share, and grow. Let's go there.

One last thing I will say about hybrid spaces is what it means for us to create the spaces that our communities need. And for us to begin our gathering by asking people, "What do you need out of this space?" That is number one and most important.

So, when you begin, the call starts with the basics: "Do you need food? Do you need water? Do you need childcare? Do you just need to stay at the house? What do you need?"

Then it is up to us to create the spaces and the conditions necessary for all the things you need from that call. We can meet, and it may mean that the needs can't all be met in one

way.

It means we need multiple strategies to meet that need. It may mean we have to have two different meetings. It may mean that this part, this group is going to be all on their devices and all online, and others will be all in person.

The real question we should be asking is: ***How do we create the space and the conditions necessary for all the people that need and want to be here in our work, our lives, and in our communities to participate?***

And that goes for the random gatherings we do as well. It goes for city council, county commission meetings, for the house party. It goes for everything, so that everybody has, feels like they have, a place to be. In that way, everybody can have community—a place where people are cared for by the people around them—and are not treated as disposable objects that are only good for the things they provide.

We cannot go back to the way we were leading and doing before COVID-19. For the sake of chronically ill folks, people who are care givers, undocumented people. People working everyday jobs, folks that are houseless, we must shift into a whole other consciousness.

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