

GROUND-BREAKING COLLABORATION IN AN ONLINE WORLD

GLOBAL CO-CREATION EVENT – VIRTUAL PROJECT LAUNCH

CONTEXT

One of the wonders of meeting regularly with IAF members is sharing stories and particularly in the last 18 months, hearing how friends and colleagues have become more and more confident with facilitating in our remote world. At our last Northern IAF meet-up in July, attended by a small but perfectly formed group of our host John Varney, Christine Bell, and me Jane Mitchell, we were able to explore a fabulous piece of client work that Christine and her team @centreforfacilitation had recently completed. Without too much arm twisting, Christine agreed to collaborate in writing up the story because we felt that the lessons learned were not only inspiring for the facilitation community, but they also show what a difference you can make to a client in the most unexpected of ways.

This story was fascinating to me for several reasons, not least as a demonstration of how to shift behaviours from a traditionally safe ways of doing things, and which we are perfectly comfortable with. The inevitability of hybrid ways of working taking hold in the future means that our role as facilitators, has become even more significant. Not only do we help our clients brilliantly navigate conversations and meetings, we also now need to help our clients be more comfortable with *new normal* technology and support them in making the shifts they will have to make.

I must confess to a real aversion to the idea of 'returning to normal'. I fully understand that people are fearful and have been badly affected by what has happened to our global community. That for me is fundamentally why we should be taking the opportunity to shape a new normal. A normal in which we are more compassionate and caring as a start, but also one in which we embrace a more inclusive way of working, where people feel listened to, safe to contribute and speak up. The cult of the organisational silo belongs to the past and we should be welcoming a new ethos of collaboration and understanding that drives a clear sense of purpose and renewed engagement.

The example that Christine shares with us here, is I believe, a beacon for what we might achieve in the future. It provides insights and outcomes that are powerful messages to facilitators and clients, and of course, it's a terrific story. |Take it away Christine!

BACKGROUND

BioSkyNet is a newly created global network funded by NERC for world leading experts in biomonitoring/bioaerosols¹. The purpose of this new network was to bring together these experts for the first time in one global forum so that they could standardize and further improve the methods that are used to measure the ecological, human, and environmental health effects of airborne microorganisms. Covid19 has raised awareness of air quality issues in general and highlighted the urgency of research in this area.

The purpose of this first global gathering was to begin the process of building the network of expertise in this area of research and to identify common areas of research interest. The gathering was designed to help put faces to names and to explore the potential for developing standardized methods for sampling bioaerosols.

When the BioSkyNet gathering was first being planned for the summer of 2021 it was to be a 3–4-day residential event at the University of Essex, attended by about 15 - 20 expert scientists from over 10 different countries. The structure of the had to include some critical components: - space for network members to do specialist presentations, opportunities to explore the University's scientific facilities, fora to discuss ideas for a joint sampling project. The network leader was planning to *manage* and coordinate the event without any external professional facilitation input. In essence, the format and structure of the event were based around a tried and tested blueprint.

By the spring of 2021, however, the pandemic made sure that a face to face get together was simply not going to be possible. Lockdowns and subsequent limitations put on global travel forced the project leader to think differently. Inspired by having attended one of the Centre for Facilitation's previous collaboration events he got agreement to divert funds from a global travel budget, into taking on outside experts to support a fully virtual facilitated event. This agreement threw the project leader into a collaborative relationship with facilitators from the Centre for Facilitation as they co-designed a unique and bespoke programme that gave the scientist participants the opportunity to work together in a virtually connected format.

DESIGN CHALLENGES FOR A GLOBAL NETWORK

TIMING

The first thing that the team had to tackle was how to juggle up to 10 time zones. BioSkyNet members span the globe, from Chile and Canada to Austria, Pakistan, Singapore, Japan, and the UK. With members joining from multiple time zones, the team had to find a way of combining activities that happened both at the same time and that contributed asynchronously.

After days of intense collaboration, the team had designed a Co-Creation workshop consisting of four **Lab²** sessions hosted as a Zoom meeting and scheduled between 11.00 and 14.00 in UTC+1 time zone. The four sessions spanned two

¹ The project is funded by Natural Environment Research Council UK NE/V008293/1

² The use of Lab rather than workshop was a conscious choice and used to highlight that this was going to be an experiential working environment

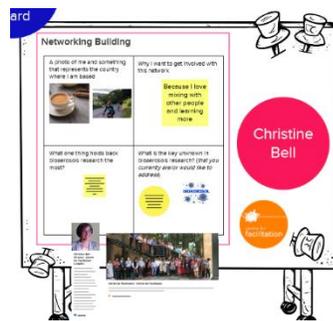
weeks. This enabled time for everyone between the Lab sessions, for asynchronous reflection and brainstorming using a **Mural** interactive whiteboard space. More of which later.

The timing of the Labs was designed so that wherever they were, members could join at the beginning, middle or end of their day. To help this process each Lab had a timetabled 30 minute “refresh break” which provided a natural way for participants to join or leave the session if they could not attend for the whole time. We maintained an approach that how ever long people could join for they were welcome, and everyone did their best to help them “catch on” with the process and progress.

Providing a 30-minute break also gave time for network members to reflect and refuel so that the energy levels could be kept high throughout the Lab sessions. We encouraged everyone to turn off their cameras, to go on mute and to do a little bit of Zumba dancing when no one was watching!

BEGINNING A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

Key to the facilitation team was that we were supporting the development of a new network. Our second challenge was to help network members get to know each other and their subject expertise. In the past this had happened with a series of back-to-back presentations. The team explored the idea of network members posting presentational videos but realized that it was unlikely anyone would have the time and energy to watch up to 20 video presentations, however short! It was decided to use a more flexible approach that would be quicker for network members to create and to view. This is where the flexibility of Mural came into its own and members were invited to introduce themselves on a noticeboard area on the ‘Welcome Mural’.



Screen grab of networking noticeboard

In the Mural welcome area, network members first shared their experiences of bioaerosol research, noted their expectations for the network and posted the key questions that they wanted to explore in this relatively new area of study. This was done asynchronously before, during and after the Lab sessions, so that participants could continue to embellish and build on their own content. It was dynamic and compelling to see it live and breathe. Many people provided links to their research or other reference areas of wider interest to the network. The bonus of the networking boards was that it helped to familiarize and build peoples’ skills with Mural before the first Lab session. Rather sneakily, it also meant that the project leaders could get a preview of who the “active collaborators” were among the 30+ participants who had signed up for the network. Vital intelligence.

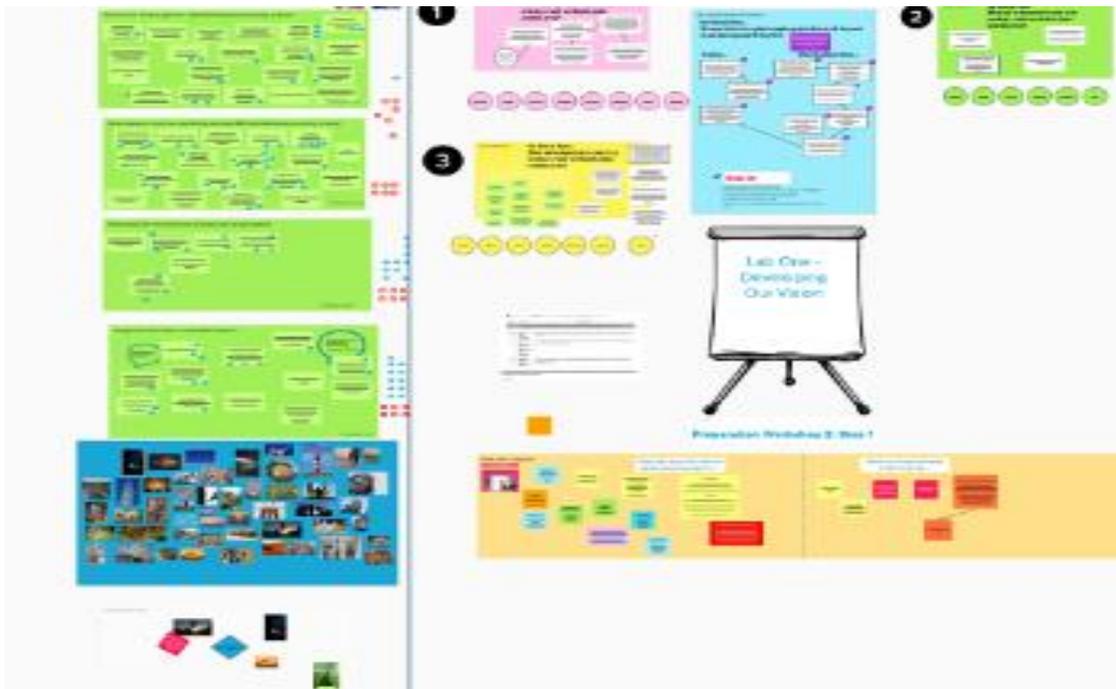
We took care not to throw the uninitiated participants into a virtual lab environment without any support and we were aiming to build their capabilities and confidence in using virtual platforms. We ran a “launch” session a week before the first Lab so participants could meet the project leader and facilitators. We provided walk-throughs of the digital tools and the process. This session was pre-recorded and sent out to everyone who could view it at a convenient time. We also created a “Learning Zone” area where step-by-step instructions were given for the Mural skills required to be a “Mural Workshop Ninja”.

SHARING A VISION - LAB ONE

Typically, scientific collaborations like first to focus in on the relevant science with scientists sharing their own expertise and experience. This process can often make less experienced researchers feel intimidated and so it was agreed to change this usual expertise dynamic by starting with a process that everyone could contribute to. The process required

all network members to focus initially on the wider picture, the vision for the network and in particular the idea of developing a standardised sampling methodology. This way of working enabled members to contribute thoughts before the lab session on anonymous virtual post it notes and by selecting visual images to build up a shared vision. In this way, the principles of a democratic and interactive process were established from the start.

Sharing the insights and identifying common ground in advance provided a good way for network members to get to know more about each other and their scientific interests and backgrounds, without having to explicitly present this information. During the lab the network members shaped the ideas and by the end of the session had agreed a draft vision for the network ambitions. There was then space over the next 48 hours for network members to review and comment on this vision before the next Lab



Lab One: Developing a Shared Vision

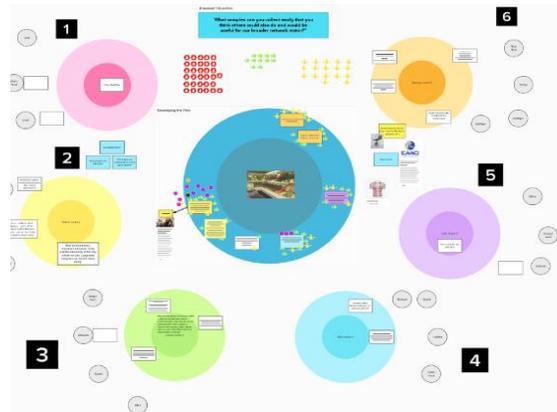
REACHING CONSENSUS: LAB TWO

An important outcome from the vision activities in Lab One was that network members were clearly focused on being action-orientated. The network members had highlighted in the visioning activity how there was an urgency to raise the profile of this area of scientific research and find more investment in the research. The awareness of airborne organisms during the Covid pandemic had increased and this provided a window of opportunity for the group to gain more traction in this area from other key stakeholders.

This workshop was very informative and especially the facilitators managed it very well by making the session very interactive”

The purpose of the second Lab was to turn the network’s agreed vision into tangible action by scoping out a global bioaerosol sampling project that everyone could contribute towards. There was some funding in the project set up for a sampling project, but it needed the network members to agree first **what** they would sample and for the network to then develop the scope for the project to make it happen within the funding deadline.

We used a process called “consensus circles” to start to flush out what sampling project ideas might work best in all the locations. Small breakout groups were set up and each network member shared their suggestion for what might be a good focus for the sampling. These ideas were each placed in the outer circle on the Mural diagram (Figure 3). The ideas were reviewed and if all the breakout group participants felt that this idea could work in their global location the idea was moved into the inner circle. It was a simple and very visual method of helping the group to recognise what might be possible across such a diverse range of locations.



3 Consensus Circles

In the plenary session each breakout group shared their inner circle ideas. The group quickly established a consensus (using a form of dot voting) around one of the options, which was based around sampling the presence of airborne microorganisms in a grocery store. People were really enthused and energised by this example and the project leader commented that this was not something he would have thought of, so this gave the whole network ownership of the direction of the work of the network. Consensus was easy to achieve because the common ground had been identified through the vision setting work in Lab One. The group could also easily see that the grocery store project met all their aspirations for the type of work that the network would be involved in. The group also became enthused about the potential of using bioaerosol data collected globally to monitor pollen levels.

“I had a real feeling of achievement - this is far more useful than other meetings where there is talk but no action!”

DEVELOPING PROPOSALS: LAB 3

In the first two labs the organising team had created all the breakout groups to ensure that network members would get to know as many people as possible. As we moved into the second week the network members themselves took charge of the agenda and the group formations.

The session started with proposals from network members about how they wanted to use the time by nominating topics using the Zoom Breakout Proposal Grid. (Figure 4)

“I found the experience inspiring; I can see a lot of potential in the network in the future. This could have a huge impact on our understanding of bioaerosols and their impacts.”

Capacity Building for Virtual Collaborations

For many of the participants this process meant working in a completely new way. All the network members were familiar with being in Zoom/Teams meetings, but our use of the video platform combined with a collaborative shared whiteboard was new to many of them. The benefits of having this collaborative platform meant that there was equality of participation. More senior members of the network recognised that everyone’s views in the network were appreciated, and that this equality of participation had been fundamental to the outcomes.

Productive Use of Time

The group recognised that the involvement of professional facilitators had led to interactive and well managed sessions., and this made good use of the time. They appreciated the fresh approach and the move away from the usual presentation format. There was a sense that given a choice in the future between spending the budget on airfares to attend the event in the UK or using that funding for facilitators for a virtual event, they would opt for facilitation, particularly given the particular focus of this network on air quality.

REFLECTIONS OF THE FACILITATION TEAM

We learned a lot with our client on this project, and their experience and feedback helped us to work out what works well and what we need to more and less of. We think that these principles may be universal for the future of online facilitation, and we hope our experiences will help our facilitation community to continue learning and developing our skills in supporting groups to collaborate in a more sustainable way.

Responsive Co-Creation

The network leader was involved throughout the design process so that the initial designs followed his aspirations for the network development. We then adapted the design with him during the process so that it better reflected the network’s evolving requirements. Having a client that was willing for us to adapt the design and to check in with him before we went live, gave us confidence that we were designing a process that was relevant, worth the investment in facilitation time and would make a positive contribution to the success of the project. Having the live sessions on non-consecutive days provided space for us to make these changes in a thoughtful manner

Making Use of Synchronous Time

We learnt how precious the synchronous time is when working across time zones. Participants were getting up early or joining after their evening meal so there needed to be a clear benefit from the Zoom sessions. We learnt to only use the Zoom time for activities which needed dialogue and to prioritise time for breakout group activities. This helped participants to get to know each other more and kept momentum going so that tangible work was completed by the end of the process.

Active Collaboration

The process focused on providing opportunities for the network members to actively collaborate by working on real project work together, agreeing the vision, exploring the options, reaching consensus and action planning. Conversations were always purposeful, and the network members got to know more about each other’s skills, knowledge base and experiences by sharing relevant information to complete the activities.

Equality of Participation

The project leader is an early career researcher who has only recently completed his PhD while other network members are highly experienced leaders in their fields. The Zoom format gives everyone equal rights to contribute through the chat or by using the “raise hand function” in the plenaries. In the smaller breakout groups a structure was created that meant each member had the same time to share their ideas and the group would then cluster and develop the thinking.

Acceptance of Variable Engagement Levels

There were over 30 people on the network list. In some sessions there were 25 network members, others were smaller, and people dropped in and out of the sessions due to other constraints, including time zone issues. The benefit of a virtual format is that anyone who came to the first session and decided that this network was not for them or felt unable to participate was not held hostage by flights/expense. They could leave the call at any point and there were no questions asked. The people engaged at the end will be those that have the time, energy, and inclination to take this research further forward.

THANKS

- Without the willingness of our funders NERC³ to consider our proposal to create a virtual process to replace our [planned network kickoff](#) at The University of Essex this work would not have been possible
- Our organising team headed up by Dr Rob Ferguson from the University of Essex with our facilitators Christine Bell and Dan Andrews from Centre for Facilitation who designed a dynamic and engaging process that would enable network members to contribute to the co-creation process from a variety of time zones
- Our network members for being willing to embrace this experience and to fully engage with the process of a global co-creation process over a 10-day period so that we have an action plan to support our research plans going forward
- To John Varney and Jane Mitchell who persuaded me that this was a story worth sharing and to Jane for providing editorial support to shape this article into something readable!

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