



How can we use technology to reinforce the key partnering principles when partnering remotely?

A report from three webinars

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Introduction

PBA's ongoing research into remote partnering included a series of three webinars in April/May 2017 on the subject: 23 participants attended from the following categories: INGOs, individuals, online learning community, tertiary education institute and accredited partnership brokers, located in India, Australia, UK, Slovenia, Lithuania and USA. The webinars had a dual purpose: to share findings from our remote partnering research to date and also gather more information as part of an ongoing and iterative learning process. Below is a summary of findings.

Findings

Section 1: What people said they are finding challenging and want to learn

- Making remote partnering more effective
- Using technology better to build a sense of community/team-work/ quality relationships
- Bringing offline community engagement into online community building
- Engaging with diversity whether multi-sectoral, multi-cultural or multi lingual
- Working across time zones to increase understanding
- Mitigating the negative side of technology i.e. connectivity problems

Section 2: Key Insights from the conversations

GENERAL:

Participants reflected that there is a bigger danger for remote partners to feel less valued than those they meet face to face; this is illustrated by the fact that it's often the case that less time is devoted to working remotely than other forms of working. With further probing, it became clear that often challenges would be pushed aside or postponed until a face-to-face meeting. This reinforced a strong bias in favour of face-to-face meeting and meant partners had less motivation to find creative solutions to working online.

Some of the participants speculated whether increased investment in online working would get results as good as when working face-to-face.

"Working remotely is definitely financially motivated for us. I wonder how that would change if the motivation was not financial and that we were proactive in working remotely and that was informing practice and play."

This view was confirmed following the webinars which modelled the kind of engagement that would normally be experienced in face-to-face encounters such as informal conversations, conscious efforts at relationship- building as well as the use of video. Many said that because they could see each other and

time was allocated to getting to know each other, it increased their commitment and sense of responsibility to give full attention and not to multi-task.

When online communication is intentionally designed and facilitated to be participatory in all aspects, it was found to have a strong partnership-building effect. It was noted that certain technological tools can be hugely helpful in building and reinforcing multiple partnering principles at the same time. However, as with all tools, it depends how they are used.

INTENTIONAL HUMAN INTERACTION:

- Participants agreed that they valued face to face more because they hadn't invested any relationship-building time in their remote working which led them to move too quickly online to business at hand
- What is needed for on-line partnering is a commitment to empathy and inclusivity and the webinar participants were actively looking for techniques to do this well
- Some people look for more informal space to share their ideas and get to know each other. It was seen as important to build in informal time online and that this was not a trivial use of time
- Feedback from the webinars themselves suggest that it can be helpful to have a first round of talking that is focused on checking in with each other (individuals and their contexts) to allow for a deeper getting to know one another, followed by a second round focused on the work / outcomes / actions required from the call.

THE ISSUE OF EQUITY IN ON-LINE WORKING:

- It was reported that those with more power tend to dominate online conversations rather than facilitating or participating themselves in participatory/equitable /inclusive conversations. Whilst this also happens in face-to-face partnering, in remote partnering, the effects are more pronounced because the lack of engagement from remote partners is more obvious - i.e. there are less visual cues when they don't speak, respond or engage.
- Access to Technology is also a question of equity – this was perhaps the biggest issue to consider when working remotely and needing to consider the benefits and reach that technology can afford vs the exclusion that it could produce for those without access. Important to research the available and most appropriate communication methods for particular partnering contexts.
- Time difference is also an equity issue if not adjusted/rotated. Many global meetings with fixed times, continually leave certain partners at a disadvantage (inconvenienced or working when they are not at their best). Commitment to rotating the times of the meetings would provide equitable access to normal working hours.

Some examples of ways to build equity long-distance:

- a) Individual personal check-ins at the beginning of calls which can be open questions about partners' current realities such as describing the location of their call and what they can see outside their window or
- b) simple individual check-in questions e.g. using an object to describe how they're feeling? These methods also build equity by allowing everyone *airspace* and demonstrate that each person is important
- c) using a virtual talking piece – person wishing to speak has to signal either visually or through a chat box and the speaker is given the go-ahead by the chair; this prevents the person leading from taking control
- d) using low bandwidth tech options such as Vsee or using audio only in a participatory way or investing in easy, accessible and affordable video conferencing such as Zoom.
- e) Rotating time zones.
- f) Creating tea breaks online to share informal time with each other instead of partners going their separate ways and returning at an appointed time
- g) Integrating video where possible, especially at the start of a partnership or with new members.

HIGHLIGHTING DIVERSITY IN THE GROUP

There is a greater need in remote partnering to make multifaceted diversity visible and acknowledge it because it is easier to ignore it.

- Particular importance of making visible diversity of living realities and cultural diversity to build understanding - examples from the webinar included responses to what can be seen through the window: "*looking at my chickens in rural Slovenia*", "*at my engagement party in Gunhor in India*" and provide a greater feeling of sitting in global circle that relishes geographic and cultural diversity
- Linked to equity, giving everyone the opportunity to share the diversity of their own individual perspective in ways that are genuinely valued. On a remote call this might be done in writing (chat functions) as well as voiced. More research needed to understand the difference between the use of voice and written chat.
- Greater need to investigate specific issues e.g. Are women more likely to be working remotely than men? Is it easier or harder for women? Are the younger generation more confident about on-line working than older people? Which groups are more likely to use technology? Also culturally - who is/ is not invited to the table?
- Reaching out to diverse groups "*Giving comfort and courage - are we reaching out to them at their level of comfort and trust?*"

"What infrastructure positively supports diversity? Technology can be positive and foster collaboration. Where it is not conducive it breeds frustration and misunderstanding. Requires a lot of investment. Understanding of vision mission and politics. How are we investing? Tap into it where it exists. Where it doesn't it needs to be addressed. South-South superstructure does not exist - we remain in the status quo - try to find the minimum way of doing it. Stretches us to be creative an innovative to meet a new era - play in a new game. How to create a new environment that can integrate culture?"

Some examples of how to acknowledge and build on diversity:

- a) Asking people to describe their context
- b) Sharing an aspect of what is current in their culture
- c) Specifically asking for different perspectives to be surfaced/shared and provide space / time / encouragement rather than closing down in the interests of time
- d) Making a point of not making decisions until diverse points of view are explored

THE VALUE OF TECHNOLOGY IN PROMOTING OPENNESS

IT was agreed that online partnering provides the opportunity for greater openness through shared documents and online spaces for collaborative work though it may need more confidence / exploration to optimise these possibilities.

Technology can also help to support the other partnering principles in a number of ways:

Video conferencing seems to bridge the divide really potently between being remote and face-to-face as it provides a type of remote face to face and by seeing each other, builds relationships, cultural understanding and appreciation of diversity. Where this is an equity issue because of poor connectivity, low bandwidth options can be explored. However, it should be remembered that some people are still uncomfortable with using video. "*at times it is not worth having group meetings stretching across multiple time zones with video as it doesn't add anything and it's better to Skype 1:1 with people instead*" "*it's about recognising that at different time zones people will have their lives going on*"

The issue was raised as to whether using video conferencing whilst people are at home is an imposition because it may feel too exposing; it shouldn't be assumed it is easy or acceptable to all. Conversely, there are also opportunities for creating a trusting environment where people could feel comfortable to share their intimate home context, and it contributing to greater group cohesion.

Maximising audio only: Audio can be used far better than it is – there are lessons to be learned from talk radio and how to engage people and acknowledge when people have spoken.

Shared editing of documents is becoming commonplace – Examples are Google Drive and Dropbox. The value of keeping live online minutes (as demonstrated in the webinar) is a transparent way of recording views and ensures that those involved see their inputs are being recorded / respected. Protocols can jointly be developed for editing and deleting.

Shared Knowledge management: Most using dropbox & Google Drive although some still feel it is a "continuous struggle" particularly in low bandwidth areas.

Collaborative project management: increasing online tools for partners to work together e.g. Slack used by many as it has built-in team and project channels and integrates Google Docs, calendars etc although it was felt by one person to be "less good for strategic partnering". There was general agreement that specific platforms are needed because standard communication channels such as email and whatsapp were less appropriate for accessing and archiving documents.

Shared Decision making: increasing online tools to help people come to decisions transparently and collaboratively as well as track reservations/concerns e.g. Loomio, Glass frog.

Online dialogue: Social media, messaging and networking sites such as Twitter, Whatsapp (increasingly used in many places as the default mode of conversation between groups) Mightybell, Discourse, Viber etc are being used. Facebook Workplace, is an attempt to break down barriers and find a hybrid between personal and professional.

Having explored all of these benefits of technology to support effective remote partnering, the range of online tools and the pace of new emergent technology was also raised as an anxiety and generating feelings of being overwhelmed; this suggests that a needs analysis for each context could better produce the choices of technology.

BEING COURAGEOUS IN EXPLORING THE OPPORTUNITIES OF REMOTE PARTNERING PRACTICE

The norms of online communication were experienced by some as rather dry and detached and not very satisfactory. Some agreed that those more confident with online working could give them too much power. To bring about a spirit of partnership into online relationships requires a shaking up of established process in favour of something more human, engaging, creative and participatory.

- **Building relationships** - Building in a window of opportunity to focus on process and getting to know each other rather than diving into tasks "being proactive to create camaraderie"
- **Maximising individual potential:** We each have identity and creativity - how can we bring ourselves into remote partnering more creatively? How do we surface individual strengths (and assets?)
- **Remote selection of partners** The importance of asking questions about values and discussing together can save lots of time later.

"We are at the start of process - need to find a way of filtering through organisations that we want to work with."

"My clients employ me to vet partners, they don't have the funds to send me to meet prospective partners in person so it needs to be done online"

- **Listening /feedback platforms** Creating intentional spaces/mechanisms online to be able to listen to people's needs/feedback/issues may well be valuable however it is important that there is someone who can take action or resolve issues.

"With our research teams which are global with 8-9 participants in them. We came up with this great idea that they could have a partnership focal point. They would be the main contact and see how they're doing and the project leads wanted to be a partnership focal point. We felt it was a good opportunity for less senior members of partnership to be the main focal point. What happened is everyone used it as an opportunity to share their gripes about what they didn't like about the leads or other things and this put the focal points in a difficult position because they didn't have

authority. It showed that the partnership wasn't working and was a good diagnosis point to help recognise there was work to do to support the partnership."

- **Using processes of senses and silence to consciously harmonise people**

An example was provided by a webinar participant around the use of Alpha dynamic meditation - collectively meditating and creatively imagining together for the purposes of goal setting, changing work practices etc. It was reported by participants that it was a powerful way of adding potency to the discussions by tuning into the same frequencies as the quality of material produced was more powerful. Participants talked of experiences of working with faith-based organisations which often start with a prayer and this was shown to foster togetherness and connectedness. How can we incorporate new and appropriate approaches in a non-threatening way which can produce new results?

The experience of a MOOC in awareness based leadership (Ulab) where thousands of people are connected together in guided silence and journaling and the power of that. How to provide thinking space within relationships which allows reflective time. This could include: mentally picturing all the partners and asking them to consider: what am I learning from each angle i.e. working with DeBono's six hats to gain six different perspectives on a single issue.

- **Learning from distance learning:**

Many parallels between this work and online and blended learning were identified which also sees value in some face-to-face (not only online) teaching.

"My work with students, they find the initial contact face to face is most useful. In those critical moments in the learning journey of a 2 semester course, there's a high drop out point that comes and meeting face to face helps to reduce that. Critical moments in the journey of the discussion, it would be interesting to see if that happens in the partnership dialogue - what are the moments when there is higher risk of "drop-off?"

BEING INTENTIONAL ABOUT WORKING FOR **MUTUAL BENEFIT**

At the end of each webinar there was a "check out " to understand from each participant what they were taking away from the call and what they might practice. This along with the check in round seems to constitute a good way to ensure benefits to all parties is always taken seriously and worked towards.

Final Points raised at the end of the webinars

- A greater awareness about intentional remote partnership brokering: *"Reminded me that all the decades put into doing face to face group processes - the SAME thing applies to creating the most powerful remote experiences" " I have a lot of tools e.g. on how we understand and use the French terms liberty, equality and fraternity that I could also use online"*
- Inspiration that great relationships can be had with those we haven't met and that greater awareness of need for partnership brokering: *" Food for thought around trying some different techniques, how to structure the call, and set expectations before about what active participation could be" "Coming from a project management background - the concept of 'business as usual' is the shortest way to get from a-b and then it is done and dusted - you stick to project plan. To put on the partnership brokering overlay blows me away and adds a new dimension to how I think about project work and brokering principles of trust and equity. It is hurting my brain but that is not a bad thing"*
- Recognition of how people may be unknowingly contributing to power imbalances *"Finding ways for people to be contributors to meetings. A lot of times, I think of it as my role to lead everything - I could share roles around. People showing up is an issue in virtual meetings - maybe if more shared responsibilities they will feel more compelled to show up!"*

- Desire to reinvigorate calls that have become routine *"with new approaches to conversations that are more relationship focused, keep people more engaged and involve more fun!"*
- Recognition that calls which take more time to build rapport may make it harder for people to disengage
- Desire to use video more and work more intentionally with silence
- Recognition of the importance of the senses and engaging with people more fulsomely
- Recognition that partnership is based on a relationship as well as a project
- Recognition that values are not always aligned in remote partnerships and the need to address them
- Recognition of common need to learn more about remote partnering *"we have common problems and it's easier if we can collaborate on how to do it efficiently"*
- Recognition of the need to allocate sufficient time and space -for the process
- Increased awareness of different tech tools and the desire to experiment e.g. more (Slack/Sociocracy /Loomio/Zoom)
- Recognised need to find new ways of facilitating online sessions
- Increased awareness of the issues and need to change our attitudes to meeting online *"I need to change my own belief system that it's not a second best medium"*
- A sense of hope *"There is a lot of opportunity to be innovative and creative"*
- Remote partnering does not need to mean "Out of sight. Out of love"
Technology can enable positive experiences if used intentionally. "Something strong spoke to me about the intention to build relationships".

Desirable next steps suggested by those on the webinars include:

- Commitment to doing own research and following up on the webinar discussions and feed back to each other and chat *"I would like to hear how did it work - what were the challenges and new benefits - hope we keep in touch"*
- Create and share templates and resources and links mentioned to be circulated
- Use the Remote Partnering project Website (and download the resources) and contribute to more research
- Request for a new online training

Conclusions:

There seemed to be agreement that remote partnering is ripe for being the first choice for communication and engagement yet its power and potential has been underestimated because it is largely uncharted territory.

Whilst many good tools exist, one 'do it all' tool does not exist (this can mean good innovation opportunities!) and that it is the approach and mindset of the person using the tool that can make a difference to harnessing the potential in the virtual meeting - or not.