DISEMBODIED RELATIONS AT WORK
Exploring the Dynamics of Working Online During a Pandemic
16 February – 17 March 2021

DIRECTOR'S REPORT
APRIL 2021

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Summary

The conference attracted 18 participants who identified themselves across 12 nationalities (including Australia), living in as many different countries. The majority lived within Australia's regional time zone countries of Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, China, Hong Kong and India. Over half could be described as 'ex-pats' living abroad from their country of citizenship. There were also participants from further afield – Peru, South Africa and Italy. The international diversity was greater than that experienced in the 2018 conference and is no doubt due to it being an online event, amongst other things.

Most named their work role as either consultant, coach or facilitator. Many operated independently, and some were employed in educational institutions. Ages ranged from mid-forties to late sixties amongst 15 females and 3 males.

The conference staff were:

EXECUTIVE DIRECTORATE

Jinette de Gooijer, Conference Director

Greg Cook, Associate Director, and Director Learning Engagement

Caroline Farmer, Associate Director, and Director Membership Engagement

Sally Mussared, Director Technology

Thomas Mitchell, Assistant Administrator (Internship role)

CONSULTANTS

In addition to above staff:

Ganesh Anantharaman

Winnie Fei

Because of the fewer registrations than hoped for, not all of the invited staff were able to be appointed. I acknowledge the pre-conference engagement of Leslie Brissett, Nuala Dent, Ayin Jambulingam, Kristina Karlsson and Uma Ravikumar.

The conference was a new design drawing on established group relations methodologies, and then re-imagined for studying online collaboration and group phenomena. The online technologies were explicitly incorporated into the learning model of the conference, coined the 'Triple Task'. A new concept for both staff and members, it added complexity to an already challenging primary task of studying the nature of group and interpersonal relations when working online during a pandemic. The theme of Disembodied Relations at Work evoked powerful and disturbing associations to 'a land without shadows', 'shipwrecked in the desert' and a group culture of 'violent politeness'.

Members were invited to complete a pre-conference activity as preparation for small group work and role analysis groups. Few members actually completed this activity, some actively resisted doing so. The fact that not all staff completed this activity either may have contributed to this dynamic.

Marketing began in October 2020, then in earnest from December. With the Christmas break in the midst of this, we relied on digital media and personal contacts to promote the conference. Most participants cited email as their source of information about the conference.

While the conference made a financial loss, this first experience of running an online conference has been worthwhile for the learning outcomes and capabilities developed within GRA for online events.

Experiences and Reflections

In this section of the report are highlights of what we came to understand about the theme of 'Disembodied relations at work and the dynamics of working online during a pandemic'. I begin with a working hypothesis that emerged in a post-conference review held with staff. This is followed by reports from Greg Cook and Caroline Farmer on Learning Engagement and Membership Engagement.

A Working Hypothesis

> To avoid infection or death during this Covid-19 pandemic, individuals need to keep physical distance from one another. Social interactions and collaborative work can continue using online technologies. Online engagement also has its known dangers – trolling, abuse, and attacks on personal identity. Physical and emotional vulnerabilities are thus cathected. Disembodied relations when working online during a pandemic means **keeping a safe distance from the Other**.

Some incidents in support of this hypothesis are:

- At the Opening Plenary, the last person to arrive was wearing a face mask.

- Members would refer often to the 'disembodied' aspect of their experiences, but 'disembodied relations' was not spoken about.

- A group culture of politeness, later described as 'violent politeness', in which members would refrain from exploring their experiences and feelings about others, show diminished curiosity about others in small and large study groups, debate what was polite/not polite and propound on how one should behave online.

- Racial and gender relational dynamics and sexuality would be mentioned but not explored.

- Members expressed anger that not all the advertised staff were working in the conference.

- An informal meeting space was created for 'Members Only' and accessible 24/7 during the 5 week period of the whole conference, few members visited and most did not realise it was available 24/7.

- The Executive Directorate stopped meeting after the 1st week, and staff did not meet informally in between days either, mirroring the members use of their informal space.

- In the staff pre-conference meeting associations to the theme included 'disembodied means being cut off at the head', and that being online means 'that we cannot contaminate each other physically, but what about psychically?'

Learning Engagement

The learning engagement of members was intended to be explicitly linked through the Pre-Conference Activity (PCA) into the Small Group and then with the same groups into the Inter-Group Event (IGE). This learning engagement was intended to be further explored with members work in the Role Analysis Group (RAG). While this happened to some extent, it was this linking of experience that was paradoxically, perhaps the most challenging. It may have been the clearest example of being 'disembodied'.

The Pre-Conference Activity involved identifying a developmental issue based on a recent experience of working online that was to be worked on during the conference program – including the impact on member's roles and authority, how the task was undertaken, the impact on boundaries within their

work teams or other groups and how this was addressed. This did require a shared exploration of member's 'at home', COVID pandemic related work experiences.

Some members had undertaken this activity, but a significant number had not. Some members seemed to have not undertaken the PCA as simple denial, others perhaps as an avoidance of revealing their work lives during the pandemic within the conference, in other cases, more dramatically, perhaps as an enactment of being disembodied, perhaps even dissociated from the conference theme.

This then amplified the challenges of the Small Group (SG) and the 'new' formulation, attempted in this conference of the 'triple task' - studying the emergent dynamic behaviour and interaction within the group when working online on a shared task. The 'triple task' was variously taken up – with some rich inquiry about the challenges of group engagement and process reflection, in the 'here-and-now' when working online. The links to a shared group task of exploring topics of common interest based on the pre-conference activity (PCE) was less well developed. For many experienced members, it was a new, very unfamiliar approach and this simply may have compounded the disembodiment of working online.

It may also have been that the explicit challenge of working with the 'triple task' - of reflecting on the online group experience of working on a shared group task, provoked fears of exposure, perhaps of being attacked (trolled?), or of an intimacy that was simultaneously intimate but disembodied and therefore frightening. This may have been said most clearly in member's reflections on being stranded on a desert island – a land without shadow.

The Role Analysis Group (RAG) may have been the least challenging as members could focus on their 'at home' challenges in working online. This may also reflect an escape from focussing on 'live' online group process.

Membership Engagement

Overall there was much less direct engagement with individual members than there would be for a residential conference, for obvious reasons (no travel and accommodation aspects to arranging to attend). Engagement with members was primarily through the conference email both prior to the conference and during the conference. Beyond general enquiries about the conference, emails were primarily about fees and potential absences from particular events. The structure of the conference meant that several members had conflicting commitments which would mean they would be absent from some events.

Several technology workshops were offered in the lead up to the conference so that members could ensure they were familiar with the various platforms being used. Only one member took up this offer. Each week of the conference an email was sent to members with details of the various Zoom links required for that week's events.

During the conference there were regular Administration Office hours via a dedicated Zoom account and Members were given Signal contact details for the Technology Director and Assistant Administrator. The Administration office was only visited once.

We created Zoom accounts as dedicated Members and Conference Lounges. These were rarely used by Members. There seemed to be a lack of awareness that they existed amongst some Members, despite clear information in the Conference Information pack and links included in the weekly email.

On reflection it would have been good to have had some kind of Registration process. Perhaps a requirement that members register by logging into a Zoom account with breakout rooms prior to the Opening Plenary where staff would be there to greet them and orientate them to the technology. There were definite gaps in Members' understanding of how to use the platforms, including Zoom.

Conference Design

A structured program of group events provided participants with opportunities to:

- Examine and explore the lived experiences, interpersonal and unconscious group dynamics of working online during a pandemic;

- Identify and analyse individual and group response patterns in working online, developing new capabilities for managing these experiences; and

- Develop and experiment with new approaches for building more effective online working groups and teams where members can encounter each other more fully and productively.

Program Schedule

WEEK	0	1		2		3		4		5
Time (Australian Eastern Time		16 Feb	17 Feb	23 Feb	24 Feb	2 Mar	3 Mar	9 Mar	10 Mar	17 Mar
midday-1:00 pm		*Informal Gatherings*								12:30 pm
1:00-2:00 pm	pre-conference activity	OP	LSG 1	LSG 2	LSG 3	LSG 4	SC 2	SC 4	SC Review	GA
2:00-2:30 pm		*break*								
2:30-3:30 pm		SG 1	SG 3	IG PL / IG 1	IG 3	RA 2	SC 3	SC 5	RA 5	
3:30-4:00 pm		*break*								
4:00-5:00 pm		SG 2	RA 1	IG 2	IG Review	SC PL / SC 1	RA 3	RA 4	GA PL	CP
5:00-6:00pm		*Informal Gatherings*								

EVENT KEY
Opening Plenary (OP)
Plenary (PL)
Closing Plenary (CP)
Small Group (SG)
Small Group Inter-group event (IG)
Large Study Group (LSG)
Role Analysis group(RA)
System Culture event (SC)
Group Application event (GA)

LOG IN/LOG OUT TIMES:
Australian Eastern Standard time: midday-6 pm

Indicative international time zones:
Southeast Asia: 9 am-3 pm
India: 6:30 am-12:30 pm
UK: 1 am -7 am
East coast USA (NY): 8 pm - 2 am (previous day)
West coast USA (LA): 5 - 11pm (previous day)

Design Logic

The design of a staggered series of events over 4.5 weeks was intended to mirror the realities of living and working from home in a pandemic – the interrupted, disjointedness of such life. Additionally, I had in mind that sitting in front of a computer screen for 8 or more hours a day, for 6 consecutive days was physically untenable. What was also in mind was that this conference was not an online replication of a cancelled residential conference, but an entirely new concept. It was an opportunity to experiment, innovate and learn from this.

We (Caroline, Greg and I) had an idea about the place of technology in the collaborative work of online groups and worked on designing a practice-based activity to explore it. Greg's concept of a 'triple task', related to 'managing the tensions between technology, task and team process' provided us with a helpful framework. We did not know exactly how this would be understood and engaged with, or how it would be explored and studied. It was new for us all – staff and members. The experimental structure of the conference task was ignored by some, actively resisted by others; some tried to work with it, and some could not get their heads around it.

The pre-conference activity designed to assist members enter the conference and engage with the Triple Task structure had similar responses. The fact that all staff did not do the pre-conference activity themselves, along with members, nor even trialled it, would likely have contributed to members reactions to it. We were complicit in not fully engaging with it.

On the other hand, the technology had a discernible impact on dynamics directly, especially as an object and tool of authority. The role of Zoom Host is a powerful controller of individual autonomy. As the conference progressed with increasing complexity of group configurations and interactions, I realised that the 'technological authority' boundaries needed to shift. What was highly controlled in the Opening Plenary (members' videos were switched off by the Director Technology during my introduction) was loosened entirely for the Group Application event when every participant and staff member was made a co-host.

The final event, Group Application, allowed for more play, and the tight timeframe of one extended session meant that members were pushed to act, to be creative and interact. It is an event I trialled in 2018, and am pleased that it migrated well into an online experience.

What we learnt about designing an online conference

In the post-conference staff review, we shared our thoughts about what worked well and what we would do differently next time. A summary of these thoughts:

- How staff begin in engaging with members to create a containing entry environment is important. Online, one suddenly appears and disappears. There is a need to be introduced to staff and welcomed by them before the opening plenary. Showing members around the 'territory' of the conference when they arrive is a significant action by staff and promotes containment.

- Linked to this is the need to pay more attention to the spaces in-between sessions and events. Neither staff nor members used these to the extent that they could. Being together, not just working together, is challenging to do online.

- The design helped members' learning; nothing in particular was not useful or impeded learning. That members stayed the distance is testament that they found value to remain.

- The conference played around with what has become a familiar template for face-to-face residential conferences. Multiple elements were varied, e.g. remaining in the same small groups for the inter-group event; explicating a triple task for small group work, which disturbed expectations, especially for those with prior experience of group relations conferences. It added complexity.

- The extended period of 4.5 weeks was too long and could be compressed to a series over two weeks. The System Culture Event in particular would benefit from not being split over two weeks. Notwithstanding the interrupted pace, it felt that the conference as an institution continued to flow and develop from one week to the next.

- Understanding that this conference happened in a context of a pandemic, of social turmoil – cancel culture, Black Lives matter, #metoo, strong arm authoritarianism – all of which leads to a lot of distrust.

Operational Outcomes

• Staffing

Because fewer staff were employed than anticipated, the structure of the group was dominated by the five Executive Directorate members, all of whom were Australian.

Well into the planning for the conference, and after the promotional brochure had been promulgated, NIODA's CEO Wendy Harding made a generous offer to second Sally Mussared to the still vacant role of Director Technology. Sally's experience and expertise with the relevant technology platforms is exceptional and she made a significant contribution to the smooth running of the conference. Around the same time, Thomas Mitchell was invited to take up an internship role as Assistant Administrator. Thomas had applied for the internship role for the cancelled Working with Diversity conference. Fiona Martin, the other applicant for that role was more keen to conduct a research enquiry into the conference Triple Task. This is being conducted separately, under John Newton's supervision.

The role and function of administration in an online conference has a number of important differences from what is needed for a residential conference. We were all learning as we went along and had a few stumbles along the way. Administration of online conferences includes:

- Management of participant applications and financials.

- Selecting an appropriate set of technology platforms to meet the functional requirements of the conference, and having the skill set to manage these during live events.

- Ongoing communication and documentation of information to support members and staff access to technology accounts and associated tools.

The internship role of Assistant Administrator was less defined than as originally intended. Typically, administration is on the boundary of relations between staff and members, but in an online conference, this boundary is indistinct. When members, for example, came to visit management during the System Culture Event, the usual process of asking members at the door as to what is their purpose, role, group representation etc. is impossible to do with ease. Zoom technology is not geared for such negotiations in 'waiting rooms'. Ultimately, the Assistant Administrator performed (amongst other things) data entry of applicant's details, as a backup to the Director Technology (necessary at times), and their role was extended to include consultancy to Role Analysis groups and in the Inter-group and Group Application events.

• Marketing

Marketing began in October with the GRA newsletter and in earnest in December once the website was live with the brochure and application form complete. The application form held things up a bit and in retrospect I think we could have gone live with the website prior to this being ready. We could have asked people to email if they were interested in applying, and then directed them to the application form once it was up. An online application form was created using WeForms and worked well for applicants.

The conference was marketed digitally only (no hardcopy brochures or postcards were produced).

Website:

- Dedicated page on the GRA website with links to download the brochure and to the online application form;

- Tavistock website item with links to the GRA website

Email:

- Regular mailouts to the GRA conference list and items in the GRA member newsletter;

- Items included in member newsletters of like-minded organisations – NIODA, OPUS, Tavistock, GR India and two postings on the ISPSO listserv.

Social media: postings on the GRA Facebook page and the GR International Facebook page.

LinkedIn: regular posts on GRA LinkedIn account – conference staff and GRA members were encouraged to share these posts.

Messaging: Messaging in the emails and LinkedIn posts were aimed at the GRC familiar – focussed on the shifts in the model and an invitation to explore and innovate with us – and the GRC unfamiliar, in particular coaches and consultants – messaging focussed on the opportunity for professional development in understanding how group dynamics shift online.

RESULTS

Most people sited email as their source of information about the conference – GRA, ISPSO, NIODA, Tavistock and GRI emails were mentioned. Otherwise it was through direct contact with staff.

We were surprised at the lack of GRA members and Australians generally in the membership, only five Australian residents attended, all female. It may be that our relative 'back to normal' experience here in Australia meant that people saw the conference as less relevant, or that the structure was difficult because of clashes with work commitments, but it would seem advisable for GRA to consider this when planning the next conference.

• Technology

Three platforms were used:

ZOOM

Zoom was used for all events and to create ongoing meeting spaces for the conference. We created 11 accounts altogether. There were accounts dedicated to a conference lounge, a members lounge and a staff room that were open 24/7 for the full conference period. There was also an Administration/Technology Room open at specific times. The other seven accounts were used in different ways for the various small group and system events.

This proved to be a versatile and appropriate platform for the conference events.

MIRO

Miro Board was used for information sharing. We created three Miro Boards: A Conference Board that was used for general information to members and during events; a Staff-only board; and a Members-only board.

There were issues with this App once multiple people began to view and use the Conference Board. It was difficult to keep information posted in the appropriate place for example with posts being moved, resized or obscured accidentally. With more use and experimentation with different ways of arranging information on the Boards it might prove to be more effective.

SIGNAL

Signal was the messaging app for the conference. This was the only messaging app available in all countries represented in the Staff and Membership.

- ## Financial results

Gross Revenue: $21,269

Total Expenditure: $31,056

Net result: -$5,411

Conclusions

Aside from being run entirely online, the Disembodied Relations at Work conference introduced several innovations to the group relations conference methodology and GRA's modus operandi:

- The life of the conference as a temporary institution existed for five weeks. During this time, informal group spaces were available 24/7 over the whole five weeks, while formal study events were held two days a week.

- Implementing the concept (coined by Greg Cook) that groups working online are engaged with a 'Triple Task' of managing the dynamics of group task, group process, and the technology that enables them to connect.

- Formulating a pre-conference activity as preparation for working to the 'triple task' in various events.

- Members remained in their small groups for the Inter-group event to enable their small group work to continue while at the same time they interacted with other groups.

- Appointment of a Director Technology whose role was dedicated to the administration of the technologies-in-use.

- The appointment of an internship role, Assistant Administrator, offered to a recent NIODA graduate.

- Marketing the conference to Australia's regional time zone.

While the number of participants was fewer than hoped for, the online format attracted a diverse group of nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Some questions remain as to why the group was predominantly female, and why so few Australians or GRA members participated.

The 'triple task' proved to be complex and challenging, and provocative. The role of technology and its algorithmic constructs will continue to impact on group interactions, personal autonomy and authority. While that is so, exploring the dynamics of 'the triple task' remains relevant.

I feel it is only the beginning of understanding the conscious and unconscious dynamics of group relations online and what enables or impedes people to be fully present and available to the Other when interacting online.

This experiment in an online group relations conference has been a worthwhile exercise. More is yet to be understood from this first experience.

Jinette de Gooijer, Conference Director
11 April 2021