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HOW TO BEAT ISOLATION? FEEDBACK GROUPS FIT THE BILL

Researchers share tips for supporting research and life from a distance.

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We are an interdisciplinary group of scientists who have met online each week over the past eight years to provide one another with feedback and support in our careers. We have built a virtual community that has enriched our lives as people and as scholars. As the coronavirus pandemic threatens to isolate researchers, our experience might be of value. The pandemic is putting many people through a difficult time, but it might be an opportunity to create networks that will provide immediate emotional support and long-term research benefits. We hope our advice on forming and maintaining

a virtual feedback group will inspire others searching for ways to fight isolation and build communities.

Our project started as a dissertation-writing group while we were doing graduate work at Stanford University in California. It endured because, as we began our careers as academics and government scientists, we discovered that we had as much – if not more – need for one another's reactions and support. We found that feedback, especially that given early in the research process, was crucial to our scholarly success and was largely missing from available networks.

In our virtual meetings, one of us shares

something – a paper, outline, study design, syllabus, grant proposal, preliminary data or mere seed of an idea – and receives comments from the group. Our emphasis of feedback on content and its scientific underpinnings distinguishes our group from those focused on writing, which prioritize output or editing. Nor are we a standard research group: although we routinely provide contributions to one another's academic works and acknowledge members in our papers, our purpose is to support individual research agendas and career progress by providing rapid, frequent and multiple-stage commentary from a group of respected peers in a safe environment.

This type of feedback has many benefits. It does not replace the need for field- or organization-specific advice from experts in our disciplines or from mentors at our institutions. But, by enabling us to engage early in the research process and with people outside our discipline, our group offers benefits that those sources might not. Receiving advice early in the research and teaching process improves quality in ways that late-stage feedback from peer review or conference presentations does not. Engagement with interdisciplinary colleagues introduces us to new literature and methods, enabling us to be better collaborators and mentors.

Giving and receiving feedback improves our contributions to journal peer review and our ability to advise students. All members learn from everyone else's experiences, accelerating exposure to scholarly and professional activities and giving us confidence and insight. One member has provided feedback on more than 40 articles and 2 book proposals in the group – which exceeds the norm for her position as a first-year faculty member. This has given her the confidence to propose her own book and take on a journal-editor position.

Belonging to a supportive group in which we can present challenging ideas and receive advice without judgement enables us to step out of our comfort zones. This helps us, for example, to advance our fields by employing new methods, and to maintain work–life boundaries by saying no to enticing but unnecessary opportunities. And our support has helped members to pursue creative projects: one of us has published work using geographic maps to explore legal concepts.

From our experience, we have some tips for beginning such a group:

Choose respected peers from outside your 'normal' groups

Each member must respect the contributions of every member. It can be helpful for some participants to know one another personally – by sharing a common graduate program, as we did, or by belonging to the same professional or scholarly community, for example – but this is not essential. The group will meet online, making it an excellent space to expand your network by including colleagues from outside your university or usual collaboration circles. Including someone from a conference whose work is tangential to your own or the author of a paper in a field slightly outside yours can be good starting points.

Find disciplinary breadth and common ground

Having members from different disciplines has exposed all of us to new ideas and methods, although there are limits to how much interdisciplinarity is helpful. Our members come from environmental sciences, geography, law,

urban planning, environmental planning and public policy, so we vary widely in our methods, research interests and where we work; however, we share an interest in environmental governance and water. This gives us common ground and a shared language that helps to ensure our comments are informed and relevant.

Meet frequently and provide feedback at early stages

Unlike a writing group that aims to polish a nearly final product, feedback groups can mould nascent concepts. This helps members to filter promising ideas from unpromising ones, provides iterative commentary throughout the research process and encourages submission of rough concepts to enable prototyping of ideas.

Create a safe space

Feedback groups are most useful when members can be vulnerable and present a challenging idea or can offer constructive criticism without fear of reprisal. We engage from a place of respect: we direct our comments at the work, not the person. We balance negative

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and positive comments, and all feedback is presented constructively. Furthermore, we belong to different institutions and disciplines, so there is no 'career risk'. We are not on each other's tenure or promotion boards; we do not review one another's journal publications. Thus, we can ask questions that we might not raise in our own departments or organizations.

Be flexible, but take the commitment seriously

For some, this group could just be a stop-gap, perhaps to address social isolation due to the coronavirus pandemic. Even if this is the case, we encourage you to embrace the potential of continuing the group afterwards. Participating over years builds trust and creates reciprocity. This enables members to share ideas that they are less confident about, and to ask more of each other, such as a quick response on a time-sensitive issue or a detailed review of a long piece of work. Each person knows the others have asked or will ask the same in return. Trust and reciprocity do not instantly materialize; they must be cultivated.

Our group has evolved over time, as have our 'rules'. Since we formed, members have moved between countries, states and jobs; we have got married, had kids, overcome illnesses and

travelled. Flexibility helps us to address the realities of our changing lives while remaining committed to the group. We began with strict rules about weekly in-person attendance, and we used guidelines such as these to discuss expectations about how frequently we would meet, what the attendance policy would be and what types of feedback we would provide. Gradually, we relaxed these rules and transitioned to a weekly video conference with regular, if not compulsory, attendance. Members occasionally sit out for months at a time for career or family reasons. We developed trust and commitment to each other that rendered strict rules unnecessary.

Our technology and scheduling have also changed. Our members live in four time zones spanning a ten-hour time difference (from the east coast of the United States to the east coast of Australia). At the beginning of each semester, we review our teaching schedules and commitments, and use online scheduling platforms to find a meeting time that works for everyone for that semester. We have learnt that, no matter how well we plan, something will come up, such as daylight savings occurring on different days in different countries. Rather than let such hiccups derail our group, we have learnt to be flexible. We provide feedback through e-mail, change our presentation rota or simply skip a week. We are conscious that the group's goal is to provide support, not to create another must-do task.

For many scientists, a short-term group could help them to sustain their research practice and endure emotional strains during this uncertain time. But for some, it might evolve into something lasting, with benefits that extend far beyond the current crisis. The group has improved the quality of our scholarship and helped us to navigate challenges in our professional lives. Perhaps even more importantly, it has helped us to build a community and maintain work–life balance, which makes us happier academics and more well-rounded scholars and humans.

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