

Virtual Viral Hangouts: The media literacy lifeline I didn't realize I needed

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ABSTRACT

This article describes my experience as an academic media librarian initially seeking guidance on best support practices for the virtual world from other media literacy educators at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. What I found through the Virtual Viral Hangouts community turned out to be so much more! In addition to sharing tips on media literacy education (my contribution emphasized commercial media resources and student created media projects in virtual contexts), I also developed dear friendships with participants from all walks of life. The one hour a day spent away from my daily work served as a lifeline, providing space for much needed self-care that sustained me during a very challenging time while expanding my knowledge of media literacy education practices.

Keywords: *media literacy, community of practice, media resources, student-created media, virtual instruction.*



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INTRODUCTION

Picture this: You are an academic media librarian happily going about your business leading a library-based media services program, working with instructors to develop their course with integrated student-created media assignments, and coordinating direct support with students in collaboration with library site-based services. You are also responsible for coordinating access to instructional video, such as streaming feature films, documentaries, and practitioner video. Over the past 13 years, you have supported over 400 courses, representing hundreds of instructors, thousands of students spanning campus disciplines with all manner of different types of student-created media project genres. Most of these projects, whether in the classroom or the library media center, heretofore, have been conducted in person.

Then, out of the blue, mid-semester in March 2020, you are advised that the students who had been on spring break will not be returning to the classroom for the foreseeable future.

Right away, you start receiving frantic emails from instructors with whom you had collaborated to intricately design effective media assignments and related support plans in order to optimize learning potential. They are questioning whether the assignment should be revised or even continued at all? If they are continued, since many of these projects were group-based, they ask, how can the library provide external support for disparate, virtual media creation? Moreover, if this assignment is to continue, what should be the expectations to measure success? On the media resource front, instructors are contacting you seeking immediate guidance on accessing streaming commercial films now that they can no longer show DVDs in the classroom.

This was my Covid reality in the spring of 2020.

As a media specialist, leading a program that was place-based, I was confronted with a number of these questions but did not know where to turn. Accordingly, I was intrigued when I received an invite to join the Virtual Viral Hangouts (VVH) community consisting of other media literacy educators from a diverse range of educational contexts. Whether they be a teacher, instructor, librarian, media specialist, or media education associational leader, I figured they were likely facing some of the same challenges and perhaps, had some answers. Still, I did not know what to expect. What I experienced was not exactly what I had been anticipating, but it turned out to be much more.

Where everyone knows your name

Every session began with an around the room call out from the session facilitator, professor Renee Hobbs (University of Rhode Island). Every person was made to feel welcome by not only introducing themselves if they were new to the group, but also having the opportunity to respond to a unique question of the day. This simple exercise helped participants let go of stresses existent outside of this one hour of participation while becoming assimilated with the group. Over time, through this exercise, Hobbs began to link people who had commonalities or differences from one another. This practice continued as we separated into Zoom breakout rooms to discuss a central topic with provocative, usually media literacy related questions, in a smaller group. These seemingly simple, but thoughtfully designed practices built into the broader session structure leveraged the functional affordances of the virtual Zoom platform to build community.

Talking shop: Sharing multiple approaches to media literacy education

From a media literacy practice perspective, for as much as I contributed to the discussion, I gained new insights from this community in spades both in terms of subject knowledge acquisition and a space to collaboratively reflect on practice. This learning experience included topics that were new to me, such as the benefits of gamification in the classroom as a catalyst for youth literacy. It also included provocative reflections, such as the extent to which the pandemic has impacted our worldviews on the philosophies, practices, policies, and systems related to media literacy education that may need change. Further, we reflected on how we as media literacy educators should take steps to change these philosophies, practices, policies, and systems in a post-pandemic world. As such, the VVH environment helped me better capture the current media literacy education landscape, while envisioning what the future could look like.

Because my job involves helping educators design and implement media production activities in a wide range of university courses, I had some ideas about how to adapt to the Covid reality. Instinctively, I knew that lowering the technical barriers for media creation and giving students opportunities to create a video that more closely resembled a personal narrative digital story would be important. Students could combine still images and compose a script with voiceover rather than

a more documentary style video. While students would still have the option to include moving images, soundtracks, and subject matter interviews (which now needed to be conducted virtually), this was no longer the composition that instructors were expecting for most of the courses I had been consulting. That said, when the expectations and related support services shifted to lower barriers to media creation, some instructors were concerned that some of the potential for student learning may be lost. I wondered what were the best approaches to adapt my outreach practice, and our services more broadly to meet these challenges?

As an academic media librarian, having the opportunity to share my experiences and capture those from educators situated in multiple contexts was one of the most rewarding aspects to VVH. Of course, a community of media literacy educators would coalesce around media literacy education topics. Every session included a presentation from at least one of the participants on a wide range of topics, resulting in the sharing of expertise from multiple perspectives. I had the honor of presenting at two of these sessions.

Student-created media storytelling

The first presentation was an adaptation of my classroom outreach “visual literacy” discussion. This presentation began with an overview of different genres of student-created media supported over the years and illustrated by an online website I previously created as part of a research project (Spicer, 2019). This resource focuses on sustainability topics but has applicability across disciplinary contexts. It includes examples of student works along with the benefits, considerations and suggested additional curricular activity pairings for each type. For example, in my VVH presentation I referenced the Ecosystem Health student-created media project – a course that I had helped transition to the online environment in light of the pandemic. Combining two different types of student-created media projects – a journalistic, investigative case study with a solution-modeling video – Ecosystem Health is one of the most complex projects that our Media Services program has supported to date. In previous iterations, students utilized a broad range of compositional strategies – including user-generated and repurposed mixed media and third party content – to communicate background of their subjects and their proposed solutions. Notably, these projects tend to combine still photography, moving image, soundtrack, text, graphics, and script-driven voiceover narrative.

Given the suddenly dispersed media creation environment, where students needed to create their group videos remotely, we worked to lower the required threshold to emphasize the thoughtful use of still imagery by providing guidance on image selection considerations, and the meanings that still imagery can convey. I also further emphasized the use of pacing, silence (blank slides), text fonts, transitions and other effective, yet technically minimalistic strategies for conveying their ideas. Though the focus was on lower-barrier media creation, we made it clear that groups were welcome to compose at a higher technical level as appropriate for their project and capacity. As shared in my presentation, a light content analysis of group projects from this class, compared to those created in the previous spring semester, suggests that the benefit of this compositional transition towards lower-barrier, still imagery, and voiceover, was evident. Nonetheless, final screenings and feedback from the instructors suggest that the students once again far exceeded the media assignment expectations, especially under these trying circumstances.

Can I get that film in streaming?

For instructors who had previously relied on in-class typically DVD media delivery, transitioning to an all-online environment required a way to provide streaming digital video access to commercial films, documentaries, television programs, practitioner instructional videos and likely in some cases, newly adopted exclusive web programs as an alternative, that are pedagogically critical to reinforcing course content and describing complex concepts. As a result, I scrambled to identify access possibilities under a crush of sudden instructor demand, against a backdrop of having a reasonable but modest budget and in many cases, a challenging marketplace environment that fails to offer institutional streaming access to instructor-requested content. Over the years, I have developed some depth of expertise in dealing with this environment by subscribing to educational platforms such as Kanopy or referring our patrons to freely available online resources.

The VVH forum provided me with a perfect platform to share this information with colleagues in the summer of 2020. Judging by the feedback, my portion of the presentation, which also included co-presenters discussing topics of navigating Netflix subgenres and public library media resource offerings, met the intended goals. I was able to raise media educators’

awareness of some specific media distribution platforms and provided this audience with a set of tangible library-created guides they can now use to provide guidance for their communities. As a result, VVH provided a fertile opportunity for information cross-pollination between multiple educators including academic librarians, public librarians, university instructors, K-12 teachers, and other media literacy professionals.

Making friends in all the right places

Lexico defines the term “resilience” as “the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness” (Lexico, n.d.). As the pandemic has made apparent, it is difficult to recover from ills while still undergoing sudden trauma, especially when ambiguity persists, and the future remains uncertain. During these times of high stress, individual coping mechanisms are useful, but can have limited utility depending on one’s circumstances. What is often needed for even partial recovery, is a combination of self-care and community. This is truly where VVH excelled!

Though we shared our knowledge and experience as media literacy practitioners, the camaraderie we built through sharing our professional and personal challenges simply surviving the pandemic was the greatest benefit of all. Anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger proposed the concept of the community of practice (CoP), which has been described as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1). It became readily apparent that, as media education practitioners, we all share a common passion for media education, but exist within silos at our institutions that can be isolating. Still, common cause alone is not enough to sustain a community. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for participation are necessary. Etienne Wenger, Richard McDermott, and William M. Snyder’s book, *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge* (2002) proposed seven characteristics of effectively designed CoPs: design for evolution, open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives, invite different levels of participation, develop both public and private community spaces, focus on value, combine familiarity and excitement, and create a rhythm for the community.

VVH incorporated all these concepts, which I believe helped it to be successful. This resulted in, for example, sustained high levels of participation over time

(e.g., reprise sessions around Thanksgiving, fall 2021). It was also not uncommon for a member to attend a session simply to passively observe. They might say, “I am not feeling well today, but I wanted to be with you.” This emotional and social support represents the power of a well-designed community.

Though I had come to the group anticipating answers on how to best adapt our Media Services program to the virtual environment, and received some of that information, the sharing of our life experiences was where this community had the most significant impact for me. During that one hour a day, I was able to let go of my concerns and be with colleagues going through similar circumstances. As a result, I was better able to maintain my well-being and go back to my work rejuvenated with a positive outlook capable of overcoming the overwhelming pressures that a pandemic can induce. This in turn helped me to be a better prepared media literacy practitioner capable of taking on the multiple challenges that came my way.

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