

FULL-LENGTH ARTICLES

Online and Remote Community-Engaged Facilitation: Pedagogical and Ethical Considerations and Commitments

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In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, many community-engaged practitioners struggled with how to meaningfully and ethically build, maintain or sustain relationships, partnerships, or community-engaged projects, amidst mass upheaval, loss, and uncertainty. Prior to the pandemic, workshops, meetings or community events happened in community drop-ins, social service organizations, or in neighbourhood meeting places. Due to social distancing restrictions, these physical environments abruptly changed to online meeting and messaging applications, phone, and even postal mail. This drastically impacted how community-engaged practitioners approached their facilitation work with communities. This rapid shift also amplified many ethical complexities, like privacy and confidentiality, equitable access, and safety, for those facilitating workshops or programs in non-profit, community-based and participatory research contexts. This article explores findings from a participatory study on how community-engaged practitioners (i.e., community artists, community facilitators, participatory researchers, and participatory visual methods practitioners) across Canada adapted their facilitation approaches to online or remote platforms in the context of COVID-19. We briefly describe our process of doing participatory research online during a pandemic and share findings on how community-engaged practitioners articulated the ethical commitments they brought to their facilitation practice as well as pedagogical and ethical considerations identified for online or remote (i.e., phone, mail) community-engaged facilitation. We conclude by offering reflections on what might be gleaned about online and remote community-engaged facilitation for the present moment. We hope that this article - and the illustrations enclosed - will serve as a guide for emerging and established community-engaged practitioners to reflect on their 'how and why' of facilitation when working with and alongside communities for social change.

This article shares findings from a participatory research project that explored how community-engaged practitioners were adapting their facilitation practice to online or remote (i.e., mail, phone) platforms in the context of COVID-19. By community-engaged practitioners, we refer to individuals who actively involve and collaboratively work alongside community members to address pressing social and environmental injustices. More specifically, community-engaged practitioners invite community

members - who often experience marginalization - into dialogue by adopting a participatory approach to facilitating meetings, conversations, workshops or gatherings, while also building deep relationships over time. Their work is often inspired by popular education, an approach to de-institutionalized learning where people collectively share their lived experiences to build collective knowledge and work toward liberation for all (Freire, 2000; Highlander Research and Education Centre, n.d.). For the purpose of our study, community-engaged practitioners included participatory researchers, community artists, community facilitators, and participatory visual methods practitioners. In these fields, careful facilitation is required to bring about dialogue and exchange on issues of community importance.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many community-engaged practitioners struggled with how to meaningfully and ethically build and sustain relationships, partnerships, or projects, amidst mass upheaval, loss, and uncertainty. Prior to the pandemic, meetings happened in community drop-ins, social service organizations, or in neighbourhood meeting places. However, due to social distancing restrictions, these physical environments abruptly changed to alternate platforms and communication tools, such as online meeting and messaging applications, phone, and even mail (Burkholder, MacEntee, et al., 2022; Rivera et al., 2022). This drastically impacted how community-engaged practitioners approached their facilitation work with communities. The abrupt shift to online or remote (i.e., phone, mail) platforms introduced and amplified many ethical issues such as privacy, safety, confidentiality and equitable access for those working with communities who experience social and economic marginalization (Polat, 2022; Teti et al., 2021; Valdez & Gubrium, 2020). Many people cannot access quality internet or technology to participate in online spaces due to age, income, geographic location, gender roles and family responsibilities (Fang et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2020). Even with access to the internet, download speeds and device access can present additional barriers, especially for low-income communities, and seniors (Andrey et al., 2021). Furthermore, many marginalized and/or structurally disadvantaged communities experienced heightened stress and isolation during the pandemic. These physical, economic and structural impacts of COVID-19 were exacerbated by racial, gender and class-based health inequities across the global north and south (Knight et al., 2021; Kumar & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2020). Finally, the abrupt shift to online or remote platforms changed aspects of how people related to each other. Past scholarship has documented how technology shapes what is possible relationally (Heringer, 2021; Noone, 2020). As people began to gather online or by phone, implicit rules of social engagement began to emerge for each platform, such as greetings, muting, video use, emojis, and chat etiquette.

Despite group facilitation being a key competency for community-engaged practitioners (Burkholder, Aladejebi, et al., 2022a; Nelson et al., 2004), scholarship on online, community-engaged facilitation is relatively limited

(see exceptions: Burkholder, Thorpe, et al., 2022; Hassen & Flicker, forthcoming; Jahangir et al., 2022). Literature in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic was especially dearth. Although educational institutions developed learning resources for online *teaching* (Bozkurt et al., 2020), these were geared specifically to in-school classroom contexts, and not as relevant for community-engaged practitioners *facilitating* workshops or meetings in out-of-school contexts with community groups, youth programs, or social service organizations. While there are some similarities across contexts such as issues of inequity, data privacy, care practices and digital literacies (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023; Bozkurt et al., 2020), schools are guided by different commitments than community-engaged initiatives. Similarly, institutional review boards within academic institutions are not always equipped to deal with the unique issues that emerge in participatory research (Flicker et al., 2007; Kwan & Walsh, 2018). As meetings and workshops shifted online, the absence of relevant resources left many community-engaged practitioners without guidance or support.

These challenges sparked conversations about the need for opportunities to dialogue, troubleshoot, and exchange strategies. In response, the “Community Engagement in COVID-19” pilot study was formed in order to create space for community-engaged practitioners - including ourselves - to learn from each other as we were adapting our participatory facilitation approaches in the context of COVID-19. We were particularly interested in learning from community-engaged practitioners who articulated their facilitation practice as grounded in a social justice ethic – in other words, those who saw their facilitation practice as a means to amplify community voices on pressing social and environmental injustices.

In what follows, we briefly describe our process of doing participatory research during a pandemic and share findings on how community-engaged practitioners articulated the ethical commitments they brought to their work, as well as the pedagogical and ethical considerations identified for online or remote community-engaged facilitation. Pedagogical considerations include: the backdrop of COVID-19, isolation and stress, equity and power dynamics, accessibility, zoom fatigue, space and place, community care and group dynamics, materiality, time and labour concerns. Ethical considerations include privacy, confidentiality, surveillance, blurred boundaries, access and equity, safety and extractive practices and industries. Each is explored below.

Our findings are informed by two theoretical frames. First, drawing on Gaztambide-Fernández and Matute (2013), we understand pedagogy as an inherently relational and ethical process, driven by practitioners’ desires and intentions (both conscious *and* unconscious). When community-engaged practitioners facilitate conversations with others during workshops, meetings, or gatherings, they rely on approaches, embodiments or techniques that “push against the experiences of another” to engage people in dialogue (Gaztambide-Fernández & Matute, 2013, p. 56). In other words, pedagogy refers to how community-engaged practitioners think through and enact

ethical commitments in their facilitation practice. Second, we understand community engagement as a relational, ethical, affective, and pedagogical process, influenced by institutional contexts where the role of the facilitator is not neutral (Freire, 2000; Switzer, 2019b; Switzer et al., 2020). Here, engagement is neither a technocratic means to an end (e.g., we ‘engaged’ a community in order to), nor a fixed state (e.g., they were engaged). Rather, engagement is a process of collaboratively reaching towards an imagined future – in other words, a “beyond” where what we can create or strive towards, is more than we can create or imagine alone (Gaztambide-Fernández & Switzer, forthcoming; Switzer, 2019a).

Although our study explored how community-engaged practitioners were adapting their participatory facilitation approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic, our findings are increasingly made more relevant as facilitating online becomes more entrenched in everyday practice. Thus, in light of our findings, we conclude by offering reflections on what might be gleaned about online and remote community-engaged facilitation for the present moment. We hope that this article - and the illustrations enclosed - will serve as a guide for both emerging and established community-engaged practitioners to reflect on their ‘how and why’ of facilitation when working with and alongside communities for social change.

Doing Participatory Research with Community-Engaged Practitioners in a Pandemic

Background

We write as a team of community-engaged practitioners committed to sparking dialogue about facilitation, participatory design and social justice. Our work crosses the fields of participatory research, community arts and cultural production, participatory visual methods, and popular education.¹ At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we struggled with the unique pedagogical and ethical issues we were encountering in our facilitation practice with communities, as we transitioned our meetings to online and remote platforms. We sought to find spaces to learn from others who shared similar social justice commitments and turned to our networks to strategize on how to best adapt our projects with care. Meanwhile, the lead author (Sarah) was hosting conversations and facilitating workshops about how to transition participatory workshops, programs or research methods to online environments.² These early conversations coalesced into a pilot study to

¹ Community arts is a grassroots, process-oriented approach to collaborative and community-centered art-making, often outside of gallery spaces. Here, the process of working collaboratively together is as important as the product (Barndt, 2011). We refer to cultural production as forms of creative, cultural and symbolic exchange that aim to express and create ideas all while engaging in collaborative and creative practices that are forms of political engagement themselves (Gaztambide-Fernández & Arráiz Matute, 2015). Participatory visual methods include but are not limited to photovoice, digital storytelling, and participatory video, where participants collaboratively create, analyze, discuss and share visual products (MacEntee et al., 2022). These methods are used in research, evaluation, and community development.

² These workshops and discussions took place within participatory research communities, as well as 2SLGBTBQ+ youth and HIV and Harm Reduction initiatives.

explore how community-engaged practitioners were adapting their participatory facilitation practices to online and remote communication platforms during the pandemic, and the unique pedagogical and ethical issues that were emerging. We realized that more critical spaces were needed for community-engaged practitioners to collectively learn from one another across sectors and fields. Our larger goal was to develop a series of free, public resources and cross-sector events to support community-engaged practitioners through this challenging time.

Our team included those formally affiliated with academic institutions, a local organization and/or independently affiliated practitioners. Together we collaborated on project design, analysis and dissemination. Community partners included Neighborhood Arts Network and the Centre for Community Partnerships at the University of Toronto. The study unfolded in spring 2020 amidst economic and societal upheaval and local lock-downs. Due to pandemic challenges, and because we aspired to complete the project in a timely and community-responsive way, a sub-group of researchers located at the Youth Research Lab (authors Sarah, Andrea, rubén) addressed day-to-day decisions, seeking design and analysis input from collaborators (authors Casey, Erin, Francisco and other team members). As a post-doctoral fellow, Sarah had the resources to devote to (co)leading this study, with the support of the team. Andrea initially supported the project as a research assistant and later became lead illustrator. Team members embraced diverse identifications, networks and histories conducting community-engaged, participatory projects with communities across arts, public health, and participatory research fields across local, national and international scales. Herein, the ‘we’ refers to ‘our team.’

Methods: Data Collection and Analysis

Over the fall and early winter 2020-2021, we invited 31 community artists, community facilitators, participatory researchers, and participatory visual methods practitioners across Canada into dialogue. We hosted five audio-recorded 90 minute focus groups via Zoom, drawing on a “praxis research” approach, defined as when practitioners “evaluate their own individual and collective praxis in light of tradition and in response to current and emerging conditions and circumstances” (Kemmis, 2010, p. 20). Participants were recruited by email and social media through team networks. Participants required at least five years of community-engaged facilitation experience and had already begun adapting their work to online, phone, or other communication platforms as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure inclusivity, exceptions were made for participants under 30 years-old who had less experience, or those who identified working in a peer-facilitation role.³ Interested participants filled out a screening survey on eligibility criteria,

³ Here, the term peer refers to individuals who are hired explicitly because of their lived experience in a role (e.g., youth facilitators with a youth participatory research project, or people living with HIV who facilitate programs for other people living with HIV).

practitioner role (i.e., community facilitator, participatory researcher) and shared how they self-identified via an open-ended question. The majority of participants were cis-gender women, followed by cis-gender men.⁴ Some participants identified as trans and/or did not identify along the gender binary. Many identified as queer. Slightly over half of our participants identified as white, followed by Black, Latinx and Southeast Asian. Some participants self-identified as living with a disability, being neurodivergent, “mad” or “crazy.” Participants worked across academia, the arts/cultural production fields, HIV and/or harm reduction, youth and immigrant and refugee serving sectors. Most were located in urban centres. For feasibility, and because this was a pilot study, we prioritized diversity of role over region. Although practitioners identified with multiple roles, role prioritization helped with scheduling, and encouraged dialogue and exchange during focus groups. Some team members also participated as focus group participants.

A subset of the team co-facilitated focus groups. Focus group design included participatory icebreakers, chat use, collaborative brainstorming via padlet (an online brainstorming software), and semi-structured discussion questions. While literature has since surfaced on best practices for online focus groups and engagement (Pocock et al., 2021), at the time, online data collection and facilitation resources were exceptionally limited. Throughout, co-facilitators (Sarah and Andrea) met regularly to reflect on focus groups, discuss emerging findings, and make adaptations based on what they were learning within and external to focus groups. Since authors were simultaneously learning how to adapt participatory approaches to online settings, these debriefs informed both focus group delivery and analysis.

Focus group conversations were transcribed and entered into NVivo software for coding, alongside chat and online brainstorming records. Participants chose pseudonyms; to recognize their contribution, some practitioners chose to use their first names. Using grounded theory, an inductive approach to theory-building (Charmaz, 2005), we conducted thematic analysis of transcripts. In grounded theory, analysis begins early and further focuses data collection, making it a good fit for a pilot study (Stebbins, 2001). Due to research team capacity and resources, a smaller working group developed a preliminary coding framework, based on a series of iterative discussions about the data, and then presented the coding framework and preliminary analysis to collaborators for feedback and to ask refining questions. What was initially referred to in jest as ‘pandemic analysis’ – as a ‘play’ on preliminary analysis and a nod to our team’s strained capacity during a pandemic – became a salient reference for responsive and time-sensitive analysis. Presenting ‘drafty’ and unrefined findings opened up analysis to a diversity of stakeholders. This was particularly important given the absence of any literature on facilitation and community-engagement

⁴ Cis-gender refers to people who identify with the gender that matches the sex assigned at birth.

in relation to COVID-19 restrictions at the time of the study. Pandemic analysis also reflected the pressing themes of balanced participation, rigour, and community-responsiveness throughout the research process.

Finally, to get further feedback on our analysis and communicate our findings to a wider audience we developed a series of sixteen creative-commons licensed illustrations based on the findings. There is a strong alignment between grounded theory and open-ended methods that include image and text (Creswell, 2003). Illustrations were developed iteratively, with the help of data summaries and continual dialogue between Andrea (lead illustrator) and team members during both one-on-one and full team meetings. Later, we shared draft illustrations with research participants to inform collective thinking and to source feedback on preliminary findings. Relying on graphic representations to ground abstract discussions of research findings can be an accessible and participatory way of including multiple perspectives on data (Switzer & Flicker, 2021). Illustrations are representational and interpretive touchstones of findings. During analysis, they served as "graphic orientations" to emerging ideas and concepts (Vela Alarcón et al., 2022). Furthermore, illustrations helped our team open up analysis to both participants and wider stakeholders in a short period of time. Below, we share images to illustrate our findings and prompt reader reflection. Our study concluded with a series of resources and public events including: an experiential practitioner-led panel, an online community of practice discussion, an illustrated web-resource, video-series (www.beyondthetoolkit.com) and later, conventional academic outputs.

Pedagogical and Ethical Considerations for Community-engaged Online and/or Remote Facilitation

Central to community-engaged facilitation are the ethical commitments community-engaged practitioners bring to their facilitation practice, as well as concrete pedagogical and ethical considerations and practices that help practitioners enact these commitments. Whereas commitments are the values that guide practitioners' facilitation practice, pedagogical or ethical considerations refer to the multiple interlocking elements one must navigate when facilitating with community groups online, or via alternate communication platforms (i.e., phone, mail). Each is described and illustrated below.

Ethical Commitments

Community-engaged practitioners identified three inter-related ethical commitments guiding their facilitation practices: 1) relationality and care; 2) accountability and transparency; and 3) equitable access.

Relationality and Care

For practitioners, attending to relationships and crafting the conditions for care with others (and themselves) was an important ethical commitment in their facilitation practice. In the context of COVID-19 and other syndemics,⁵ collective care practices became amplified. Practitioners shared how many communities they worked with, and belonged to, were experiencing heightened isolation, inequity, mental health challenges and anti-Black racism. Our study took place at the same time social organizing was surging against mounting anti-Black violence and discrimination in policing, education, and justice systems in Canada (Cole, 2022). For racialized communities,⁶ community meetings could feel “very heavy.” As Sam, a participatory researcher shared:

There’s been crisis after crisis in the city’s northwest. ... So, we’ve had to create alternative spaces. ... like a light edition or joy edition where there’s only sharing of family members’ babies and pets and fun stuff just to counter-balance the fact that we only saw each other when we were mitigating crisis or making sure folks have enough to eat or COVID pop up tests. ... That kind of light edition of our WhatsApp groups and Zoom meetings which has helped a lot of folks, especially some of our elders that are Aunties who are feeling quite isolated.

As illustrated in [figure 1](#), for many, technology bridged physical and social gaps in creating networks of care.

In focus group workshops, participants evoked plants as both metaphor and physical object to signal collective and self-care. Many participants creatively developed new collective care-taking practices, as illustrated by the plant being passed between two distant mobile devices. In [figure 1](#), a person extends their arms through a cell phone lined by a growing garden of flowers and foliage. They pass a plant to an individual who reaches outwards from a separate device, their arms outstretched. This illustration represents the symbiotic relationship between needing care for oneself in order to offer care for another - a key discussion during our focus groups.

This commitment to, and tension between, caring for oneself and caring for others was particularly pronounced during the pandemic. Many practitioners explained that they were also struggling. Practices of self-grounding, honesty, transparency, and collective support became paramount

⁵ The term syndemics refers to diseases and social conditions that interact to create enhanced vulnerability for individuals and communities, such as COVID-19, structural racism, and mental health challenges. The term was developed during the HIV epidemic in 1990’s to describe the way in which substance use, violence and HIV/AIDS interacted to impact health outcomes (Bhui, 2021; Shim & Starks, 2021).

⁶ Drawing on the work of Reece (2021), we use the term racialized to refer to the process of racialization, whereby racial identities are ascribed to particular groups, resulting in oppression and exclusion. For Reece, this term is in contrast to the acronym BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) which can erase the distinct ways and degrees in which racism is experienced by members of these groups (See also: Women and HIV/AIDS Initiative (2024)).

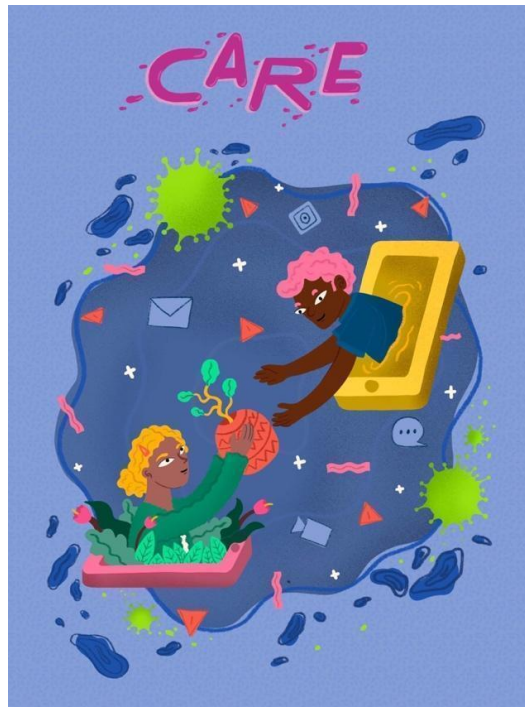


Figure 1. Relationality and Care

for building and sustaining relationships with self and others. Kate, a community facilitator, described her facilitation practice as one of “availability and a practice of attention”: “It feels like an ethical principle of relating to the folks that I work with. To be available to be moved. ... I’ve been having to really carefully think about what I need to give myself in order to be available emotionally, to be as generous as I’d like in my daily work.” [Figure 1](#) evokes Kate and others’ openness to be moved and to move others through collective support and self-care.

Accountability and Transparency

Practitioners shared that being accountable and transparent to communities was an important guiding principle in their work. As Victoria, a community artist shared, “holding people’s stories” was both a “great gift” and “responsibility.” As evoked by [figure 2](#), accountability also evokes collaboration, as individuals bring different contributions to a project, and participate from different positionalities and vantage points. Practitioners also spoke about making transparent budget or project constraints as well as ensuring the creative re-distribution of financial and material resources away from institutions and towards community needs. In the context of the pandemic, this commitment was realized by physically mailing supplies to participants or travelling to directly deliver participant honoraria. Some participants reflected on how this action shifted pre-existing power dynamics; during in-person workshops, a facilitator brings supplies, and packs them up at the end of a workshop. Co-Author Casey, a participatory visual methods practitioner working with rural 2SLGBTBQ youth, likened the process of wealth redistribution to being like “Robin Hood”:



Figure 2. Accountability and Transparency

I think that that's something that we've been able to do because of COVID to physically get visual materials into people's hands, into their homes, in a way that would have been very different if our original project design [was] where people came to a university site for a weekend workshop and made visuals in that space.

While practitioners' ethical commitments often pre-dated COVID-19, the conditions imposed by the pandemic amplified these values as they creatively navigated the "lived tensions" of adapting their participatory practice to new, rapidly changing online environments. Practitioners described how this invited them to become more reflexive about power dynamics and their conscious (and unconscious) desires as facilitators. For example, many practitioners commented on how the pandemic elucidated just how integral their community-engaged facilitation practice had always been for their own mental and emotional well-being. Nonetheless, as M., a participatory researcher shared, being able to "successfully redistribute power and the need for consistent, rigorous humility" was not always easy: "I think a lot about power and my investments in undoing or dismantling systems of violence and, also how I am implicated in them and how easy it is to opt back in at every moment." As represented by the jostling of multiple pieces in [figure 2](#), navigating accountability and transparency was an ongoing and emergent process contoured by multiple shifting institutional and interpersonal power dynamics.

Equitable Access

Practitioners articulated an ethical commitment to equitable access to participation, via technology. As illustrated in [figure 3](#), they acted on this commitment by thinking through and responding to the many technological access points posed by online and/or remote communication technologies (i.e., phone, video, audio, chat, types of online platforms). This involved adopting an open, flexible, and equity-oriented approach when engaging communities through diverse communication media. For many, these adaptations compelled them to think more deeply about issues of equitable access in a way that transformed their facilitation practice across both online and in-person environments. Naomi, a community artist, adapted her theatre workshops to the phone, when working with low-income seniors. She shared that this process encouraged her to reflect in a way that “will take me into really, really doing deep work around how to make my work accessible when we get back in person.”

Further, putting this commitment into practice required nuanced discussions on intersectionality, positionality, equity, and accessibility. From conversations, we learned that there was no one-size fits all approach to accessibility. Practitioners described that technology can *both* alleviate and/or amplify equity-related issues and access barriers, depending on the overlapping community needs and identities, and the topic being discussed. As Craig, a community facilitator noted, “A lot of the peer [workers] that we work with don’t have access to the internet or cell phones. ... It’s been challenging. ...a lot of the people that we truly value we haven’t been able to connect with.” Varying digital literacy levels or language barriers (e.g., translating Zoom functions) also requires close attention.

For others, technology *decreased* participation barriers. As Z. explained, “One of the good things that I see coming out of so much going online is that for ... some folks with disabilities.... it’s become very accessible to be able to join things and participate in things, not having to travel, being able to blackout your screen, to mute yourself.” Similarly, Ananya, a participatory researcher, described how meeting on Zoom decreased participation barriers for South Asian youth who were reliant on parents’ shift-work schedules to travel. Additionally, instead of paying for gas and other travel, money is “being reallocated to our community for more resources and needs and to pay for their time and honorariums.” Working online can increase flexibility and access for many, including those in rural communities who have to travel far distances, or for those juggling multiple responsibilities. Furthermore, as illustrated in [figure 3](#), technology allows people the choice to change one’s name or add pronouns, opening up more possibilities for confidentiality or for expressing gender diversity.

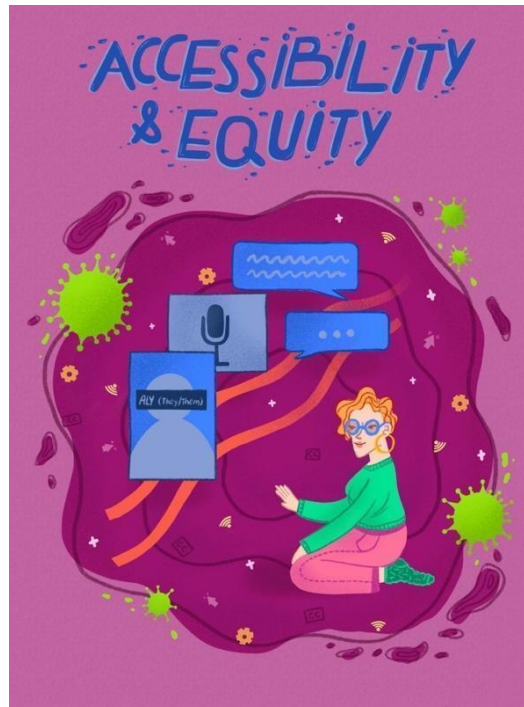


Figure 3. Equitable Access

Pedagogical Considerations and Practices

Community-engaged practitioners relied on the above ethical commitments as anchors as they transitioned their work to online environments, often with limited organizational or institutional support. As community facilitator Khari, articulated: “One of the things that I’ve learned is to not make my scope or dream small, my imagining small, because I’m in this [online] medium. But, to actually be really expansive in my creative thinking around what I want to do with participants and then figuring out if there is technically a way to do it.” Facilitation during the pandemic required patience, pragmatism and creativity. Practitioners described their need to reflect on multiple “pieces” simultaneously when facilitating a workshop, meeting or gathering. These pedagogical considerations include: COVID-19 stress and isolation; equity and power dynamics; accessibility and zoom fatigue; space and place; connection, care, and community dynamics; materiality; time; and labour issues. In [figures 4-6](#), we represent these pedagogical considerations as puzzle pieces that community-engaged practitioners must navigate when facilitating online, by phone or mail. Similar to facilitating, completing a puzzle requires strategy, experimentation, following hunches, and simultaneous attention to both the individual and collective. Like a puzzle, each consideration is interconnected with another.

COVID-19 Stress and Isolation

At the time of focus groups, the COVID-19 pandemic was devastating communities, with no vaccine or end to lockdowns in sight. For many - including those we spoke with - COVID-19 was not the only issue they were contending with; many communities experienced the impacts of multiple



Figure 4. Pedagogical considerations – COVID-19 stress and isolation, equity and power, accessibility, and Zoom fatigue

syndemics simultaneously (e.g., COVID-19, poverty, a rise in police violence against Black and Brown communities, the drug toxicity crisis) (Friesen et al., 2021; Knight et al., 2021; Mendenhall, 2020). Community-engaged practitioners spoke about the stress they and their participants were up against. People were “losing their s--- and really struggling,” or not able to “take it anymore.” Others described how isolation was impacting their facilitation practice. As Adam, a community artist shared: “If you haven’t noticed I’m a bit of an extrovert, and so living alone in a pandemic is quite challenging. ...Reminding myself of these connections that I had to people was really comforting.” This encouraged Adam - and others - to design online workshops which foregrounded opportunities for connection.

The backdrop of COVID-19 stress, isolation, and larger inequities created the conditions for what was possible when facilitating or participating online, by phone, or by mail ([figure 4](#)). Isolation caused by the pandemic, poverty, language barriers, grief and loss, and care-giving responsibilities (disproportionately affecting women) became a trifecta impacting participation. For example, participants shared how inequitable technology and bandwidth access, and variable computer literacy levels propelled the isolation communities experienced. Some shared that communities (especially those without legal status) were reluctant to meet online due to fears of surveillance, which further propelled isolation.

Equity and Power Dynamics

Many practitioners discussed how they put their commitments into practice by striving to recalibrate power dynamics ([figure 4](#)). Technology, contoured by larger equity and power dynamics, shapes what is possible pedagogically. While power dynamics manifest when facilitating in-person, online technologies can make power dynamics both visible *and* opaque in new ways. Some discussed how micro-aggressions in online settings may increase. For example, when working online or by phone, practitioners articulated that it was harder to “read the room,” impacting their ability to create a safe(r) space, or to navigate personal disclosures. Jessica, a community facilitator explained this tension:

I just don’t feel as attuned to people as I did when we were in the same room. I’m learning to collectively and collaboratively read ... each other in this new place, where perhaps there are some things that are amplified in the way we can communicate and then there’s some things that are more hidden.

Through these conversations, we learned that taking a nuanced and intersectional approach when navigating issues of equity and power dynamics was key.

Accessibility and Zoom Fatigue

Like equity, accessibility was both a commitment and consideration for practitioners to navigate in their facilitation practice. As illustrated in [figure 4](#), participation could be locked or unlocked depending on multiple intersecting factors. As other scholarship has elucidated, accessibility online must be considered alongside larger axes of class, ability, geography, race, gender and sexual identity, language, Indigeneity, and citizenship (Yellow Horse & Nakagawa, 2020). Our research surfaced a variety of accessibility considerations for online or remote facilitation including: technology and internet access and quality; digital literacy; access to private space; as well as accommodations for equitable participation (e.g., closed captioning, ASL, child-care support, image-descriptions, language translation). Clear activity and tech instructions, multiple participation options (including phone, low-tech and low-data options), flexible scheduling, support or understanding of children present, and sharing agendas in advance were all identified as concrete facilitation practices that supported people in making informed decisions about online participation. Practitioners also shared that equity-related supports that were previously made available for in-person meetings (i.e., childcare, food, honoraria) needed to be adapted and re-imagined so that those with limited access could participate as desired.

Screen time also presented an access issue. Extended screen time, or “Zoom fatigue” can lead to emotional and physiological exhaustion ([figure 4](#)). In response, community-engaged practitioners advocated for pairing the appropriate task with the appropriate technology. Not every conversation

or meeting needs to be held online. Phone meetings or other asynchronous communication strategies were shared as promising collaboration practices. Shorter meetings, breaks or activities that invite people to temporarily leave the screen, rest their eyes, or stretch were also identified.

Space and Place

In conversations with practitioners, *space* was discussed in physical, virtual, and relational terms (e.g., ‘holding’ space or creating a ‘safer’ space). As will be further discussed below, practitioners also discussed the difficulties of facilitating and/or participating in *places* people call ‘home’ as reflected by blurred boundaries and child-minding responsibilities ([figure 5](#)). One participant commented that people’s homes or workplaces “can be challenging and sometimes unsafe to work in - assessing before a session that it is safe for the participant to be part of the workshop and to understand the restrictions ahead of time.” This was particularly pressing when discussing sensitive topics. Alternatively, Casey, a participatory visual methods practitioner, reflected on the difficulty of storing supplies: “I don’t have an office right now. I’m working from home. While we were [having] this conversation my child found and started playing with an Exacto knife, so physically, [this] is a huge challenge for me.” Practitioners commented that turning their private home into a public working environment also entailed a financial investment and/or new configurations for sharing space with others.

Many commented on how the shift to working online or remotely encouraged them to think about space, place, and collaboration differently. The virtual environment can bring individuals and communities together across geographical distances, which might not otherwise be possible (or without significant cost). People may now participate from anywhere, which can increase the scale of an event or project. A local workshop can suddenly have global reach; however, this may make tailoring content or the approach more challenging. For example, a broader audience brings new questions about how to meaningfully offer land acknowledgements and follow treaty protocols, which are specific to place.

To be effective, a workshop or meeting agenda that was initially planned in-person needs to be adapted when shifted to an online or remote communication platform. For example, when gathering in-person, individuals can physically move into different rooms when working in groups; in doing so, this can transform institutional spaces or mix up group dynamics. A participatory researcher and co-author, rubén reflected on the spatial qualities of in-person workshops where youth “can sort of roam, and when they can go up and down the stairs, or, when there’s a kind of dynamic. And that actually allows for a certain kind of collaborative energy to emerge. And that’s been really, really challenging in the online environment.” To attend to this, some practitioners used strategies such as break-out rooms, or individual activities done off screen with opportunities to leave the screen or phone to evoke a spatial dynamic.

Connection, Care and Community Dynamics

Practitioners shared how technology both enhances and limits the capacity for social intimacies, connection and care ([figure 5](#)). Lori, a participatory researcher described the role of WhatsApp in creating community care networks:

The women I work with are immigrant women, so WhatsApp has been their way of communicating to their families back home. But for us, it actually became this space where we just talk not just about the project, but anything ... like people would talk about how they were feeling. Sometimes they would talk about what's going on in their day. So, it was a way for people to feel connected even only for a few minutes.

Here, technology enhanced feelings of connection between group members. This is echoed by other scholarship documenting the relational impact of chat use during Zoom calls (Jahangir et al., 2022). Similarly, practitioners shared that during meetings they often deprioritized content or agenda items for moments of connection and collective care-taking. In-person gatherings involve unstructured time, including activities like eating or small talk while taking a break. In lieu of this, practitioners described integrating 'task-less' time for relationship-building when working online. Verbal check-ins, breakout groups and inviting 'timed' unmuting were also identified as supportive activities for relationship-building. Embodied activities that require a shared movement or sound may also invite feelings of connection amidst isolation. New groups and groups with a shared history may require different strategies for building trust and cohesion.

Many talked about how camera use may support people's ability to "read the room" thereby enhancing feelings of group cohesion or safety, which influence group dynamics. Alternatively, there may be cases where having cameras off is more conducive to fostering a supportive group dynamic. Camera use also introduced many ethical complexities, as explored below.

Materiality

During a focus group, C., a community artist, held up a rock to bring the "tactile" into our conversations about facilitation online. She explained:

we need a lot more of touching things, and you know hugging ourselves For me, as something grounding related to the land, and how we move ... you can easily give a rock, you can paint a rock, you can do lots of things with it, and most of all, you can really hold it and it just feels good.

Like the image of a hand holding bubbles ([figure 5](#)), materiality - the engagement with the material world - felt nebulous to many in their online or remote facilitation practice. Neither participants nor facilitators were working with the same objects (i.e., food, supplies) as in-person. This could lead to



Figure 5. Pedagogical considerations – Space and place; connection and care; community dynamics and materiality

a decreased sense of shared connection when gathering online. In response, many practitioners shared creative strategies for bringing materials online or by phone such as inviting participants to work with objects in their own homes; supply delivery (by vehicle or mail); or showcasing live how-to tutorials. In our focus groups, we attended to materiality by inviting participants to find an object in their homes that represented an ethical commitment they brought to their facilitation practice in an opening icebreaker. Participants held up their object and reflected on how it illuminated this commitment in light of COVID-19.

Time

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lock-downs required practitioners to think through their facilitation practice temporally. Practitioners considered whether to host programs or workshops synchronously or asynchronously, during the day, or evening. During ‘live’ events, time and technology took on new meanings. For example, 100 participants can ‘breakout’ into conversation with a single click reducing time required for group work, or participants can message simultaneously on chat, amassing many comments in seconds, changing the rhythm of a conversation. In contrast, practitioners shared that it was often not possible to do as much online as in person due to technical issues, leading to feelings of being time constrained, as evocatively implied in [figure 6](#). At the beginning of the pandemic, it took time to explain and learn the technology. Zoom meetings also needed to be shorter than in-person meetings for accessibility or



Figure 6. Pedagogical considerations: Time and labour

bandwidth reasons. Many practitioners commented on the amount of time required to prepare, re-prioritize, learn new technology, and continually adapt their practice. This relates to issues of labour, as explored next.

Labour Issues

Many community-engaged practitioners felt unsupported and/or under-resourced to attend to rising work-loads. They explained how institutional (or societal) messaging to ‘slow down’ was accompanied by limited compensation or supports for required demands (e.g., new technological skills, extra preparation time, addressing security risks). Many community-engaged practitioners also resourced equipment or technology on their own. Participants identified the paradox between the expectations that they ‘do less’ without the external recognition that creating ‘engaging’ spaces takes time, labour, energy, skills, *and* favourable structural conditions. As Y, a participatory researcher and community facilitator shared: “Time is always elastic....less is more but make sure you’re hitting all the things within your time.” Similarly, Kate, a community facilitator (also working in a post-secondary institution) commented:

The keener in me is like, ‘wow! use this as an opportunity to get better as a facilitator, to experiment with new ways of doing my job.’ And the person who cares about labour in me is like, ‘Let’s just be enoughlet’s get by. Let’s just survive this.....’ I feel very, very cautious and aware that the institution



Figure 7. Ethical Considerations: Forging the uncertain path ahead

is already trying to create this ... very neoliberal push towards micro credentials and technology, as a way of facilitating even fewer of us being full time permanent than before.

Many spoke to challenges balancing the added work demands alongside personal challenges resulting from stay-at-home orders ([figure 6](#)).

Ethical Considerations

During focus groups, we invited participants to identify specific ethical issues they were encountering as they adapted their participatory projects to new communication platforms. Fair labour conditions, privacy, confidentiality and surveillance, extractive practices and industries, blurred boundaries, access and equity issues, and physical and emotional safety were just a few of the issues identified. Participants shared anxiety about the new ethical risks and tensions exposed by the sudden ‘pivot’ to working online or remotely. As illustrated in [figure 7](#), despite concerns (or perhaps because of them), practitioners navigated these new ethical tensions with reflection and care, using ethical commitments (care, accountability and transparency, and equitable access) as a compass to forge paths ahead, often without institutional or organizational support.

Fair labour conditions were a pressing topic, as described above. Many community facilitators and artists we spoke with were gig workers, who were themselves experiencing precarious employment conditions because of the pandemic. In some cases, pay rates were reduced, while the knowledge, skills and preparation required for a single workshop had increased. Meanwhile, more facilitators were required for a single online workshop in order to

manage technology. Feelings of constant availability, blurred boundaries between work and home, and mounting workloads compounded feelings of burn-out. Practitioners were struggling with the emotional weight of holding space for others' stories, while caring for their own needs. As Kellum, a participatory researcher working in a non-profit youth organization articulated, "A lot of our team experienced burnout quite heavily... [It was] a shift in an environment that we didn't really understand until it was right in front of us."

Labour issues were compounded by unique privacy, confidentiality, and safety issues. The blurred boundaries between private and public spheres created ethical challenges for practitioners and participants alike, especially for those with children at home. Safety has also become more complex in online settings. Unwanted visitors (i.e., Zoom hackers) may breach a space and cause disruption (at best) and perpetuate harm (at worst), especially when influenced by racist and sexist motives. Camera use was also a complex issue. One practitioner likened forcing participants' camera use as "breaking into [participants'] homes." People may inadvertently disclose activities and things in their home that they do not want others to see. Inversely, while there may be many valid reasons to have one's camera off, it may be difficult to know if someone is emotionally activated off camera, or if others are listening into sensitive conversations which can breach confidentiality. Ultimately, practitioners were adamant that the decision to show one's face, space, or turn on the mic must be navigated with sensitivity, care, and attention to context.

Privacy issues were also exacerbated by inequities, such as access to private devices or space. Shira, a participatory researcher, explained that finding private spaces to discuss sensitive topics was challenging for newcomer youth who lived in close quarters. As she explained:

I have my youth, like in the bathtub talking to me, right? So, and this [project] is about sexual and mental health and those youth *want* to talk about it and it's still *that* challenging. We're like, how are we going to recruit new kids who already don't have comfort with this [topic] and don't trust us yet? ... How are we going to do that in their bathtub? It's just not realistic, right?

These ethical dilemmas led Shira - as well as others - to pause some projects and make "difficult decisions to not continue certain things in the current climate." Having a private space to meet can be particularly difficult when addressing stigmatized or sensitive topics, or for participants living in unsafe environments.

This led many community-engaged practitioners - in particular participatory researchers - to express concern over the lack of institutional support around ethics, privacy, and technology during the quick 'pivot' to working online. As Carol, a participatory researcher commented:

All of a sudden I have to become an IT specialist to understand privacy and confidentiality and I don't get any support for that. And you may try to make your best decision, but the time it takes to learn all that is astonishing right? And you know, I probably have made a lot of mistakes at somebody's expense and I just don't even know it. ... But I'm expected to know that which makes me worried.

Many participants echoed this sentiment. It takes time and specialized skill to understand digital privacy landscapes, especially with the integration of new technologies and third-party applications. Sam shared that “as it takes time for those of us who have access to technology [to] troubleshoot, we often have to remember that those of us with the least amount of means are those most affected by our collective learning curve.” Many participatory researchers we spoke with were deeply concerned about extractive research practices in academia, arising during the pandemic. The impacts of practitioners’ “learning curve[s]” was particularly important to consider when doing research or community-engaged programming with racialized communities who are over-researched or those whose lives are often overly administered through programs or the state. During focus group debriefs, team members also reflected on Zoom as an environment itself, as connected to extractive industries. In addition to privacy concerns, the landscape of big data is heavily contoured by capitalism, resulting in significant ecological impacts, mainly through resource extraction, waste and energy (Gonzalez Monserrate, 2022).

New pedagogical and ethical issues continue to emerge as technological landscapes change and shift, and as gathering online becomes more commonplace. We now turn to a larger discussion about community-engaged facilitation in this present moment.

Discussion

In their edited collection, Burkholder et al., (2022b) provoke readers to question what facilitators committed to social justice ‘do’ when facilitating. They ask, what are the “incremental decisions” that facilitators make, and “what are the consequences of these decisions?” (p. 8). Our study builds on conversations with others who shine a critical spotlight on facilitation, including how facilitation can be an avenue for reflecting on larger issues of power, positionality, and social change (brown, 2021; Burkholder, Aladejebi, et al., 2022a; Guerrero et al., 2013; MacEntee et al., 2022; Reece, 2021). Throughout the pandemic, practitioners required creativity, and a keen attention to relationships, technologies, materials, power dynamics and historicities when designing activities or processes with communities in online or remote platforms. After all, participatory processes are not neutral (Dhillon, 2017; Switzer, 2020), and neither is facilitation. Community-engaged projects can introduce complexities around power dynamics, ownership, and issues of representation (Burch, 2021; Guerrero et al., 2013).

Equity-based design must consider all learning (formal or informal) as situated in social, spatial, and historical processes that are marked by inequalities (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016). This is important, because proficient facilitation is a strong predictor of both social action and policy impacts in many participatory projects (Boivin et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2004). Furthermore, the *process* of convening groups in dialogue will always change the outcome.

During conversations, we explored how digital interfaces influence how we communicate, the language we use, and the ways in which relationships may be structured. After all, online environments are not empty containers to apply methods for dialogue, but rather are constitutive of what is possible between people in any interaction (Law & Urry, 2004). In other words, each online platform (i.e., Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp, Google Meet) comes with different affordances and constraints for how people interact or engage with each other. Settings in Zoom can be reconfigured ‘behind the scenes’ (e.g., the ability to rename oneself, or privately message others) in ways that shape the conditions for participation in online settings. These settings are initially determined by developers but can be clicked on or off by institutional or organizational administrators, and finally, practitioners (sometimes unknowingly). All influence how people can participate in an online space, thereby influencing care-taking, connection practices and community dynamics.

For many, COVID-19 shone a spotlight on taken-for-granted elements of their facilitation practice. Throughout, we explored how community-engaged practitioners drew on ethical commitments as anchors to adapt their community-engaged facilitation practice online during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in keeping with Gaztambide-Fernández and Matute (2013)’s understanding of pedagogy as always informed by an ethical imperative. Here, pedagogy is “a relational process through which multiple subjects enter—not always deliberately or directly—into a temporal and spatial relationship through which one makes an attempt to influence or ‘push against’ the experiences of another” (Gaztambide-Fernández & Matute, 2013, p. 56). When convening groups in dialogue, each action (conscious or unconscious) taken by a community-engaged practitioner is informed by the ethical commitments they bring to their facilitation practice (i.e., their pedagogical approach), and navigated through a series of pedagogical and ethical considerations, such as those discussed throughout.

Taken together, our findings point to a pedagogy of community engagement. Community engagement doesn’t just ‘happen’; rather, community-engaged processes like online workshops, meetings or gatherings must be carefully facilitated through a series of activities (structured or unstructured), actions, disclosures, stories, discussion topics or conversations. Further, the environment in which the work happens (i.e., online), the institutional constraints, the communities involved, and the socio-political contexts (i.e., COVID-19) significantly impacts how a practitioner facilitates.

As we learned through conversations, each pedagogical or ethical consideration – be it Zoom fatigue, accessibility, privacy, blurred boundaries, or connection and care – was negotiated carefully in response to environment, positionality, and larger community dynamics. Nonetheless, for practitioners committed to ethical commitments of care, equitable access, and accountability and transparency, the puzzle of how to put their commitments into practice could be trying. Practitioners spoke to considerations of time, space, place, power and community dynamics, materiality, and COVID-19 and related stress and isolation as key elements to navigate. In the constraints posed during early COVID-19 lock-downs, not all facilitation considerations (i.e., the pieces of the puzzle) were within reach. For example, time was a consideration, in part because it was in a short supply. Labour constraints, feelings of burnout or care-giving responsibilities made facilitation online particularly challenging.

As authors, we were also marked by the pandemic. Focus group facilitators' (Sarah and Andrea) intentions were to create a supportive and generative space for dialogue and co-learning. However, like participants, we were still learning the implicit and explicit 'rules' of online engagement. How to say hello, goodbye, and when and how to step away from the screen or phone were still emergent protocols. At the time of data collection, we were adapting our participatory practices in uncertain times within a neoliberal post-secondary institution marked by labour grievances, and limited institutional support for adapting community-engaged practices in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many, our community, family and health responsibilities and challenges had been amplified as a result of the pandemic. We were contending with our own experiences of grief and loss from the pandemic, and associated syndemics (i.e., the drug toxicity crisis, and other related inequities). As we reflected on focus group discussions, we continually adapted our practice of engaging others, using our own ethical commitments as anchors. In the spirit of transparency, we named and dialogued about challenges with participants, team members, and each other.

Like many community-engaged practitioners we spoke with, we learned immensely about our own facilitation practices through the very process of adapting focus groups to online settings during trying times. As MacEntee et al., (2022) argue, "facilitation is an embodied, relational, and contextual practice that must be continually examined" in the context of setting, intersecting identities, and knowledge production systems (p. 77). For practitioners who were adapting their facilitation practice during the early COVID-19 pandemic, ethical commitments such as care, equitable access and accountability and transparency acted as anchors as they navigated the transition. While many practitioners spoke about the constraints introduced by the pandemic, the act of adaptation introduced new opportunities for reflexivity, creativity, connection and care, as groups collectively figured out how to work and care for each other in this new moment. Many other community-engaged projects have shared how the shift to online or remote

communication platforms changed the nature of their work and relationships in generative ways (Gonzalez et al., 2021; Raza, 2021). After all, “when facilitation is done well, there is a coming together to create something new” (MacEntee et al., 2022, p. 88). This is consistent with our understanding of engagement as a “beyond”, and the role of the facilitator working alongside community members in helping to achieve this. When envisioned not as a fixed end or a technocratic means, but rather, as a “beyond”, community engagement may introduce new possibilities and openings that might not otherwise be possible (Switzer, 2019a). After all, as Freire (2000) reminds us, “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, *with the world, and with each other*” (italics added, p. 72). We now turn to a brief reflection on the future of online and remote community-engaged facilitation.

Conclusion

In this article, we explored key pedagogical and ethical considerations and practices for online and remote community-engaged facilitation that are of benefit to both emerging and seasoned community-engaged practitioners alike. Community-engaged practitioners have an important role to play in helping communities process the impacts of social and environmental injustice, including inequities exacerbated through the pandemic, as well facilitating conversations about new futures, multiple years after the introduction of COVID-19. During the early days of the pandemic, despite limited resources and institutional support, community-engaged practitioners learned new skills, thoughtfully leveraged online and remote platforms, and drew on ethical commitments of care, access, and transparency to navigate complex pedagogical and ethical tensions in their facilitation work with communities. By being reflexive, adaptive, and transparent, community-engaged practitioners also built meaningful relationships and fostered genuine dialogue with communities, despite pandemic constraints. Furthermore, as a result of adapting their facilitation practice to online or remote platforms, many community-engaged practitioners were able to see and approach their facilitation practice in new ways.

Although our study was conducted during the beginning of COVID-19 lockdowns, over three years later, it is clear that online environments for gathering are here to stay. In fact, new pedagogical and ethical issues continue to emerge as technological landscapes change and shift, and as working online or remotely become more common-place. Artificial intelligence, augmented and virtual reality, and the advance of third-party collaboration software introduce new ethical complexities that were not even on the horizon at the time of focus groups. Big data and data mining also raises new complexities and questions for data storage. As Usha Ramanathan shares, technological approaches to community development are not a panacea; such approaches, if not rooted in communities’ lived realities, can compound existing structural inequities (Casey & Warren, 2021). After all, technology and associated

algorithms have long been used to incarcerate, surveil and police racialized communities (REDE4BlackLives, 2020). New technology - built via natural resources - can also lead to more e-waste; the impacts of which are bound up in circuits of power (Liboiron, 2018). Meeting online or remotely with a group may reduce carbon footprints, but it is not politically nor carbon-neutral.

As technology continues to change, our findings point towards the importance of ethical commitments as points of departure when reflecting on facilitation in community settings. How might practitioners draw on the ethical commitments shared throughout to collectively navigate new technological advances online such as artificial intelligence? How might ethical protocols or pedagogical practices be adapted to more clearly centre ethical commitments of care, equitable access and accountability and transparency with groups? Careful facilitation attuned to these ethical commitments may contribute to creating spaces where people feel safe enough to participate – or not participate - on their own terms. This might include conversations about technology, power dynamics, and privacy in group agreements, or about how data will be shared, where, and with whom. Zoom is not suspended in ‘empty’ space, nor is it isolated from material practices, land struggles, power dynamics or conflicts happening ‘off screen’. More concretely, practitioners might use the illustrations shared throughout to invite groups to reflect on group agreements when they facilitate and gather online or remotely.⁷ Each illustration is available to download under creative common licence (www.beyondthetoolkit.com)

Finally, our research speaks to the importance of continued dialogue and research on community engaged-facilitation. More opportunities are needed to dialogue about, and wrestle with many of the tensions and opportunities online and remote community-engaged facilitation presents. This is especially the case for community-engaged practitioners whose pedagogical practice is oriented towards working collaboratively and equitably for social justice. Educational research often focuses on disciplinary-specific learning rather than social learning that foregrounds the types of relationships, affective practices, and power configurations that may lead people to imagine different futures (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Curnow & Jurow, 2021). The learning that happens in community-engaged projects matters. Future studies might explore how community-engaged practitioners are navigating their facilitation practice multiple years into the pandemic, or pedagogical and ethical considerations for facilitating community-engaged initiatives in hybrid environments. More research on ethical guidelines for facilitating

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participatory research methods online or community agreement protocols for online programming are also needed amidst changing technological landscapes.

Like the open-ended nature of the illustrations themselves, the field of community-engaged facilitation is constantly changing, as communities work together to create new initiatives, projects and types of relationships. To continue this dialogue, we invite readers to think through their own ethical commitments and the unique pedagogical and ethical considerations they're encountering in their facilitation practice within their own networks, with participants, and team members alike.

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