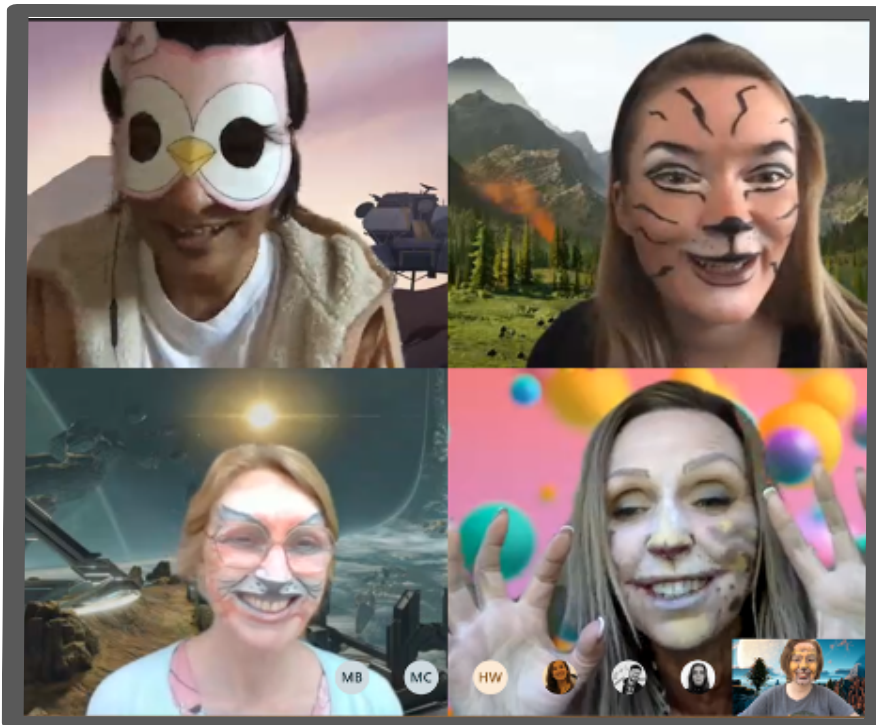

LEARNINGS FROM A PSUEDO WORLD-CAFE ONLINE...

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As a leading democracy organisation working in 24 countries across Europe, we at The Democratic Society (Demsoc) were already accustomed to working as a distributed yet closely connected team.

And yet, when the world as we knew it was forced to move online, we still had to adapt. And fast. To keep spirits high, we set up creative team challenges, drop-in lunch chats, and Howdy Friday checkouts with weekend tips.



On the work delivery front, it meant literally moving processes from **room to zoom** overnight. This brought more excitement than trepidation - a chance to expand horizons and skills. It also meant a lot of hard work, even more so than usual. After hours and days of research and endless Miro vs Mural debates, we agreed to test first and hone later.

And so began our work in earnest on an online pseudo World Café. Why pseudo you ask? With-out the luxury of physical round tables, and humbled by features of the tech we were still exploring, we decided to take several liberties with the classic World café format. More importantly, despite several excellent resources out there on how to run events online in general, we were, and still remain, keen on building a Demsoc approach to group dialogue that is as inclusive as it is engaging. This will ultimately tie into the work that our local government team has been doing on **creating spaces for online deliberation**.

The topic we chose was broad yet layered in its complexity: terminology. In our work on participatory democracy, we often see words such as ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’ used interchangeably. While this may allow for a certain flexibility, it can also lead to confusion, miscommunication, unquestioned assumptions, and unreal expectations around participatory processes, both on the side of participants as well as organisers. The main objective of this workshop was to therefore establish a shared, common understanding of participation-related

terminology for our **EIT-Climate-KIC Healthy, Clean Cities Deep Demonstration project** -that lay the foundation for our own work whilst informing that of our peers and partners. **But more on that in a separate article (do keep your eyes peeled)!**

Key takeaways

Below we outline some of our key takeaways.

Our experience

After starting in the main room, we sorted participants into three breakout rooms with one host each. We then held three rounds, each with a specific goal and designed in a manner so as to build on the other: The first involved brain-storming ideas and concepts around selected terms; the second was aimed at drafting a first sentence to define the terms; and the third focussed on refining and finalising the definition.



I **Breakout rooms are the closest you will get to discussion tables - and disapparition**

Several video platforms offer breakout rooms as a possibility to split groups and teleport to a different ‘table’ with a host to guide deeper discussions. Additionally, creating different frames on collaboration whiteboards, such as Miro, is a fun way for participants to work their magic. Using video and whiteboards together allows you to create an online World Café, or a similar participatory process.



Our experience

Icebreakers are a means of putting people at ease - and making friends with tech

Ice breakers are a way to lighten the mood and put people at ease when speaking in a group, and they also work online! Use your camera, microphone, or whiteboard to think about creative ways of engaging participants. Better yet, use ice breakers to experiment and help participants familiarise themselves with technology. You might want to try out new ice breakers with friends or colleagues before-hand to make sure they are easy to follow.

We chose to take advantage of the icebreaker time not only to create a playful atmosphere, but also make colleagues feel comfortable with the tool they were meant to be using. We created a birthday timeline on Miro and played with our favourite foods, leading to lots of excitement, laughter, and a rather creative cry for help.



 Our experience


Facilitators need to ‘read the room’, also online.

In every group, there are some voices that are louder than others. This bears the risk of some people not having their say. It also makes it really easy to overlook participants, especially when their video is turned off. Be mindful of giving everyone a turn to speak, and be flexible enough to adapt the process if one person is taking up all of the airtime.

Ground rules help set the tone for more inclusive processes, such as letting everyone have their turn. An additional tip for online workshops is to encourage participants to make notes on the collaborative whiteboard and share what they have posted in a discussion after. If appropriate, ask your participants to turn on their video.

 Our experience

In addition to a tech facilitator, we realised in hindsight that having two co-hosts in the breakout rooms - a note-taker and a facilitator - would have helped run the process more smoothly. A pro-tip is to have two computer screens to be able to see your participants and the Miro board at the same time.



Your co-host is the Watson to your Holmes (or Robin to your Batman).

Taking notes on the Miro board, ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to voice their opinion on Zoom, and assisting people with tech all at the same time is hard enough. Add to this facilitation, including helping participants disappear into break-out rooms, and you have yourself a mammoth task. Wherever possible, divide and conquer.

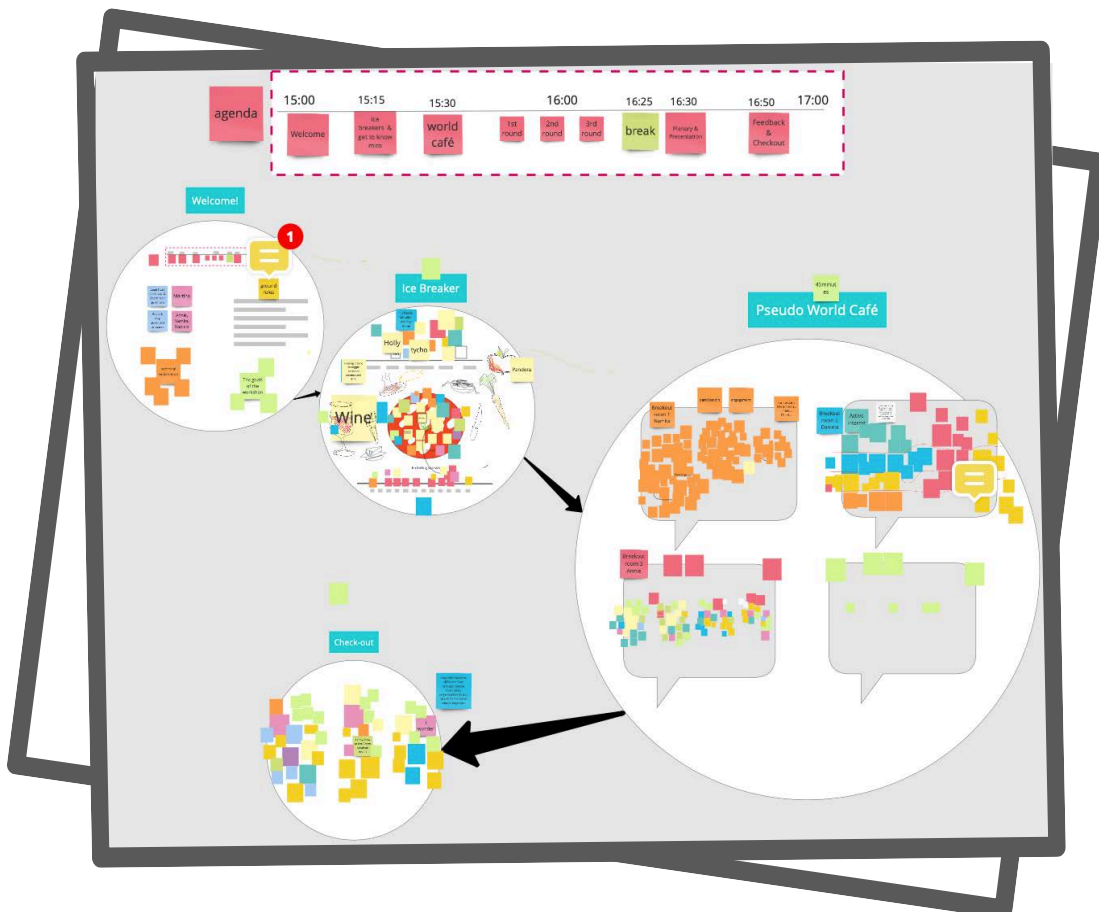
Our experience

We are aware that technology can be an obstacle to participation for those who feel less comfortable with the innumerable apps and tools that have sprouted in recent years. In addition to using icebreakers as a way of familiarising participants with tech tools, we were also available for 1:1 tutorials for those who needed them.



Use technology to include not exclude.

While online workshops hold several challenges, they also have clear advantages in that those unable to attend can still interact with the produced content. We left our Miro board open for a week after the workshop so that colleagues could look at what was discussed and add their thoughts. We saw this as another way of making the workshop more inclusive.



 Our experience

Befriend Minimalism.

Plan a minimalist agenda that allows for unhurried conversations and plenty of wiggle room in case you need to change your plans last minute. For breakout rooms, plan at least 20 minutes per round at the table. The ideal length of an online workshop should be 90 minutes to two hours, but if you need to stay online longer, remember to leave enough time (10-15 minutes) for comfort breaks to ‘reboot’ brains!

We let our enthusiasm get the better of us by trying to squeeze in too much in too little time. In hindsight, we should have factored in some time for individual reflection at the beginning of small group sessions, to help people reflect on what they wanted to share.

 Our experience

Particularly in an online world café, where it is not as easy for table hosts and participants to ask questions, it is very important to be clear about objectives and possible misunderstandings, and seek to clarify them upfront. As we experienced during our workshop, clear goals meant less confusion and more focussed contributions.


Clear goals = clear contributions.

Have you clearly defined the overall goal of your workshop? This should be the first point on your checklist. Once sure about what you want to achieve, design the activities to lead you smoothly through your process: you might find it useful to set mini goals for each session in a way that each outcome eventually builds on the other. Think of it as one small step after the other towards your ultimate goal.



8

Channel the Scouts and be prepared.

Be prepared for anything: connections will drop, screens will freeze, and not all participants will be comfortable using multiple platforms. This is a crucial point that even with a preparatory video and 'getting to know one another' time in the workshop, you cannot expect ev-eryone to run with new tech. Have a clear plan on how people that cannot access one of the two platforms can participate.

Our experience

In our workshop, we asked partici-pants to write post-its offline to be later transferred to the Miro board or to write their comments in the chat section for us to post them after. Another tip: create a back channel, accessible to all participants, in case technology fails: a group on Whatsapp or on Slack or whatever works best for you.

Our experience

We used Zoom largely because of said features. We opted for Miro as a collaborative space as it was already being used by EIT Climate-KIC and was intuitive and user friendly to boot.



9

Choose your tech wisely.

While the basics of most video platforms and collaboration whiteboards are the same, it is the additional features that will make your life as a facilitator easier, and the experience of your participants more smooth and enjoyable. Features that get a thumbs-up include break-out rooms, screen sharing, seeing all participants at the same time, and online voting. Think about what you need and try out different options to see what works best for you.



IO

Conversation guidelines make for good dialogue.

Ground rules or conversation guidelines are a set of agreements that help create a safe space in which a group can tap into its collective intelligence more easily and considerately. They are a key part of any workshop or participatory process.

Our experience

The ground rules we used during our workshop were related to conversation style and technical rules: "Ask questions, there is no such thing as a silly question; peak up... and share air time; Take risks in conversations, share new ideas; Respect each other's differences and opinions; and technical rules - mut-ed microphones when not speaking; avoid online distractions, Do not delete post-its that are not yours", etc.

Our experience

Based on our experience, we recommend a maximum of six people in each breakout room to allow for enough time and space for everyone to speak. Also, if you use zoom, this group size will allow the facilitators to see all the participants at the same time on their screen.



II

Size does matter.

How many participants are one too many in breakout rooms? This is a question that was particularly hard for us – and the answer will not come as a surprise: it depends on your group and goal.

All in all, our online pseudo World Café made for a fantastic learning experience and we hope these learnings will be as valuable to others as they were to us. Inspired by our approach, several teammates have since remodelled their own online workshops to good - and fun - effect.

As we continue to hone this approach, we remain ultra-conscious of the barriers that digital technology and participation brings, particularly for people with physical or learning disabilities, and we are giving serious thought to this much like we have always done; Inclusion in Digital & Participatory Budgeting

As the world shifts towards a 'new normal', however, we anticipate that online workshops will continue to be a valuable way to collaborate. Very little can replace hugs and informal gatherings in building trust and rapport, but in injecting more thoughtfulness and fun in our online collaboration, we at Demsoc certainly aspire to create a decent alternative.

