

Zoom Can Increase Quality of Feedback, Article by Tulane Professor and Alum Shows

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*Photos of Rachel Tabor (SSE '23, SSE *23) and Dr. Jacquelyne Thoni Howard*

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, in which students transitioned to virtual classes through Zoom, Dr. Jacquelyne Thoni Howard, a Professor of Practice of Data at the [Connolly Alexander Institute for Data Science](#) and former director of the Technology and Digital Humanities (DH) Lab at the [Newcomb Institute](#), observed a significant increase in the quality of feedback interns on the Digital Research Internship team were giving about each other's work during meetings. By being able to share their screens, they were able to talk more freely about their work. Meanwhile, as peers, being able to see team members' work displayed on their personal devices enabled more conversation and questions and increased the quality of feedback.

When students returned to campus in 2021, Howard began examining Zoom through a feminist lens as a tool to build a community of care within DH classrooms and labs.

"When we came back after 2021, we moved back to a meeting model where the students on the team sat in a circle while the team lead controlled the computer at the podium. This dynamic created an unwanted hierarchy in our meeting space known as the sage on the stage, where those in the circle remained silent," Howard said.

Howard's dissatisfaction with the organization of the meeting space prompted her to explore innovative ways in which Zoom could be harnessed to promote a non-hierarchical, student-led, feminist atmosphere.

Howard brainstormed this problem with the Lab's graduate assistant at the time, Rachel Tabor, who is now a Systems Engineer at Northrop Grumman Space, and they came up with the idea to have students sit in a circle with their devices, open Zoom, and turn off the audio and sound. Through this method, interns were able to have a conversation and be present with one another while also viewing their peers' projects through the screen share feature on their own devices.

"What we found is [that] this unbroken in-person circle allowed by Zoom enhances feminist collaboration, which is about having your students be agentic co-educators, having them teach each other, and being cooperative. All of these things helped [to] enhance [a] feminist atmosphere," Howard said.

Howard notes that when people first started using Zoom during the pandemic, the platform faced a lot of criticism.

“There [was] a lot of discussion when COVID first started about how Zoom meetings created fatigue, which it does, and about how Zoom meetings enabled disembodiment from our team members because we’re not seeing them in person,” Howard said.

Tabor notes that, though criticisms of Zoom have validity to them, there are a multitude of other ways in which Zoom can be assessed.

“Now we have a population of people that are pretty accustomed to [Zoom] and feel comfortable with it. Instead of getting rid of all those skills [that] we developed, [we started] thinking about, is this good for our community? Is this good for our putting that feminist lens on it? Is this good for practicing equitable workflows in the lab?” Tabor said.

Howard and Tabor detail that features of Zoom, such as the chat feature, direct message, closed captioning, and screen sharing, were exceptionally useful when integrating the tool into their teams’ meetings when giving and receiving feedback.

“There [are] so many ways to automate these [meeting] processes that make it more accessible for people. So we considered that, but [we] also saw the value in just having people in the same room collaborating in person,” Tabor said. This method provided a balance between using technology intentionally while still meeting in person.

Tabor asserts that, even in crisis, it can be useful to assess crisis responses through a feminist lens.

“In a crisis, you typically don’t have the longevity and the critical lens that people do in normal life because, by the nature of it, people are freaked out. People are panicking. They don’t have the foresight to really look at transforming it into longevity. So, applying this feminist lens, we

were able to look [at] what’s working,” Tabor said.

Howard says that it is vital to maintain cultures of care and examine the meaning of productivity within classrooms, labs, and meeting spaces.

“Rachel Tabor always reminded the team that we assume that productivity is a line that’s ever-increasing, higher and higher, but in fact, it’s up and down. I liked that she always reminded the team to allow themselves to have up moments and down movements and to build boundaries around your work, which has always been tenets of our Lab space,” Howard said.

Tabor mentions that, even in a crisis, short-term fixes can be implemented in the long term.

“Some of the best tools come out of scarcity,” Tabor said. “When we implement these Band-Aid fixes, I hope people critically think of the future. I think a lot more times than we think, it’s not a Band-Aid, it’s an innovative solution is something that could be in our long term.”

As they honed their meeting format, Howard partnered up with Tabor to write a journal article that analyzed how features of Zoom could be utilized as a feedback tool in college classrooms and labs.

In Oct. 2023, both Howard and Tabor published “From a Crisis Response to Feminist Talking Circles: Reconsidering Collaborative Feedback Practices in the Digital Humanities.” The article emphasizes the Digital Humanities (DH) Lab at the Newcomb Institute’s success in utilizing feminist methodologies to showcase valuable strategies for mentors in DH labs, enabling them to adapt during crises and beyond while cultivating caring environments and facilitating feedback exchange.

Tabor recalls the moment in which both she and Howard decided that they would write a journal article about the way in which the two of them transformed their meeting space.

“We saw a call for articles. I remember the moment Jacque came in. She came in, and she [was] like, ‘We should write about this, [it’s] a perfect fit for us,’” Tabor said.

“She was like, ‘It’s going to be hard. I think we can make it.’”

Howard hopes that, through the article, readers are prompted to critically examine the use of technology.

“Using technology intentionally can enhance your relationships with people. People always assume that technology is less than a face-to-face meeting, and that doesn’t necessarily have to be the case,” Howard said. Now at the Connolly Alexander Institute for Data Science, the Data Research Internship Program, currently partnered with Newcomb Institute, still uses this hybrid Zoom method during student meetings.

Readers who are interested in viewing the article can go to the Howard Tilton Memorial Library and request viewing access.