Intro to Facilitating "Hybrid" Online Groups

It is not unusual to find yourself (sometimes unexpectedly) facilitating what I call a "hybrid" online group. Instead of everyone connecting individually with their own devices (what I call individual connect format), or everyone but the facilitator together in one room (what I call group connect format), with a hybrid format you have some people connecting as individuals and some people connecting in groups.

WHEN YOU MIGHT CHOOSE HYBRID FORMAT

Even though it is challenging, using hybrid format sometimes makes sense or is the only option. For example:

- When multiple people are already in the same location and multiple device connections are not possible in that location (for example there is not enough bandwidth)
- To enable people to participate who would not be able to connect individually (for example, they do not have access to a device and/or would need support from someone else to connect)
- When you are planning to have an in-person meeting and someone's only option is to join from their own device.

CHALLENGES AND DRAWBACKS OF HYBRID ONLINE GROUPS

Facilitating hybrid groups online is challenging for both facilitators and participants. Become familiar with the challenges of the format to help yourself prepare.

Power and group dynamics.

Group dynamics and power imbalances can shift in unexpected ways or become more extreme when your group is divided between those in rooms together and those on their own. The way this plays out depends on several things. For example: How many people are connecting individually versus in groups? How many different groups are connected? Do any of the groups connecting together already have some rank or power (for example if a group connecting together is one team or an office that holds more or less rank in the larger group)?

Imbalances that can impact a hybrid group:

- People connecting in groups will usually have an easier time communicating and connecting with others in the same room.

- People connecting on their own will usually have an easier time communicating and connecting with others who also connected on their own.
- Those who connected the same way as the facilitator will usually have an easier time communicating with the facilitator.
- When people are talking out loud, those in groups are at an advantage.
- When you use the chat box, those at their own device have easier access to participate.
- Within a room where people are connecting together, those who control the mouse or keyboard, are on camera, and/or are closer to the microphone have an advantage.

Mental Load

When you are facilitating online you already have a higher mental load than when you facilitate in person. Online you track chat messages, work with slides, follow verbal and nonverbal communication, all as you focus on your goals! When facilitating a hybrid format group, this load is even bigger, since you have to track both individual and group nonverbals, and manage more complex participation.

In hybrid format you also **lose** some of the advantages of other online formats:

Individual Connect format (everyone on their own computer or device)	Group Connect format (all participants share one computer)
- Supports more communication styles by giving participants the option to communicate either in text (via chat, etc.) or out loud. - You can use activities like whiteboards that help you hear from a lot of people quickly and even anonymously. - Accessibility & language benefits of software (for example the ability to use assistive technologies like screen readers, the option to participate in chat, the ability to change the language of the software). - Different breakout options and very easy to bring everyone back from breakouts.	- All participants get easy real-time, in-person interactions with people in the same room. - Only one or two people have to manage the tech, which is great for those with less comfort or experience with online meeting technology. - Fairly easy to do different kinds of breakout groups.