

Learning activities:

some communication
tools for communities
of practice events

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Introduction

About this document

This document contains the communication tools I presented at the annual NPI-IP workshop in Mombasa, Kenya in January 2009. The choice of tools came from the organisation and was based on feedback from international members who work in the area of agricultural research and intellectual property and who wanted to know how to use some communication tools in their own work.

Usually in the design and facilitation of events I adapt and blend different tools or invent my own. However, some people prefer to master specific tools or approaches and then to become more confident in using them in different ways for different purposes. There are some people who feel a moral imperative to use some well-developed tools, like Open Space Technology, in anything other than their “pure” form.

In this workshop I tried to show the tools in their “pure” form, where I could. Some, like Social Network Mapping are procedures that I have developed myself, conscious of different ways that people have of doing the activity but unaware of any perceived right way to do it. Others, like the Evening News, are done in different ways by many different people.

Some tools in this document, are not tools at all. Facilitation, for example, is a process, a role, even a discipline. But it was presented as a tool at the workshop, which is why it appears in this document as one. Tools should be seen as a generic terms for approaches, methods or activities.

Also for the purposes of this workshop the tools were presented as ends in themselves. Unless you are specifically training people to use the tools you would integrate them as activities to help achieve particular objectives in an agenda you were shaping. The tool is not so important as the conversations you are trying to generate.

In this document I have kept each tool to one page, giving an idea of when to use it, outlining the procedure and making some comments about my experience of using that tool. I have also indicated similar tools that serve related purposes and have suggested the benefits and challenges of using the tools. There are also links to online resources and ways of using the tool.

About events for communities of practice

Although my brief at this workshop was to present communication, knowledge-sharing and facilitation *tools* I tend to talk about tools as *learning activities*. Each learning activity

embodies a certain history and philosophy about learning and is used in support of learning. Your choice of tools and how you use them will depend to some extent on your learning values as well as the purpose of the event, the maturity of the community, the history of the group and other contextual considerations.

My own learning values come from theories of social learning systems and with communities of practice as the centerpiece¹. A community of practice is a group of people who come together regularly to talk about issues that they care about. Through regularly interacting and solving problems together they come to share a language and set of practices that help them improve their work. They build relations of trust and commitment to each other and develop a sense of identification with the community.

A community of practice uses the practice of its members as the learning curriculum and their experiences as a learning resource. Members learn together, informally and formally to develop their practice. They share and build knowledge through engaging in many different types of activities together, learning both *from* and *with* each other. They learn *from* each other's experiences and they learn *with* each other how to solve problems.

The activities in this document are among those commonly adapted and used by communities of practice at events and workshops when they come together to improve their practice.

About creating a pdf document

When I was asked to document these tools for the workshop my first thought was: Why? Why would I document tools that have already been written about before and which you can easily find them on the internet? I also wondered why I should produce them in a pdf file when they could be written in a new or existing wiki. This got me thinking about how few people are using wikis because they do not have easy access to internet, or because there is just "too much stuff" out there to keep track. Part of my own learning, as an almost totally online user, is that a linear, one-page-a-tool format that you can print out and refer to are still practical and reassuring and still have their place, even in digital habitats.

There is also something about the choice of tools in the context of this event and through my lens and experience of communities of practice that could make the document more meaningful for people at the workshop and for people who are interested in more interactive events for their community of practice.

¹ [Etienne Wenger](#), a social learning theorist, is the person who has most developed this work on communities of practice.

There is a space on each page after the tool is described for “Your notes”. Your notes is more a reminder that there is no fixed recipe for “what works” than a space for actual notes. Unless you are planning to become a certified facilitator in a particular technique you need to make sense of tools and activities in your own way, and adapt them to different situations and for different purposes to get the most out of them.

Preparing to use these tools

The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind a faithful servant. We have created a society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift.

Albert Einstein

Here are some of the principles that have helped me in the designing, running or facilitating of events and workshops. When things go wrong I observe that, more often than not, it is because I have strayed from my intention to:

- Embody the values of what I am doing. Or, another way to say this is to *walk the talk*. Don't lecture people about the importance of meaningful conversations - have a conversation about it.
- Honour the learning god (or devil) in everyone. Believe that everyone is here to learn and I just need to find the right key, even if it does not seem clear what that key is.
- Embrace uncertainty. I never cease to be surprised how much deep learning can happen if I trust the process. Rather than controlling the process look for what conversations need to be happening and look for ways to make them happen.
- Invite. Talk in the spirit of invitation. Craft the invitations.
- Be bold. And forgive myself when things don't “work”. Reflect on it and get better next time. It's called learning.

TOOLS

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Yellow Pages

SIMILAR OR RELATED TOOLS

White pages, Member profiles
(online or in hard-copy)

BENEFITS

It is a way of sharing profile and contact information of all the people in the network

CHALLENGES

If someone is not dedicated to the task of keeping the Yellow Pages updated, it can quickly lose its usefulness.

LINKS

[KS Toolkit](#)

[Dare to share](#)

[Cpsquare: profile tools](#)

WHEN TO USE IT

Creating a sense of who people are and what they have to share is important in a community of practice. A Yellow Pages directory is practical in the sense of helping to keep track of the type of people in the community, the knowledge or different types of experience and expertise that community members have, and their contact information. Yellow Pages can also be a way of visualising members as a group, or as clusters of people.

Yellow Pages is part of creating a directory that will help members learn *from* each other by having their expertise and contact information available for other members to consult. If the Yellow Pages is organised by its members, it can also be a way of learning *with* each other as the group negotiate among themselves what type of profile information and what levels of privacy are important and who will be responsible for maintaining the Yellow Pages.

PROCEDURE

There are many different free or inexpensive online tools that can be used for your Yellow Pages and it is no easy task to decide which one to use. There may be organisational requirements e.g. to use the organisation's intranet or who should (or shouldn't) be included. You might also want to consider how to use tagging as a way of organising and showing different clusters of people and their interests.

1. Clarify the purpose for having the Yellow Pages. What will people use it for? This is probably your most crucial step in the procedure and requires talking to people and clearly understanding the context for having it.
2. Decide who are the people that will be part of the Yellow Pages. Is it for an extended network or only for a specific group?
3. Decide if the information will be mandatory or voluntary. There may also be some profile fields where you have to make the same decision.
4. Decide on profile fields, mixing formal and informal information. The kind of information might be brief, such as: name, role, organisation, brief description of what you are working on, email address. It might be more comprehensive, including main areas of interest, professional associations, address, telephone numbers etc. A photograph is important for bringing life to Yellow Pages.
5. Organise a way of collecting this information. Will you send out a template or will you invite people to go online and complete the information? Will there be a number of options to select or will it be relatively unstructured? Should you be using a metadata system that will help visualise the information in different ways?
6. Keep the Yellow Pages up-to-date. Who should do this? Will it be remunerated?
7. Encourage people to use the Yellow Pages.

COMMENTS

The Yellow Pages is generally considered to be an online directory but I also use it in a simpler form as a way of collecting and visualising information about members at an event and producing it as a document for people to take home. This works particularly well when members do not have easy access to internet.

I have seen people using the Yellow Pages as community building activity through the conversations it generates in setting it up and used in the process of inducting new members into the community.

This activity leads on well from the social network mapping, which helps to show the importance of leveraging the power of the network.

YOUR NOTES



Social Network Mapping

SIMILAR OR RELATED TOOLS

Yellow Pages, Impact Pathways

BENEFITS

This activity helps visualise and show the potential of the networks that people in the room belong to

CHALLENGES

You must be sure to have enough time for interpretation and reflection of the maps.

TIME

Between 60 minutes - one morning

LINKS

[KS Toolkit: Social network analysis](#)

[Net-Map toolbox](#)

[Social networking in plain English](#)

[ENRAP: Build relationships](#)

WHEN TO USE IT

I started by using social network mapping quite simply and often as a warming-up and getting to know activity. Now I use it as a way for people to visualise the broader network of a members in a community of practice. It leads to discussions about how the people in the room could be harnessing the energy of the network. It is, essentially, a way for members of a community to learn with each other, making sense of who they are together in the room and what broader networks they represent.

This activity can also be a good lead-in to the Yellow Pages activity as it often results in people wondering how to capture some of the information about people in the network, which is what you do with Yellow Pages.

PROCEDURE

Equipment

- large sheet of blank paper for each table
- 3 different coloured pens - 1 of each colour for each person at the table (i.e. if there are four people you need 12 pens, 4 x red, 4 x green and 4 x blue).
- post-it notes (3 colours)

Stages

1. Set the scene: network mapping is
2. On a post-it note write your name (with a marker) and the group/community/organisation you are here on behalf of.
3. On different post-it notes (of a different colour) write down up to five groups/communities/organisations that you also belong to or participate in.
4. Arrange those post-it notes around yours, with the closest ones being the ones you have closest relations with. Mark those relations with arrows between you and them: a two-way arrow for a two-way relationship, a one-way arrow for a one-way relationship; a dotted line for a weak relationship and a strong line for a strong relationship. You can also have a wavy line for those relationships you're not sure of.
5. Explain these groups/communities/organisations and your relationship with them to the rest of the group. Don't keep duplicate post-it notes (i.e. if two people have a relationship with the same organisation, you only need one post-it note).
6. Write the names of individuals in those organisations who are the active ones you have contact with. Write them near the post-it notes.
7. On different post-it notes (of a different colour) write down up to five groups/communities/organisations that those groups/communities/organisations are connected to and who could have an interest in your project. Mark the relationship between groups/communities/organisations with arrows.
8. Connect with dotted or strong lines those groups/communities/organisations on your map that are connected.

Reflection: Following the mapping exercise ask participants to look at their map and reflect on these kinds of questions:

- How do you read that map in relation to yourselves as a group?
- What does it say about your network and your potential network?
- What does it tell you about your outreach strategy?
- What could you do to build on or leverage that network?

COMMENTS

The procedure I have outlined above is a variation of one that I adapt and use, depending on the group and the context. The most important thing is to have a meaningful visualisation about the connections between the people in the room and their broader network and to invite people to reflect on that.

YOUR NOTES



Open Space Technology

SIMILAR OR RELATED TOOLS

The World Café, Samoan Circle, Appreciative Inquiry

BENEFITS

This helps the group take responsibility and ownership of their own learning agenda.

CHALLENGES

This activity is quite challenging for people who want to have some control the agenda.

LINKS

[Open Space World](#)

WHEN TO USE IT

This is an inspiring approach, developed by Harrison Owen in the 1980s, for generating conversations about things that matter to the community. It is a way for a diverse community to create their own agenda, particularly when the work is complex and the interest of the group is high.

It can be used for many purposes in a community of practice, for learning from or with each other; it can be used as a way for members to share stories about their practice, or to carry out a productive inquiry, or case clinic into a particular problem some members might be experiencing, or as a way of reviewing projects. What is important is that the purpose for the Open Space session is framed at the beginning of the session and that you follow the Open Space principles. The stories, cases or projects will then be decided by group members in the session.

PROCEDURE

1. Select a focusing statement that frames the discussions in a positive way.
2. Sit everyone in a wide circle and explain the procedure and the principles.
3. Open Space principles are:
 - Whoever comes are the right people.
 - Whatever happens is the only thing that could have.
 - Whenever it starts is the right time.
 - When it's over, it's over.

There is also the "Law of Two Feet", which means that people are bound to walk away from discussions which they do not have anything to contribute to, or which they think are irrelevant.

4. Invite people to step into the circle and announce their name and topic they feel strongly enough to lead a discussion about. They write it on a piece of paper that is put on the wall.
5. Once all the topics have been announced the wall becomes a market place where sessions can be combined, clustered and negotiated. People sign their names onto the sessions they want to attend.
6. Groups carry out the conversations in different parts of the room (or building). Those who announced the topic are responsible for taking notes about the conversation, or of making sure that notes are taken. The conversations follow the Open Space principles and law.
7. Reconvene into the larger group and report back.

COMMENTS

I have seen Open Space produce some excellent results, especially if you allow plenty of time for it (two days) and with very large groups. It is based on the idea "Trust the group - trust the process" and facilitators who become over-enthusiastic or try to control the agenda are known as "Space Invaders" and to be discouraged.

Other Open Space patterns not mentioned about are: meet in a circle; begin in silence to listen to the creative spirit; honour or welcome the unexpected; reflect on learning; practice conversations to hear and respect all voices and ways of relationship.

YOUR NOTES



Evening News

SIMILAR OR RELATED TOOLS

Morning news

BENEFITS

An informal round-up of the day's events can lighten the atmosphere and create a shared run memory of the event.

CHALLENGES

You have to be prepared to improvise.

LINKS

WHEN TO USE IT

The "Evening News". Is a way of bringing some closure to the day, with summaries of what's happened and some of the highlights or insights. It can be formal or informal, structured or not-structured. Usually there are one or two people who are assigned to collect the news and they can represent it by sitting or standing at the front, or even performing it. Sometimes people show some photos or a video in the evening news.

The best evening news both reflects and stretches the group dynamics. It is always rather brief with the intention of framing what has happened in a sympathetic and interesting way rather than a representation of facts or conclusions. It is more a way for members to learn *with* each other; rather than *from* the Evening News reporter(s).

A facilitator might do the Evening News herself or coordinate or delegate it to participants.

PROCEDURE

1. Recruit people who will be involved in presenting the evening news at the end of the day.
2. Decide how you will present the news e.g. as a briefing of the day's events, as a collection of insights collected from what people said during the day, as a representation of the T.V. News, as a slideshow, with photographs, as a visual.
3. Check that you have the equipment you need for the evening news. For example, a camera, access to a computer to prepare a slide-show etc.
4. Arrange times during the day when you (the Evening News reporters) will come together to review what you have been noting down in preparation for the evening news.
5. During the workshop or event, keep attentive to what is happening formally and informally.
6. Do a final run-through with the other Evening News reporters.
7. Present the evening news at the closing session, recording it if appropriate.

COMMENTS

I have seen this activity being one of the most effective community-building activities of a workshop or an event. In recruiting people to help collect and report the news you involve participants in creating the story of the event. It is a way of putting some of the hard issues "on the table" in a light-hearted way; and it lightens up the atmosphere after a hard day of work. I mix it with social reporting techniques, which is a way of using new tools to help deepen conversations and help the group create a shared memory for themselves and for the people who were not at the event.

YOUR NOTES



Online Tools: wikis, tagging,

SIMILAR OR RELATED TOOLS

There are many different versions of these tools as well as other Web2.0 tools. RSS feeds are not talked about here, but they are also related.

BENEFITS

These tools offer potential transformations in our way of collaborating, opening up many opportunities for using technology, even to non-technology minded people.

CHALLENGES

So many tools and ways of integrating them can be quite overwhelming, especially when you have to remember different user names and passwords.

LINKS

[Web2.0 for development](#)
[Wikis in plain English](#)
[O'Reilly: What is a wiki \(and how to use one for your projects\)](#)
[Cool Cat Teachers: Skype for beginners](#)
[Full Circle Associated: telephone conference call tips](#)
[Blogs in plain English](#)
[KS Toolkit: Blogs](#)
[KS Toolkit: Tagging and social bookmarking](#)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The burgeoning number of online tools (often referred to as Web2.0 tools) support peer-to-peer connections and sharing of information, networked thinking and new forms of representation. This peer-to-peer learning is typical of what you see in communities of practice.

As we extend the reach of conversations beyond time and space, these tools become increasingly important for learning and communication.

WHEN TO USE ONLINE TOOLS

(Adapted from Etienne Wenger's FAQ on Web2.0 and communities)

Wikis (e.g., MediaWiki used by Wikipedia). Communities of practice use wikis to create and publish collective, co-authored documents, including web pages. They also use wikis as interactive workspaces for conducting projects or for planning events. The use of wikis range from mere accumulations of resources to full co-authoring of text.

Blogs (e.g., Blogger; Google's blogging tool). Communities use blogs in two ways: individual blogs and collective blogs.

- Individual blogs give people a personal voice as contributors to a community. Some communities offer individual blogs inside the community space for specific purposes, such as telling personal stories of practice. Some communities also point to the personal blogs of their members outside the community space, for instance by including member's blogs on their "blog roll" (links to associated sites), or by offering a feed that aggregates members' blogs. Informal communities also develop as conversations connect related blogs through postings and comments that point to each other across blogs.
- Collective blogs are also used by communities as shared chronological spaces for posting opinions or news items. In some cases, a community blog acts as a kind of dynamic, online newsletter to keep members or broader audiences up-to-date on what is happening in and around the community. In other cases, a collective blog focuses on a topic and the chronological stream of postings and comments forms a kind of conversation on that topic.

Tagging (e.g., Delicious, a social bookmarking site based on tagging). Communities can use a set of tags as communal keywords, thus creating shared set of pointers to resources relevant to members. A "tag cloud" (the set of tags that a community uses sized according to frequency of use) can be a way to represent dynamically what a community is interested in and where its learning is focusing. It can be interesting for members to visualize their membership by comparing their own tag cloud that of their community.

VOIP (e.g., Skype). Many communities use Skype for making calls, holding videoconferences, participating in group telephone calls and for taking joint notes. This provides a free or inexpensive way for members to stay in touch. The online presence indicator of people in your contact list also helps gives a sense of other members of the group, even when people are located in different places.

YOUR NOTES



Facilitation

SIMILAR OR RELATED TOOLS

Facilitation refers to the process of enabling groups to collaborate in ways that will help them achieve their objectives.

BENEFITS

Good facilitation is a way of ensuring that groups get the most of coming together.

CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge is in negotiating the expectations of different people in the design of the event of the community

LINKS

[Tearfund: Facilitation skills work-book](#)

[NEOWE: Facilitation skills](#)

[AusAID: Basic facilitation skills](#)

[Full Circle: Facilitation resources](#)

WHEN TO USE IT

There are many different approaches and techniques for facilitation. It generally means to enable groups to work together more efficiently and more collaboratively. Sometimes organisations hire a professional facilitator to help them achieve certain objectives, other times someone within the organisation takes on the role of facilitation. It can be particularly helpful to have a skilled facilitator when you have people from diverse backgrounds and with different interests working together; or if there is a tension around who is managing the agenda.

A skilled facilitator in a community of practice is concerned about the quality of the learning in peer-to-peer conversations and knowledge sharing. The facilitator will be helping to build relationships of trust among members, of creating quality dialogue and giving all people a voice. This often means taking an approach of principled "self-organising" and an edge-of-chaos quality of thinking as the facilitator leads a process of helping people to identify and explore the issues they care about, to be authentic and to speak frankly. The facilitator helps frame those issues and works in ways that empower the group to understand their problems and find the capacity to solve those problems themselves.

PROCEDURE

There is no recipe or procedure for facilitation, but there are things that it is helpful to pay attention to:

Before the event

1. Make sure you have clearly negotiated your mandate in the event and what are the expectations of event organisers.
2. Find out the background and context of all people participating in the event.
3. Help shape the design of the agenda.

At the event

4. Introductions - make sure that everyone, even those who enter late, are introduced to the others. It is worth spending time on people getting to know each other and each other's names.
5. Physical environment - organise the seating and general architecture of the room to reflect how you want people to be talking and listening to each other. Make sure people know where the bathrooms are and what time the breaks are.
6. Timing and breaks - be responsible for making sure people take breaks. Breaks are as important as sessions.
7. Transparency and consistency about the culture of the meeting - you might want to write down (and agree) rules, such as: every opinion is valid, all participants are equal, no mobile phones, be punctual etc.
8. Involving all participants - not everyone needs to participate in the same way, but you should be trying different ways to engage people in what is happening, looking out for people who might not be being heard because they talk quietly, have a physical disability or who are simply not accustomed to being listened to.
9. Model good behaviour - you can encourage collaboration by being honest, open, respectful and by not taking side.
10. Process - a facilitator is supporting the process and the group's responsibility is to try and reach their desired outcome. You cannot push a group to do anything, you can only support them in their endeavour.
11. Feedback - invite feedback from participants, the event organiser, friends or co-facilitators. Use this feedback to improve your facilitation skills.

COMMENTS

There are as many ways to facilitate as there are facilitators. The key is in understanding the expectations of all the people involved in the meeting or event and looking for ways to support the community in finding their collective energy in achieving their goals. Facilitation is not about bringing consensus. It is as also about bringing in minority voices, asking awkward questions, and about surfacing disagreements.

YOUR NOTES



The Samoan Circle

SIMILAR OR RELATED TOOLS

Fishbowl

BENEFITS

This activity gives many people a chance to speak.

CHALLENGES

If you don't have a topic or theme that generates discussion, people will not move in and out of the circle and the discussion will stay with few people.

LINKS

[DSE: Samoan circles](#)

[KS Toolkit: Samoan circle](#)

WHEN TO USE IT

This works well when there is a controversial topic where many people have an opinion. The aim is to allow different perspectives of an issue, giving everyone a chance to speak. It is an activity that puts the process in the hands of members who can take responsibility for the direction of the conversation by entering the circle any time they want. It could be used as a way of learning from someone's experience, but is mostly a way to learn with other members of the community as you explore a controversial issue.

PROCEDURE

The Samoan Circle is a meeting without a leader, although you need a facilitator to set it up and explain the process:

1. Set up a circle of chairs within a wider circle of chairs.
2. If there are many people, the inner circle may need a microphone.
3. Choose four people with different representative views to sit in the inner circle (four chairs)
4. Clarify that once the discussion begins, the facilitator will withdraw.
5. Explain that anyone who wants to join the conversation must come to the inner circle, put their hand on the shoulder of someone in the inner circle who withdraws leaving their seat for the new conversation participant.
6. During the discussion you can record the different viewpoints or outcomes.

COMMENTS

Some people don't like feeling so passive in the process of this activity. Others see it as a way to really listen to and focus on different opinions. Some people are intimidated to send someone out of the inner circle, others see it as an opportunity to influence the conversation. I notice that people from national cultures where conversations often have several people talking at once and where people freely interrupt each other are less comfortable with this activity than people who come from cultures where turn-taking is related to waiting for someone to finish talking. I also observe that people who have been quiet during an event may often come out to talk in this activity.

YOUR NOTES



Collegial Coaching

OTHER SIMILAR TOOLS

Peer coaching, Peer mentoring, Peer Assist

BENEFITS

This activity allows and encourages people to learn from colleagues who share the same context and who have faced similar issues.

CHALLENGES

Collegial coaching requires a certain degree of humility. All people involved need to believe that that they are good but can always improve what they are doing by listening to others.

LINKS

[Dare to share](#)

[Use peer coaching to extend your skills](#)

WHEN TO USE IT

In a mature community of practice collegial coaching will be an integral part of the community's practice, generally happening on an informal level. Early on in the life-cycle, or when there is a regular turn-over of members, it can be helpful to use it as a more formal procedure until people get used to it. It is a way of learning from and with each other. Collegial coaching could be one person asking for coaching from one or a team of coaches, or several people inviting coaching from an individual or several coaches. The idea is we can learn from colleagues who have experienced similar questions and situations. The process of coaching helps clarify our ideas and might even gain some legitimacy in the process.

PROCEDURE

Collegial coaching started as a reflective technique for teachers who could listen to how colleagues were handling similar classroom challenges. Many different strategies and procedures for implementing collegial coaching have developed since then. What they have in common is that collegial coaching is non-judgmental and non-evaluative.

Here is one way to carry out collegial coaching:

7. Person A chooses a person or group of people to learn from.
8. A clarifies the purpose and objective for the coaching, which could be a specific problem s/he is seeking help for and what s/he hopes to get from the coaching.
9. The coach or coaches ask questions for clarification. The coach may visualise the problem or question to share with A.
10. A starts by sharing information and context in relation to the problem or question they have.
11. The coaches may want to ask further questions of clarification.
12. The coaches discuss A's case between them, sharing their own experience of similar situations and challenges. If there is only one coach s/he reflects aloud. A only listens.
13. A reacts on the coaches' discussion.
14. A states how s/he will follow up.

COMMENTS

Collegial coaching and peer mentoring are an integral part of the practice in a community that values learning. Perhaps the most important quality in collegial coaching is mutual listening.

YOUR NOTES

About Bev:

Beverly Trayner is a facilitator and learning consultant for organisations in the knowledge economy. She supports communities and organisations in the design, launch and support of communities of practice and social learning systems, from the learning architecture to the ongoing tools, processes and activities. In her own work she is part of international distributed teams, experienced in supporting multi-lingual and cross-cultural groups who cross time-zones and geographic locations. She has published chapters and articles about learning in internationally distributed communities and is also the creative director of an Open Source code for a platform for networked communities. Beverly is a pioneer in social reporting, a process of using new tools and technologies for creating a shared community memory with new tools and technologies in ways that support and deepen conversations.

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