A Hybrid Toastmasters Program for People with Aphasia:

Navigating Challenges in Creating the Meeting Space and Managing Group Dynamics

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Background

The Aphasia Institute has long-standing experience hosting a Gavel Club for People with Aphasia (Toastmasters International). We were the first organization to host a Gavel Club for people with aphasia, beginning in 1999. From March 2020 to August 2023, the group met online, using the Zoom platform. The Aphasia Institute began providing onsite programs again in 2023. We continue to provide program options in both onsite and online formats.

In early 2023 some members of the Toastmasters Gavel Club expressed a desire to return to an onsite meeting format, while others wished to continue meeting via Zoom. After considering the factors of choice, staff availability, group discourse factors, and technology solutions, we decided to begin a pilot project to offer our TM Gavel Club in a hybrid format. This format incorporates a simultaneous online and on-site group experience. This presentation will explore the challenges encountered and solutions developed.

Gavel Clubs

GCs provide opportunities to engage in public speaking and conversation. These groups "provide real-world communication practice in a supportive environment, while enhancing social support and networking." (Hollowell, B., 2017)

Clare **McCann**, Julia Plourde, and colleagues at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, have reported a number of improvements in those attending their Gavel Club sessions. Changes in linguistic measures, both content and grammaticality, have been noted (McCann et al, 2021). Improvements in quality of life and communication confidence have also been documented (Plourde, J.M.H. et al, 2019). Family members have reported beneficial outcomes regarding communication, purpose, and relationships. (Lyon, G. et al, 2022)

Gavel Clubs are affiliated with Toastmasters International. They are defined as a "a way of providing the Toastmaster experience to groups who may be ineligible for regular membership due to age, or other circumstances." (toastmasters.org)

Gavel Clubs are expected to use the program and procedures that are used by the Toastmasters program. Here is a summary of the standard Toastmaster meeting structure:

Meeting Roles: Chair, Toastmaster, Table Topics, Quizmaster, Evaluator

Presentations:

> Prepared: Theme of the Day, Jokes, Week in History, Word of the Day, Educational Tip, Prepared Speech

> Spontaneous: Table Topics, Evaluation, Quizmaster's Questions

The Aphasia Institute Gavel Club

The Aphasia Institute model includes contributions from trained volunteers, group members, and staff.   Volunteers assist with group organization and meeting facilitation, along with communication support (SCA); members help with group organization, and staff provide technology assistance and volunteer coaching.

When the issue arose of whether to change our meeting location/format, our GC members indicated similar opinions to those reported regarding the benefits of participating in this group, including social and communication factors. The wishes of the membership were roughly divided equally, half preferring to remain meeting via Zoom (Hall, N. et al, 2013), while half wanting to move to meeting in-person. The option of creating two separate groups was rejected soundly; the group members had formed strong connections with one another, and they did not want to 'break up'.

We considered the possibility of creating a truly hybrid meeting that would join both the online and onsite members into one group. In contrast to our other conversation group programs, which focus on "opportunities for genuine conversation" (Kagan, 2007) in a communicatively accessible context, with all of the inherent characteristics of continuous turn-taking and relatively rapid change of speakers and topics, the GC meeting format provides considerably more structure. Speakers are designated either by the chair or the volunteer facilitators and there is more time between speakers, in the formal meeting agenda. Given this discourse structural advantage, we decided to proceed with a pilot project to create a hybrid GC format.

Hybrid Meeting Space

Onsite:

The onsite group meets in a room with a projector screen on the front wall and the tables/chairs arranged in u-shape. Each meeting participant has an IPad in front of them, which is connected to the Zoom meeting. The onsite members can switch between a gallery and speaker view on their IPads. They continue to maintain eye contact with one another, but they can choose to look at online participants either on the iPads or the screen at the front. The onsite members can see the online members highlighted on the projected screen at the front of the room. The staff member who is managing the tech has two computers, one for the zoom room management (pinning, letting people in), and another to communicate with other staff and display materials via the projector). The audio input is provided via the webcam microphone, and the projector speaker is used to provide the audio output from the Zoom participants.

Online:

The Zoom participants see each group participant, both those on site and those online, in one Zoom room. There is a webcam focused on the whole room, as well, which is visible in one Zoom window, and which provides a larger visual context.

User Experience

Hybrid meetings, when some people are physically together and others are joining remotely, introduce challenges to meeting dynamics. There are design principles that are becoming standard in creating functional hybrid meeting spaces, (Tang, J.C. et al, 2023), with the goals including supporting natural interactions and increasing feelings of co-presence.

> *Blending*, rather than separating in-room and remote users
>
> *Consistency*, in the spatial arrangement, to give everyone a 'seat at the table'
>
> *First-person perspective view*, unique to each participant and spatially consistent with the relative positioning of the meeting participants

We used standard consumer-level technology to attempt to create a mirrored experience for both sets of participants (Zoom, iPads), a Conference Cam for a full room view, and a projector screen to display online participants in the onsite meeting space.

Group Development

Tuckman's model of developmental group stages has been in use since its publication in 1965 and revision in 2010. The stages are now forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. We found that with the introduction of the hybrid format, our G.C. performing group was reverted to stage one, forming. We have moved through the storming stage and have addressed issues such as status differences between online and onsite groups, inclusivity factors, and group identity issues. It appears that we are in the norming stage now.

Group Interaction

Efforts to observe the integration between the online and on-site groups have included noting the numbers of participants in each format who take assigned G.C. roles, the interaction patterns among onsite and on-line members, and the inclusion methods used by group facilitators and participants. At the present time the G.C. roles are equally distributed naturally, without the need for intervention. Conversation that occurs in between the formal talk is occurring between members across platforms, as well as among members onsite. (London, M. and Sessa, V. 2007).

Future Directions:

We are reviewing our processes regarding conversation during break times and the need for more intentional facilitation to encourage different types of interaction among the online members. Online meeting choices center around accessibility due to travel time, fatigue factors, and other accessibility issues . The additional value that the onsite experience potentially brings regarding relationships and communication complexity needs to be considered.

Learning Outcomes

1. Describe the purpose of Gavel Clubs and list positive outcomes that have been reported in the literature
2. Define the "hybrid" meeting model and describe design principles that foster interaction in hybrid meetings
3. List some of the group development and group interaction challenges that have been observed during hybrid meetings and describe some ways to overcome these challenges.

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