

The lifecycle of a virtual collaboration
Emily Miller, Appalachian State University

When Lisa and I decided to explore the interaction between technology and identity as doctoral students, we were both saddled with extremely busy schedules. We needed to find ways to maximize our time together. Lisa first proposed the project via email, and, as is often the case, the conference proposal abstract was due almost immediately. We communicated through Facebook and email to get the abstract submitted and agreed to the project without ever having been in the same room.

We used a sonata case study format in which we both read the same set of readings biweekly and then responded in writing throughout the semester. We decided to meet in the coffee shop every other week to discuss how things were going and agree on the next steps in our research. Truthfully, our face-to-face meetings were more social than work related. We often ironed out a few details and then talked about how things were going in our personal lives, all the reading and writing happened elsewhere.

We used a Moodle shell for our project's virtual home. We posted the articles we were reading there and responded to one another through the forum tool. The forum sent an email to our professional email accounts each time one of us added a response. The email notifications were virtual nudges to take the next step. We wanted a virtual space where we could add images, links, articles, and where we could write collaboratively. We used Moodle because we could create a private shell via the University's moodle services; however, had that option not been available, I would have suggested we use a wiki for our shared virtual space (PBworks).

When we completed the case study, we needed to write it up and prepare the presentation. We used a Google doc to write collaboratively, sometimes synchronously and sometimes asynchronously. After going through several written versions, we intended to get a private room in the library to practice our presentation; however, the end of the semester made finding a common available time very difficult. We opted instead to practice via Skype.

It's hard to say where the work of our project actually happened. I feel like the coffee shop meetings were very important to our process because we always left a meeting with a clear idea of what should happen next and a renewed sense of purpose. Ironically, the face-to-face meetings felt more important, but most of the real work happened in the various virtual spaces we occupied.

We often used Facebook as a way to initiate virtual contact, to let each other know that we'd updated the Google doc, to arrange Skype times, or to ask each other to check the university email accounts we used to communicate. In the end, the project was a slew of oftentimes unplanned virtual contact. We didn't agree to communicate via Facebook, but it was a virtual space that we both occupied, sort of like running into one another at the water cooler, if you could run into one another at the water cooler asynchronously and in your pajamas.