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Navigating the Spectrum: Online vs. Real Person Interaction My Observations

In the era of virtual reality and the lingering impact of the pandemic, the contrast between online and real-person interaction has become increasingly pronounced.

As someone who spent a significant amount of time on Zoom during lockdown, I had the opportunity to connect with amazing individuals from all corners of the country and world. Initially I was converted to the online world and became a staunch supporter of virtual meetings, even suggesting that any gathering beyond five miles should be conducted via Zoom, while shorter distances warranted physical presence, advocating biking or walking.

However, reflecting on my experiences, I've found that reality hasn't quite aligned with my initial assertions!!

While Zoom and similar platforms undoubtedly offer convenience and efficiency, enabling connections that transcend geographical barriers, I've come to realize that there's a certain magic to in-person interactions that cannot be replicated virtually. Recently, as I returned to swimming after a 5 month break, the simple act of engaging with ten different individuals within the confines of a pool reminded me of the richness and depth of face-to-face encounters. Whilst swimming I even had a catchup meeting with a children's wellbeing professional and arranged some free training; met the lady from the National Forest that I was due a meeting with and had a discussion with the lifeguard on a safeguarding issue. There's an energy, an immediacy to real-world interactions that leaves a lasting impact!

One aspect that highlights this further is the stark contrast in attendance between virtual and physical classes at the local leisure centres. Virtual rooms may boast a substantial number of potential bookings but it's the in-person experience that's wanted. With waiting lists for nearly all in-person classes and very minimal bookings for online, could something more innovative be done with these spaces? Community groups are crying out for affordable spaces to meet and these empty spaces could be filled with people that might be tempted to have a swim or a gym session! Just a thought...



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• **People** • **Place** • **Potential**

Another example comes from the perspective of counsellors, individuals who dedicate themselves to providing support and guidance to others. Despite the convenience of online counselling sessions, I have met compassionate professionals that have expressed reservations about the impact on their own mental health on full time virtual counselling. Moreover, if counsellors were seeking counselling would they opt for in-person sessions or online? I think I know the answer. This sentiment underscores the essential nature of face-to-face interaction in therapeutic settings, where nuances in body language, tone, and presence play a pivotal role in fostering a supportive and healing environment. I believe real-person interactions are irreplaceable - particularly in contexts as sensitive and deeply human as mental health support.

A third observation and question. What is the effectiveness and long-term impact of online counselling for young people? While online platforms can provide accessible support, the quality and depth of the connection may differ from in-person sessions. What if there was investment in a single, centralized, high-quality online system that could streamline resources and potentially provide more consistent care and then the rest of the funding could go to where it's needed - in communities to provide spaces, places and activities for people to go and use where interactions and connections can take place! There in lies another blog!

While Zoom undoubtedly has its merits, particularly for bridging geographical distances and facilitating remote collaboration, it's essential not to overlook the value of face-to-face interactions. Whether it's the spontaneous conversations sparked by chance encounters or the sense of camaraderie forged through shared experiences, there's an intangible quality to in-person connections versus virtual communication.

For organizations like TH!NKFC, the ongoing dialogue between online and real-person interaction carries significant implications.

As a passionate advocate for Levelling the Playing Field and equipping individuals with the tools to effect positive change, our commitment to accessibility is evident through our freely available resources on our website and accompanying videos on YouTube.



While the digital realm offers unparalleled reach and convenience, recent experiences have underscored the enduring value of in-person engagement.

Take, for instance, our Community Connecting course, part of Reaching Peoples Leadership Program, where we collaborated with diverse community groups across Leicestershire, facilitating monthly in-person sessions. The overwhelming popularity of these gatherings stemmed not only from the sharing of tools and resources but from the genuine connections forged between participants. Their preference for face-to-face interaction, evidenced by the decision to replace planned online sessions with in-person meetings, highlights the profound impact of physical presence in fostering meaningful relationships and collaborative endeavours.

Conversely, our online sessions for the Happy MBA course, catering to Level 7 apprentices nationwide, demonstrate the usefulness of virtual platforms in facilitating remote learning and collaboration. In both instances, whether in-person or online, the emphasis remains on empowering individuals with the knowledge and resources to enact positive change, underscoring the versatility and adaptability of our approach in meeting diverse needs and preferences.

In conclusion, my journey navigating the spectrum between online and real in person interaction has been one of discovery and reflection. While technology has undoubtedly revolutionized the way we connect and communicate, it's crucial not to overlook the enduring significance of face-to-face encounters.

For most things give me a good old real life connection and a cuppa any day!

How many virtual sessions in centres across the country are empty spaces?

What might they be used for instead?

What experiences have you in the online or real-world... where do you like to connect?

How might more face to face opportunities in communities be made available?

THINK - Deana

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