

Jolanta Steciuk

# TO MEET OR NOT TO MEET? CREATING ONLINE AND OFFLINE SPACES FOR DIALOGUE IN CONFLICT AREAS



#dialogue

#pandemic

#territory

#reconciliation

#online\_and\_offline\_education

## About the author



(Photo Credit: Agata Maziarz)

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is a graduate of the Faculty of Law at the University of Warsaw. As a scholarship holder at Columbia University in New York, she participated in the Historical Dialogue and Accountability program (2012). She is a trainer in international projects on civic

education, dialogue, and contemporary history. She has been closely cooperating with [Krzyżowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding in Europe and Kreisau-Initiative e.V.](#) implementing such projects as "My History – Your History," "Once Upon... Today in Europe, Entangled History as a Perspective for Non-Formal Education." Jolanta is the author of the book *All Shall Be Different*, a series of interviews with human rights advocate, publicist, and pedagogue Halina Bortnowska (2010). She is an NGO expert with 25 years of experience. She worked for several grant programs of private and state institutions, for example Democracy and Civil Society, Active Citizens, and the Civic Europe Idea Challenge.

The pandemic introduced and normalized online meetings in many spheres: work, education and social life. Closed state borders, new safety measures, and social distancing influenced educational projects focused on dialogue between groups, especially those from countries and communities affected by conflict. In this article, I delve into the new reality of online

meetings in the context of my own experiences from Polish-German projects. I will cover insights from experts working in the Israeli-Palestinian and South Korean-Japanese contexts, explore how group processes are being changed in the online space, and reflect on how the country, its history, and culture may influence the agenda and atmosphere of a meeting.

## In Berlin, Warsaw, Jerusalem, or online

In January 2021, I was taking part in a Betzavta conflict resolution training for Polish and German educators, led by Dr. Uki Maroshek-Klarman, an Israeli facilitator and the author of the Betzavta method. The pandemic was still in full swing at the beginning of 2021, so I was sitting at home, in front of my computer, preparing for the online session. My favorite mug full of coffee, the familiar view from my window, the neighbors' young child crying. I waited for the Poles and Germans to join the Zoom call from their respective locations, in neighboring countries – Warsaw, Poznań, Berlin, Stuttgart, etc. The facilitator was connecting from Jerusalem. Dr. Uki Maroshek-Klarman made sure participants switched on their cameras. She asked us to write our full names so that they would be visible on the screen.

When people from countries that had faced violent conflict meet, even many years after the conflict, the past becomes a natural framework of reference for the discussion, directly or indirectly. It is us and them in the beginning. We meet in our or their country, and quite often we visit sites of memory together to reflect on our shared history.

The Internet introduces significant changes to our meetings. We don't meet in anybody's country. The World Wide Web and the global village are just fancy names for **not** sharing a physical space when connecting and interacting. Online meetings, with faces randomly presented on the screen, change the typical scenario

of people sticking to their national groups and group identities.

With names on the screen, even at first glance, we can guess who is from Poland, and who comes from Germany. Some names and surnames are not so easy to put in a box, reminding us that family histories are complex.

Surprisingly, during the workshop, before we start the discussion about stereotypes, their origins, and how to deal with them, the facilitator asks us to pick up someone else's name and enter it in Zoom instead of our own. It is possible to borrow a name from one person, and a surname from another. Suddenly someone who was initially perceived as German adopts a Slavic surname, and a Polish person chooses a German name. Some people took names only from their national groups, sticking to their group identity. Interestingly, some people used their avatar-like names for the rest of the meeting, while others quickly felt uneasy and changed back to their own names when the exercise was over.

I don't intend to describe the whole training. But I was simply impressed by the new methods of deconstructing group identities with the support of modern technology. All this with the goal of education and reflecting on our perception of others. It piqued my curiosity regarding what people might experience in different geographical and historical contexts.

## It would have been different

The Betzavta training was organized by a Polish NGO, the Krzyżowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding in Europe. Under normal circumstances, we would have met at the foundation campus located in Lower Silesia, Poland. We would have been told about the history of that place. The territory belonged to Germany before World War II and was acquired by Poland in the aftermath of the war (based on the Potsdam Conference decisions). The place has a history of the cruelty of war, forced migration, and a long reconciliation process. We would have seen the house on the hill where the German resistance against Hitler met during the war. Walking from the seminar room to the canteen, we would have passed by a big grass field on the left,

and a piece of the Berlin Wall, standing like a monument, on the right. Someone would have asked why the image of the German Chancellor and the Polish Prime Minister is painted on the open-air museums' main panel. The story of Helmut Kohl and Tadeusz Mazowiecki taking part in a reconciliation mass in Krzyżowa in 1989 would unfold, shaping a framework for reflection and dialogue. We might have visited the Courage and Reconciliation outdoor exhibition presenting Polish-German relations in the period 1939-1989. Someone might mention that the exhibition was opened by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Ewa Kopacz, the Polish Prime Minister.

While we were meeting online, I realized that **the physical place with its history and memorial sites is a silent participant influencing the dynamics of the encounter**, triggering topics and conversation, shaping and imposing collective narratives individuals need to navigate.

## Collective identity challenged

During the pandemic, in mid-2021, I was involved in the workshop series "Democracy – Courage to Change, Courage to Act" and co-organized civic education webinars bringing together participants from six countries: Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Romania, Estonia, and Moldova. The advantages of online meetings were quite obvious. We were able to dream big and invite guest speakers from distant locations

as well as experts from a variety of fields (from environment protection in Poland, to LGBT+ rights advocates from Romania to Belarussian diaspora members residing in Berlin). It felt like everyone was around the corner, just one e-mail away. International meetings were significantly cheaper, there were no international travel costs, no accommodation and food costs.

However, suddenly we were no longer sharing the ground beneath our feet. Common ground in the very physical sense was missing. I think it was quite a significant factor when it comes to meetings that were organized in areas affected by a

violent past, for example by the Second World War. Online meetings lacked direct human interaction, smiling faces, body language, informal conversation on the way from the seminar room to the canteen, sharing meals. But maybe we were less

dependent on collective identity. It's easy to be reminded of the collective trauma of World War II when you see a memorial plaque; that's not necessarily the case when you are sitting at home in front of your computer.

## A new definition of meeting

One of our experts was connecting from a camper van on the road to Croatia. She was accompanied by her refugee friend from Belarus, who was waving when he was visible on the screen. Instead of a stable, static concept of a meeting where everybody agrees on a direction, a new reality was introduced: movement and being on the road, multitasking and disconnecting, a blurry division between work and holiday time.

## A global experience

The global pandemic introduced changes in educational projects based on dialogue in many corners of the world. I had a chance to talk to two experts providing insights from Israeli-Palestinian and South Korean-Japanese encounters. I was curious to hear how they perceive the difference between online and offline meetings and what role the location of a meeting plays.

## Technology and dialogue

I spoke to Uri Rosenberg, the co-founder of Tech2Peace, an Israeli-based NGO, which combines high-tech training with conflict dialogue aimed at groups of young Palestinians and Israelis. The NGO proudly displays on its website: "We partner with

leading organizations like Google for Startups, Microsoft, and MIT to provide the best professional opportunities. At the same time, we use conflict dialogue and team-building activities to create a safe space for young people of all backgrounds and beliefs to meet, express their beliefs, and work with the 'other side.'"

Despite their tech background, online education was a challenge at first. Uri Rosenberg says, "The pandemic was

surprising; we did not have a prepared strategy for it. It disrupted our plans. We only had 90 alumni at the time." Now, about two years later, 400 people have already participated in the exchanges.

"We had to experiment. We wanted dialogue, we experimented with breakout rooms." The NGO prefers offline meetings though. "Some things are too difficult to talk about online," Rosenberg says.

## Place, ownership, and leadership

Furthermore, the connection to the land matters in the context of Israeli-Palestinian educational meetings. "Seminars take place in various locations, most of the time inside Israel. Israelis don't feel safe in Palestine, Palestinians don't feel safe meeting Jews in Palestine either. So, we meet in Palestinian towns inside Israel, for example, in Nazareth."

Nazareth is predominantly inhabited by the Arab citizens of Israel. Both local food and culture are in focus here. Such a place triggers interesting processes within the team and the group of participants. "When we meet in Palestinian towns, the leadership of Palestinian staff within Tech2Peace is visible, they own the event," Uri Rosenberg explains. "We meet also in Tel Aviv, Haifa." However, according to him "places with less nightlife" help to

focus and support the dialogue process better. Building on this notion, Tech2Peace organized a weekend in the desert, with a focus on the Bedouin minority. "There were three people from the Bedouin community who were the hosts, they felt ownership of the location and were proud to bring us – the Jewish and the Palestinian people – to their village."

Tech2Peace continues with their online activity. "When we meet online it takes 1-2 hours, no longer. On the Internet nobody owns the place. It is no man's land, neutral. But it gives more strength and the advantage to people who speak English well."

It is not only the balance of power that plays out differently during online events when compared to offline ones; the atmosphere is also different: "On Zoom body language is not visible, people just express opinions. They don't get hugs. The result is different compared to when we meet somewhere in person. The atmosphere is less friendly."

## Online format for emergency situations

The organization combines tech and entrepreneurship training with the creation of bonds between people. "The feeling of being relaxed in a Palestinian town is new to Jewish participants. In the beginning, they are worried, they ask themselves 'What am I doing here?' but soon they feel at home. On the other hand, Palestinians may initially not feel comfortable in a location where they hear people speaking Hebrew, where they see Israeli flags and people wearing kippahs. But they find out that people can be nice to you there as well."

Uri Rosenberg translates the mission of the organization into the language of

everyday life: "One of our goals is making people comfortable with each other, with the other side, in an unfamiliar place that they are not used to." And for that, we need a physical location.

The online option still has value: "It can take a week or two to get permits for Palestinian participants to come. We live with an ongoing conflict, so when something really bad happens, we now usually respond on Zoom. People prefer meeting online in an emergency situation. Whoever wants to talk, talks, and some people are silent."

Even though offline meetings take more time and resources (to rent a venue, accommodate people, etc.), it is important to meet in person: "It is so difficult to start an Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. Some things are too sensitive to talk about online," Rosenberg admits.

## Closed borders

Hanna Suh is a researcher from South Korea. She has participated in Korean-Japanese youth exchanges and she also organized such programs herself.

Interestingly, she explains that both South Korea and Japan are islands. This is because South Korea is separated from the continent by North Korea, which is one of the most isolated countries in the world. "You have to fly, to travel abroad," Hanna

Suh says. And adds, "On March 9, 2020, Japan halted visa-free entry for Korean nationals."

She recalls how educational projects for students and young activists from South Korea and Japan were interrupted by the pandemic and the closing of borders. "The anticipated visit to another country – to the "other side" – was not going to happen anytime soon. Participation in online meetings dropped due to Zoom fatigue. It was not just us, other groups experienced it as well," she says.

The meeting finally took place in August 2022 in Korea, after it was delayed for two years: "It felt like a miracle," she says. However, Covid-19 preventive measures were still in place, and bureaucratic obstacles had to be overcome.

Hanna Suh details the procedure that the Japanese group had to go through before coming to Korea. "They had to apply for a visa, so they lined up in front of the Korean embassy, it was crazy!" The group had to take a Covid test before coming and then another one within 24 hours after arrival.

## Dealing with the past and pop culture

Not all Koreans are satisfied with Japan's apology. How does this affect their decision to take part in a Korean-Japanese exchange? What motivates people to meet "the other side"?

Hanna Suh says, "In Japan, we can observe both a K-culture boom and Anti-Korean sentiment." She adds, "In Korea, there are still loud voices talking about Japan and the fact that they did not apologize. Compensation is also a serious issue. If there is a sporting event where Korean and Japanese teams compete, we have to win. The sports teams even apologize if they lose." As for the Japanese side: "Within families, there can be conflict, a father might not want you to go to Korea," she says.

"In case of a positive test result, you needed to quarantine for a week. To fly back to Japan, you need another Covid test."

Covid-related requirements are a new challenge that participants and organizers of international exchanges face. Hanna Suh describes current measures: "This pre-departure COVID test requirement for travelers ended on August 31 in South Korea and on September 7 in Japan. The on-arrival PCR test requirement was lifted on October 1, 2022 in South Korea."

## Masks and food

During the exchange in 2022, people were still wearing masks in Korea, even outside. "It was not mandatory, but people wore them anyway. We only saw each other when we ate," Hanna recalls. "The added value of the face-to-face meetings is also the food. People from Japan love Korean food!"

After two years of preparation, many people had high expectations. What was the difference between online and offline meetings? "Eating together – we cannot do this online. That was the moment people from Japan finally realized they were in Korea, because the food tastes different."

## Experiencing the border area

The exchange included a field visit. "We went to the border area between North and South Korea, the demilitarized zone. It had a strong impact. People know about it, but now they experienced it. They had this moment of realization that Korea is divided, with separated families living on both sides of the border."

How was the experience for the local community? "For the hosts, Koreans, it was an opportunity to introduce their culture. When someone asks you a question about food – What is this? How do you make it? – you are expected to provide answers, maybe even first find the right words in English."

The black chicken turned out to be a highlight. "Koreans eat a special kind of chicken soup at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of summer. We went to a famous restaurant where they serve this soup, the whole chicken is in the soup, on your plate. There is also a black chicken that you can choose from. It was surprising for me to see that many Japanese participants were delighted to eat black meat."

There are differences in cuisine between the two countries, and this was something that the participants experienced during the meeting. "People in Korea eat a lot of spicy food; in Japan this is not the case. In other contexts people ask – are you vegan, are you vegetarian? – and here we learned that we also need to ask people – do you eat spicy food?"

## Colonialism

One of the field trips included a visit to the War and Women's Human Rights Museum and the Museum of Japanese Colonial History in Korea. "We went to the exhibition about Comfort Women. In the museum they divided the Korean and the Japanese group. I understand some Japanese, so I wanted to join the Japanese group." But it was not allowed by the NGO organizing the event, Hanna Suh recalls. "The groups from Korea and Japan could not visit the museum together. I guess they might have different tours for each group."

## The future

There are plans for the continuation of the Korean-Japanese exchange. "We are planning two events in Korea and Japan in the coming years. In the project application, we included some culture-related activities, to get young people involved. In Japan they love K-pop music, this is something we can start from and then move on to historical issues," Hanna explains. Another idea is to start a conversation about different social classes based on the Korean film Parasite. The film directed by Bong Joon-ho was awarded The Golden Palm at the 72nd Cannes Film Festival in 2019 and also won four Oscars, including one for best picture. According to Hanna Suh, the film that tackles the topic of different social classes can be a starting point for a conversation about differences and similarities between people in general.

## The young generation

I asked Hanna why the Korean-Japanese youth exchange is important to her. She answered: "We are close neighbors and I believe that we should work together to solve common social problems. Rather than being buried in national identity, I think we can collaborate on common problems such as climate change with the identity of global citizens. Culturally we are very similar, the languages are similar when compared to other languages. Apart from the colonial history, we lived well together."

She also gave examples of current social challenges: "Gender inequality is an issue in both countries, we can work on this issue together." There are also similar problems facing the young generation in both countries. "Young people cannot dream big anymore, they will not earn as much as their parents." She also pointed out the changing family model and the issue of solitude. "The

number of marriages in South Korea has hit a record low, the birth rate has been dropping and is currently the world's lowest fertility rate, and single-person households are the most common type of households in South Korea. And we used to live as three generations under the same roof. In both countries, the suicide rate is high, especially among young people."

## In place of conclusions

I tried to present insights from different geographical locations to inspire reflection on the choice of meeting format – online or offline – in the context of conflict areas. This article presents subjective experiences, influenced by the backgrounds and personal values of the people sharing the insights. Furthermore, at the time of writing, the pandemic was not yet over. However, we already have learned several lessons.

## Things to consider when planning online or offline meetings in conflict or post-conflict settings:

- Are the representatives of the groups that experience or have experienced violence ready to meet? What measures need to be taken to provide safety and make people feel comfortable?
- A physical location can introduce a host-visitor dynamic during the event. For example, the language, culture, food, and historical perspective of the local community are part of the host's role; the history of the place may be presented in public spaces and museums only from one perspective, in a biased way. When two groups from different countries meet online, the role of the host doesn't belong to any of them.
- A physical place is a silent participant of sorts, one with a significant agenda. The history of a place influences the interaction between participants, it strengthens group identities and can trigger memories of violence (memorial sites, representations of the culture of "the other side" in public spaces).
- Meeting in a physical space allows for more in-depth communication and it is easier to create bonds; body language is missing in online spaces, which can lead to misunderstandings.
- The history of a place and the people who currently reside in the area influence the ownership and leadership of the event taking place offline.
- Physical space – perceived as belonging to the "other side" – can make people feel uncomfortable; participants may hesitate to visit such a place, and fears may arise due to objective factors or stereotypes.
- Online meetings give an advantage to extroverts, people who are used to speaking in public, and who know the language of the encounter better. Providing translation so that everybody can speak their own language can help. Small groups sharing in breakout rooms can support the expression of marginalized narratives and silenced voices.
- Online meetings provide an opportunity to invite participants and speakers from different locations without concerns regarding the costs of travel, accommodation, etc.
- Online meetings can be organized more quickly; they can be a good option for program alumni to connect in an emergency.

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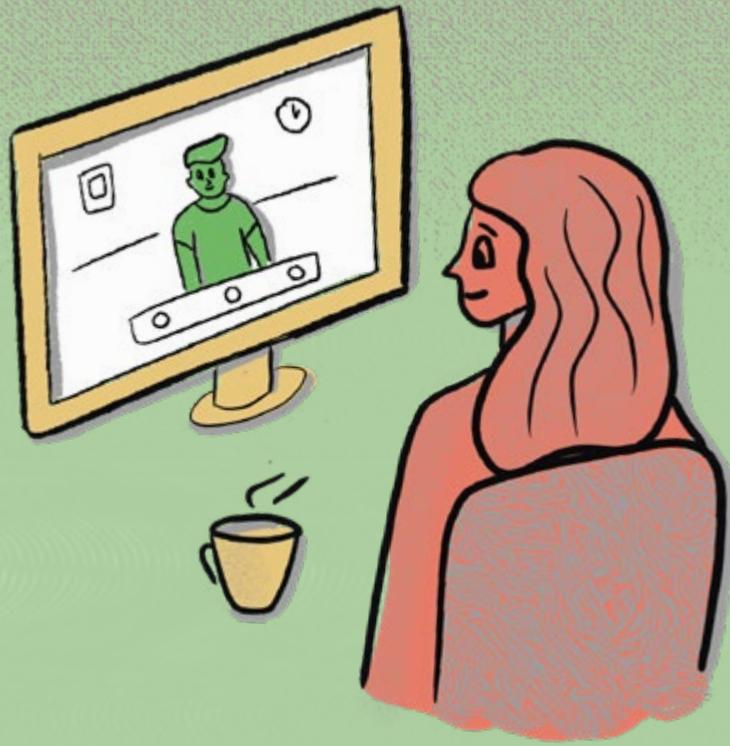
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