

**Library Working Group**  
**Testimony from Vermont Librarians on Technology**  
**Vermont Humanities – Jacob Pelletier**  
**May 20, 2022**

**Overview of Themes in Reported Testimony**

We are pleased to partner with Vermont libraries on many of our programs, including our First Wednesdays series of free humanities lectures, which are hosted by nine libraries across the state from October through May. A season is typically made up of 72 individual talks.

Like many cultural organizations that offer public events, we had to pivot to online presentations when the pandemic started. We initially hosted digital events every Wednesday night, beginning in April of 2020 and continuing through September of that year. We mostly presented on Facebook videos that we had recorded and edited in advance, although some were Facebook Live events. The response was overwhelmingly positive, but recording and editing talks in advance was time consuming.

Although we had hoped that our 2020-2021 First Wednesdays would be held in person, we had to present all 72 talks digitally that year on the Zoom accounts of the individual host libraries. Zoom meetings had their flaws as it could be a chore to keep people muted, and the cameras of some attendees could be distracting.

When we needed to again use digital presentations for much of our 2021-2022 season, we tried out a new Zoom offering, Zoom Events. This platform was great for us as event organizers, as it made it easier for us to collect registrations, communicate with attendees, and manage cameras and views during the event itself. But some users struggled to use Zoom Events, as the platform requires folks to have a Zoom account to attend.

After spending a lot of staff time trying to help our end-users, we eventually abandoned the Zoom Events platform and now use the Zoom Webinar platform. It's not quite as easy for us to manage as Zoom Events, but we can still communicate with folks before and after the event and can share videos shortly after an event ends.

Thirteen events in our most recent season were held in-person at the libraries. These had much lower attendance than our digital First Wednesdays events this season. We averaged about 40 attendees for each digital event.

**Benefits and Disadvantages of Digital Events**

While we miss meeting with our audience in-person, we have seen a lot of benefits of digital events over the past two years:

1. People can choose which talk they'd like to attend based on the topic instead of geography.
2. We can book speakers from outside Vermont more easily and for lower costs.
3. We can share recordings immediately after the event. In the past, the in-person talks were recorded by cable access stations, and it could take weeks for the videos to become available.
4. We get many more responses for surveys from digital attendees than we did by distributing paper surveys at our live events. Around 100 people fill out a survey each month, or more than

ten per talk. And because people are at home with a computer, they often share much longer responses than they would if they were filling out a survey by hand while sitting on a folding chair.

5. While some people say they miss the in-person events, the dominant comment shared is for us to please continue offering talks by Zoom. We hear this from people with small children, people who do not like to drive at night, folks with mobility issues, and those who live a long distance from any of the host libraries, including in other states and countries!
6. Offering talks online has exposed us to a new audience. In 2020-2021, over 45% of attendees said they had never come to a First Wednesdays event before.

There have been some disadvantages to hosting talks primarily online

1. We see part of our mission as helping to build community. This is much easier at an in-person event than during a Zoom Webinar.
2. For the host libraries, it has been a mixed bag. Some locations have loved it, while others feel they get no benefit from the digital events. Folks are not as aware of the library on Zoom as compared to coming into the actual library building itself.
3. Because each season we had planned to host a full in-person slate, we have ended up with nine Zoom events taking place at the same time on the same night, we are essentially competing against ourselves. Folks often tell us: "it's so hard to choose."

### **Changes for Future Programs**

After receiving this input and holding programming meetings with our partners, we have made some changes to the typical format of the First Wednesdays season.

1. After discussion with the host libraries, we have decided to offer a mixture of in-person and digital events in our upcoming 2022-2023 season, which will begin in October.
2. The libraries will host nine in-person talks on the first Wednesday of October, November, and December. We will offer one Zoom talk during those months, on the second Wednesday, so as to not directly compete with the in-person events. We are hopeful that some of the in-person events can offer live streaming.
3. In January, February, and March, we'll offer three digital events on the first Wednesday, and skip the in-person events. These are the months with the worst weather and driving conditions.
4. We will return to in-person events in April and May, with again one talk held on Zoom those months.

### **Participant Testimonials**

To help frame the context of the themes discussed above, included are a few testimonials from participants from the First Wednesdays 2021-2022 season.

1. They are a treasure trove, especially on line if you do not have direct access in your community, but it would help if more were taped and available, at least for a time to view, since they all happen at the same time. Moving to a future hybrid model to allow for in person and remote

participation would be great, not just so I, in Burlington, can attend in St. J, but many people in St. J may not be able to attend in person (child care, elder care, infirmity..) so now that we have the tested ability to provide both we should keep the door open. (Fall 2021, St. Johnsbury Event)

2. The 1st Wednesday initiative is fabulous. The range of issues presented is great. The ability to Zoom presentations from each of the nine towns is terrific. And this last point can be magnified when one realizes he/she doesn't need to go out in blizzards to "attend". Bottom line: "Bringing what matters to all Vermonters." What's not to like? (Fall 2021, Middlebury Event)
3. Have enjoyed First Wednesdays in past then got out of the habit when COVID shut things down for a time. ZOOM makes it so easy - though the 'community' element isn't as strong as when in person. Still, I don't know that I'd have attended if an in person event so appreciate you making these programs still available on ZOOM. (Spring 2022, Norwich Event)

### **Considerations for the Future**

After exploring these themes, we have discovered a few possible options for ways technology can be used to continue improving library programs and connections with stakeholders.

1. Sending digital surveys after live events has proven incredibly fruitful as participants are much more likely to respond and give meaningful feedback.
2. When holding a virtual event, it is important to consider which platform works best for your needs and the needs of the participants. For example, a Zoom Call works great for a small intimate discussion but becomes unwieldy if more than 20 people are in the event.
3. Virtual events provide a wide range of accessibility features including the possibility to easily record an event. We have utilized the live transcription feature, which is computer generated, but does provide great captioning for free. These programs are also able to invite live interpreters and captioners easily if an event requires more precise captions or translations.
4. As we move towards more of a combination of in-person, virtual, and hybrid events, it is important to consider what local marketing options are available to increase invisibility. These include more traditional print marketing as well as digital marketing through websites, social media, and email campaigns.
5. If funding is available, looking at developing infrastructure in libraries and organizations for live-streaming events would be important to consider. As noted in our surveys, people still will want to participate in virtual events in the future, and live streaming is a way to promote community building while providing wider access to programs.