How to Have Lunch in the Time of COVID-19

Kristin DeVleming and Andrew Kobin

Life as an early-career mathematician got a lot harder in 2020. While everyone is facing their own personal and community challenges during a global pandemic, those of us without tenure or a permanent position face an especially steep climb as the world responds to COVID-19. In the face of uncertainty, the two of us decided to focus on preserving something simple: chatting over lunch. Over an ongoing series of informal discussion panels, entitled “Lunch in the Time of Covid,” we have explored topics that affect early-career mathematicians, including the job market, police violence against Black Americans, mentoring, and staying productive as a researcher. Our intention is to build community and start conversations, some of which will last the rest of our careers. We hope to continue this series even as the world recovers from COVID-19 and have provided concrete suggestions for those of you interested in starting your own version of “Lunch.”

How it Started

The idea for “Lunch in the Time of Covid” came from the “hallway” at a virtual conference in the early days of the pandemic, where the organizers first met and discussed the pandemic’s unique affect on early-career mathematicians. Disillusioned by the lack of voices from our generation, we share information and registration details about upcoming events, as well as the notes, links, andmiscellanea always be possible.

Between panels, we keep lists of future topics and potential panelists. This makes it easy to start planning events well ahead of time and match a topic to panelists that have expertise or have had an impact in that area. About two weeks out from an intended date, we invite panelists for a specific topic, and if some decline, we work down our list according to what participants have on their minds. For each topic, we invite three “distinguished panelists” to lead the discussion and share their experiences with the audience. The discussion grows organically yields topics and panelists for future lunches. For example, during one lunch, participants shared the names of several impactful mentors and allies, and we were able to reach out to these people as panelists for a later lunch on allyship.

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After the first lunch, Andrew created and started maintaining a website1 for “Lunch in the Time of Covid,” where we share information and registration details about upcoming events, as well as the notes, links, andmiscellanea from past events. This has become a great resource in its own right, featuring calls to action in the mathematics community (including a letter to the Notices urging the community to boycott collaboration with the police), suggestions for further reading (or listening: participants on June 19 were eager to share their favorite podcasts), and

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DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.1090/noti2199

a partial list of bridge and post-baccalaureate programs in math in the United States.

We advertise through a mix of email, social media, and word of mouth. We maintain a list of participants from past lunches and are able to email reminders about upcoming meetings and advertise on online platforms like the Algebraic Geometry Discord channel (as both organizers are algebraic geometers). Additionally, participants advertise to their departments and colleagues.

**How to Start Conversations**

Our primary goal with “Lunch in the Time of Covid” was (and still is) to start conversations about issues that are affecting young mathematicians. With this in mind, each lunch starts as a panel discussion but slowly becomes a broader discussion where anyone can contribute. No matter your time constraints as an organizer of an event like this, it is wise to include time near the end for the audience to make their voices heard. This can be a formal Q&A, perhaps with questions collected throughout the panel as many webinar platforms allow, or a more informal call for audience members to chime in. (In the spirit of our more informal format, we opted for the latter with great success.) Fortunately, all of the lunch topics after the first week were suggested by past audience members, so we can say with confidence that our audience is passionate about being involved and sharing their experiences.

We have been very open about our own limitations—both organizers are white and have a postdoctoral position. For this reason, we make extra efforts to invite panelists and participants that have different experiences than us. Early on, we began reaching out to trusted mathematicians in our lives who, in one way or another, are not traditionally represented at these types of events. We asked them who would make a good panelist, what topics we should not neglect, and generally how we were doing so far. We have received valuable advice at every step of the way, and continue to benefit from the wisdom of these peers and mentors. Beyond broadening the conversation, we want to send a clear message that all are welcome in these conversations. For anyone who is considering planning a similar event in the future, we encourage you to think early and often about who your audience is and how you are serving their needs.

**How to Keep the Momentum Going**

After the first week, all of our topics have been developed from audience suggestions. Often, a participant shares their passion and experience for a particular topic and they are able to serve as a panelist in a future lunch. This is one of the real strengths of an event series, as opposed to a standalone event: we have been able to dedicate time and future events to focus on important topics brought up by the audience. However, even with a one-time panel, you can solicit feedback ahead of time. As with all things organizational, reach out to people you trust to diversify your perspective on what is important and what should be emphasized. Furthermore, as one participant pointed out, planning an event like this with someone, particularly someone whose background or viewpoints are different than your own, is good experience for the types of collaboration and service that you will be doing the rest of your career.

**In Conclusion**

Based on participant and panelist feedback, “Lunch in the Time of Covid” has been an essential series of conversations for many early-career mathematicians. Both organizers saw a need for an online community to discuss what things are really like during a global pandemic. We encourage anyone who sees a similar need in their community to follow our model (or their own path!) as we continue to face the challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the unique benefits of going virtual during the global pandemic has been the ability to host these lunches for participants across many branches of mathematics and start conversations and community-building that would be unlikely to happen otherwise. Even as the world recovers from COVID-19, we believe in the importance of these informal discussions and hope to inspire others to start something similar.

**Credits**

Photo of Kristin DeVleming is courtesy of the author.
Photo of Andrew Kobin is courtesy of the author.

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DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.1090/noti2200

**Unconscious Bias in Academic Mathematics**

**Danny Krashen**

In recent years, as a society, we have made significant progress at reducing explicit sources of bias. We now understand that we cannot explicitly discriminate on the basis of gender, race, and other protected categories in a range of situations. On the other hand, it has also become strikingly...