

Royal Institution Youth Summit

Observation report, October 2020

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Background

The 2020 Youth Summit was a free online one-day event bringing together sixth form and college students, aged 16-18, from around the country to discuss and debate the topics of the Christmas Lectures.

It took place on Friday 16 October 2020 using the I'm a Scientist online platform. Covering themes of sustainability, science, society and empowerment, the Summit was convened to engage young people with the Christmas Lectures later in the year.

Videos from experts and RI staff helped stimulate debate, provoking discussions amongst young people. Moderators were employed to facilitate conversations and ask further probing questions.

In total 220 young people participated in the online event. There were over 9,100 unique posts, with 198 users making an average of 45 posts within the platform. The day started with an icebreaker exercise where participants got to discuss the issues in groups where there was likely to be high levels of convergence on opinions and views about the future. Following this participant could move fluidly in and out of different content areas and 'chat rooms' depending on their interests. A scenarios exercise helped to provoke discussion and surface perspectives on critical political, social, technological and cultural challenges. From these twelve key themes were identified, and voting took place to inform the topics that would be discussed further:

1. Renewable energy
2. Future technologies
3. Political change
4. Inequality
5. Population control

Each group then had to create a message for the Christmas Lectures and report back in plenary.

About this report

David Owen, Gurukula Ltd, was invited to observe the event, and to report back to the I'm a Scientist on his observations about the effectiveness of the platform for hosting online dialogues. In particular, he was tasked with observing:

- Engagement - to what extent was the tool helping facilitate engagement with a topic? Are people engaged? Are we hearing from a diverse range of people?
- Learning – what evidence was there of dialogue between participants and around the topic?

We did not collect data directly from participants, teachers, facilitators or the I'm a scientist team. This report is therefore built on observations of the live event only.

Observations on the platform

The I'm a scientist platform offered a secure, functioning, and effective environment for the online Summit. Participants reported very few challenges with the technology while using the platform and any questions about how to use the platform (i.e. navigation) were resolved quickly. The platform offers basic functionality that is well-executed; with a functional design. The look and feel of the platform is akin to tools that users may be already familiar with (i.e. message boards, video content, voting). The platform offers a small number of simple devices which enable personalisation. For example, having an emoji that represents how the user felt about climate change; changing the colour and positioning of the nominated facilitators chat posts; profile statements.

Possible developments to the platform:

- As a user you need to occasionally refresh the page to get the menu links to work.
- Users relied on moderation to know what to do next and when. The banners at the top were useful placeholders but sometimes go unnoticed - it may be worth considering activating a pop-up notification (that can be dismissed) when you want participants to move to a new part of the dialogue.
- In a busy room, it appeared quite a challenge for the moderators to facilitate the chat, delete inappropriate posts and deal with technical concerns. Whilst there were no significant problems, one participant asked four times how to change room, but moderators and participants missed this. Consider a 'hand-raise' function or similar to notify moderators that you have a problem with the technology.
- In line with developments in how people are using WhatsApp and We-chat consider a voice record button for use with older audiences.

Observations on materials

The RI materials were well produced. Frequently very short and snappy no longer than sixty seconds. This was combined with some longer videos i.e. related to future scenarios. The interaction in the chat suggested people had engaged sufficiently with the video content to get the gist of them.

Possible developments to the materials:

- The scripting of the videos was generally of a high-level. Occasionally, however, the tense was muddled. In some of the hosting videos, it was apparent it had been pre-recorded; in others, it had a more 'live' feel. Keeping a consistency here would help with execution.
- For an external observer, there was potentially a little too much 'grief' expressed over not being able to meet online. This may be incongruent with how the audience is feeling about the event, for whom, it represents a unique opportunity they may not otherwise have engaged with.

- The mixture of expert content worked well. There it is worth noting the different styles of recording. Tara's had a polished (Tedx) like feel; Dani's were a little more informal/casual, a little like a zoom call with an aunt. These different production styles worked well, but equally, a more consistent approach could be deployed.
- It may be worth considering actors to develop and perform the content for future scenarios. This could form a significant part of any forthcoming project, embedding a partnership with actors as part of the delivery and co-development with researchers.

Observations on facilitation/moderation

As someone not tuned into using SMS or text platforms, the opening stages of the Summit could only be described as a little frenetic. There were multiple threads of conversations occurring during one single chat. Users were using a variety of different terms and slang that is unique to SMS, whilst also trying to test the boundaries of the system by sharing gaming codes. It's my view that the moderation and facilitation were good; however, facilitators need to come prepared to these events with practice using the platform, potentially a pilot experience and if working with young people, an understanding of young people how they use technology and an urban dictionary.

The pace of the discussion during the early phases of the day meant that it was hard to follow the thread of the conversations and sometimes resulted in accidentally deleted posts (which then raised questioning from users). By and large, these challenges did not appear to affect the user experience, though one would need to check this against the evaluation.

Possible developments to facilitation/moderation

- Could consider adding an extra step to re-confirm the twelve themes with participants before voting.
- The level of intervention from moderators notably dropped off when the theming was taking place. A couple of participants commented on this. Potentially having more resources in place to do the theming and leaving the moderation in place.

Observations on user engagement

This was one of the striking elements to me. I was initially sceptical of the level of engagement I would witness with the debates on the platform. However, once the event commenced, there was a frenzy of activity, which was sustained throughout the morning. The simplicity of the format (SMS messaging) seemed to free up participants to both contribute their thoughts, debate, build-bridges and interact with one another. This should be set against a critical assessment of SMS as a form of dialogue (i.e. a restricted mode of communication missing many of the non-verbal cues we are used to receiving, a lack of embodiment etc.).

I observed the following:

- Early on, it was clear that participants were having fun with the platform. There was humour shared with people pretending they were from different countries, using terms like POG.
- There were multiple conversations and exchanges, going on within one single thread.
- Streaming people at the outset into like-minded groups, appeared to help build confidence and engagement.
- There is a playful element to the interactions. It resonated a little with game room chat. Participants identity is restricted to a few small variables: username, chosen emoji, and users make the most of these to personalise their identity. The format appeared to be very familiar.
- Given the Summit was held within School time with some delegates in a classroom setting, it's not clear how much knowing one another in real life and being in a shared physical space may have aided discussions and interactions.
- The dialogues led to the emergence of a huge and diverse range of opinions, insight and topics. There was an exchange of ideas going on between participants. The topics covered included:
 - Brexit
 - US elections
 - Organic farming
 - Biodiversity
 - Veganism
 - Population control
 - Future technologies
 - Wealth gap
 - Inequality
 - Urban relocation
 - Political change
 - Greenwashing
- Young people brought in references to other experiences, literature and media as ways of locating arguments and discussions.
- Participants engaged critically with each other and the materials/videos. The moderators did an excellent job at asking probing questions and being honest with their knowledge. It worked well not to have a scientist in the room but it would be interesting to see how it affected the dynamic and exchange of knowledge.

Evaluation

Early on, as I reached for an urban dictionary, it struck me that involving a group of peer evaluators (i.e. young people of a similar age and demographic to the participants), would help me to better assess the effectiveness of the dialogue, in the terms that young people value and can relate to.

Finally, whilst the RI evaluation measured experience, it would be good to build in an assessment of learning within the event. Inviting people to update their profile statements

and emojis at the end of the event and then assessing these would offer further intelligence into the pedagogic impact of the process.

Closing remarks

The Youth Summit appeared, based on the interactions and initial feedback to be a rewarding and engaging experience for the young people who took part. The I'm a Scientist team has developed a simple but effective platform which can help facilitate dialogue online. The platform uses the same heavily relied upon communication methods many have come to know through social media platforms, message boards and SMS messaging. It is known that such technologies when effectively moderated can contribute to emotional and social well-being¹ and can provide a safe environment for learning and challenging perspectives².

While used here with Young people, there is merit in using this platform with a range of different audience groups, particularly those comfortable with the aforementioned technologies. The team's experience in using the platform and getting the best out of it for discussion on sensitive topics is evident, as is their ability to tailor the dialogue to specific audience groups, in this case young people. In recent months the problem of 'zoom fatigue' - that is the tiredness, worry, or burnout associated with overusing virtual platforms of communication - is creating new challenges for engaging audiences online. Relying predominantly on text based communication, which can be facilitated asynchronously or synchronously, the I'm a Scientist platform offers an alternative and complementary way to conduct online dialogue work.

Whilst there are limitations to the text-based communication mechanism (i.e. a lack of embodiment, missing non-verbal cues), these limitations may offer up some advantages to dialogues with different audience groups, and can also be negated by triangulation of methods i.e. telephone interviews, video conferencing if required. Other advantages of the platform include the ability to move in and out of different chat rooms, (more freely than perhaps users would if connecting via video link), and to blend synchronous and asynchronous approaches.





¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S074756321500268X>;
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10810730590934235?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=uhcm20>

² <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/edri/2014/589860/>;
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0193723513499922>





Annex A: Some highlights from the chat





The following screenshots have been taken out of chronological order in order for the conversations to be apparent. These are shared here as a short snapshot of the interaction between participants. Much longer threads exist, where young people debate a specific topic or challenge, however these are too lengthy to be illustrated here.



Thoughtful engagement...

 **0 CharlotteHH:** @Martin: Money is required to drive technological change in order to save the planet however while this happens the problems of social inequality need to be addressed to avoid this. Human rights can't be jepordised.    [Reply](#)

 **0 EthanO:** @CarlosR: Thank you for agreeing. Why do you agree?    [Reply](#)

 **0 CarlosR:** @EthanO: As much as technological progress is essential, we need to ensure that this progress is distributed. I believe we can't have only a slight percentage of the population benefiting from these advancements, it has to be for all of us    [Reply](#)

 **0 GamerGirl123:** Some people try to do that whole "I don't see colour" thing right, I don't think that's right. I think that takes away from our individuality (like in the grey future) I think that's really not the way to tackle discrimination due to racial differences    [Reply](#)

 **0 bean415:** @GamerGirl123: the idea of "not seeing colour" means that you ignore racial priviledge yes  [Reply](#)

Multiple conversations in one thread



base415arc: Switch to cloth diapers – or at least combine with disposables (even one cloth diaper per day means 365 fewer disposables in the landfill annually). 33. Switch to shade-grown coffee with the “Fair Trade” label. 34. Use a menstrual cup like this or this for your monthly cycles. I’ve used one for well over a decade now, and I don’t plan on ever stopping (plus, it makes travel a breeze). 35. Use cloth instead of paper to clean your kitchen. Repurpose old towels and t-shirts and cut them into small cleaning cloths. 36. Use cloth napkins instead of paper. 37. Read books like Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, Food Rules, and The Backyard Homestead and be inspired. [Reply](#)



Molly M: @TobyM: I agree, even on a bigger scale many economies rely on having a big, growing working population [Reply](#)



puma415had: @Mariella: I agree but we must find a solution to managing the emissions caused by the growing population [Reply](#)



MeganR: the future he decried is what I hope for but to get there will take a lot when you look at where we are now. Were moving further from a sustainable future and that needs to cahnge. [Reply](#)



DiegoNR: There must be some way in which we can change the mentality of those living in Asia and Africa. telling them that having more doesnt increase their income [Reply](#)



Harley: kill people 70 and above tell me im wrong [Reply](#)



Fran: @Mariella: Have you tried refreshing the page? [Reply](#)



LilyG: @Harley: [Reply](#)



Callum: @Harley: excuse me? [Reply](#)




Harley: ok fair [Reply](#)







.Fintan: Harley thats how nazilism startsm y boi [Reply](#)






- 





0 .Fintan: Harley thats how nazilism startsmy boi

[Reply](#)



- 





MikeMod: If you're having trouble voting, "Have you tried refreshing the page?"

[Reply](#)


- 





0 Mariella: @Fran: yes, I'm on a mobile device

[Reply](#)



- 





0 KenzieH: What topic did you vote if you don't mind me asking?

[Reply](#)



- 





0 Callum: @Katherine: say less broski

[Reply](#)



- 





0 freyab: @Harley: the purge vibes.....

[Reply](#)



- 





0 Ifty: why did my chat get deleted I was talking about electric cars !!!!!!!!

[Reply](#)



- 





0 Harley: execpt just old people

[Reply](#)



- 





0 .Fintan: Political change ^~~~~^

[Reply](#)



- 




0 Harley: they are boring

[Reply](#)



- 


0 KenzieH: cars are cool#

[Reply](#)



- 





0 Ifty: THIS IS OUTRAGING

[Reply](#)








Disagreement on sensitive topics

- 





0 LucieK: @PhillipaB: and how do you decide who lives or dies?
there will be favouritism, rich poeple would survive

[Reply](#)



- 




0 AlexH: @PhillipaB: ok, i was confused, i seemed like he was saying
that we need to cull our people


[Reply](#)



- 

0 PhillipaB: @AlexH: well it's not murder, it's just letting people die of
illness instead of trying to save them




[Reply](#)



- 

0 PhillipaB: @AlexH: yeh i get you ;)


[Reply](#)




- 





0 Ella: @InesV: I think that there are a lot of negatives to the EU, even though there
are a lot of security benefits - I don't know what I would have voted if I could have,
but it would have been a close one

[Reply](#)








Arguments and posturing

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0 EmilieM: @Anya: um excuse me



[Reply](#)



- 





























































0 bean415: @LucyD: our own government embodies that concept

[Reply](#)



- 

0 AmbaR: @Anya: What do you mean no

[Reply](#)

- 
0 Anya: @EmilieM: you're excused [Reply](#)   
- 
0 sophia: @Molly M: preach this [Reply](#)   
- 
0 HannahT: @GamerGirl123: we need to see colour to see the inequalities [Reply](#)   
- 
0 EmilieM: @Anya: :([Reply](#)   
- 
0 katieN: @Anya: 'pick me' energy [Reply](#)   
- 
0 EmilieM: @Anya: lol ha ha ha [Reply](#)   
-
- 
0 Anya: @katieN: chile bye [Reply](#)   
- 
0 AmbaR: @Anya: Silence yourself [Reply](#)   
- 
0 katieN: @Anya: imagine not respecting yourself :(awh [Reply](#)   
- 
0 Anya: @katieN: imagine not bing able to take a joke [Reply](#)   
-
- 
0 katieN: @Anya: its mental illness innit [Reply](#)   
- 
0 EmilieM: @Anya: anya i miss you [Reply](#)   
- 
0 Anya: @katieN: wow now youre mocking metal illness? shame on you [Reply](#)   
-
- 
0 katieN: @Anya: lol be mad [Reply](#)   
- 
0 Anya: @katieN: stay mad [Reply](#)   

Moderation / Classroom management



Mary Skuodas: This future still values money as success, a capitalist society only values those who produce the most money. that's not necessarily a happy and fulfilled future

[Reply](#)



CharlotteHH: I think that this world has forgotten about how damaging social inequality is as well as environmental issues. They have solved 1 problem but created far more. This is not sustainable.

[Reply](#)



brookingr14: @Mary Skuodas: agreed

[Reply](#)



SophieM: it sounds like a depressing future were all people care about is money and development not about helping wildlife and going back towards nature.

[Reply](#)



LucyD: @CharlotteHH: I agree

[Reply](#)



EthanO: @MorvenV: Ummm, aren't you too

[Reply](#)



Dave P: As some of you seem to be talking about chocolate: Have you had the chance to watch all three videos and discuss them? Head back to the 'Postcards from the future' session and choose a video that you haven't watched yet.

[Reply](#)

