
THE FQA BOARD AT WORK. . . .

Chats? Business Meetings Online?

by Esther Mürer

The FQA Board has been experimenting with holding sessions online.

Our membership is international. Yet our shoestring budget makes it impracticable for members living more than a few hours' driving distance apart to attend board meetings. This means that, however much we wish it were otherwise, in practice decisions are currently made by a small group from Philadelphia YM. What to do?



In hopes of finding a solution, I put a chat room on my web site, "Quakers and the Arts Historical Sourcebook" Click on "FQA Chatroom and Message Board."

So far we have had three practice sessions. Alfred Muma in British Columbia joined us for one session, giving us hope that we can learn how to involve members at a distance. While we are a long way from making weighty decisions online, our experience may be helpful to other groups besides FQA. Here are some things we've learned so far:

Even without the inevitable technical glitches, online meetings are just as hard to schedule as live ones. Some people only have computers at work, some only at home, there are time-zone differences to consider, etc.

The way a chat room works is: you type a message in a slot at the bottom of the screen, press "Send", and the message appears in the chat window preceded by your login name ("Esther says: ...").

This can result in a jumble of disconnected messages, so we tried to work out an orderly procedure. We use "Over" to indicate that we have finished our message. We use "CP" (clerk please) to signal our wish to speak. The clerk responds ("Esther?") as a signal to go ahead. Then we type in our message, which can take quite a while. We have discovered that the process is admirably suited for worshipful waiting!

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As for minutes: There is no way to copy and paste text from the chat screen; when the last person logs off, the text is gone forever. The recording clerk can take minutes in longhand, or open a word-processing window and switch back and forth. Notes must be taken before the recording clerk logs off at the end.

Our sessions generally begin with the clerk asking those present to suggest agenda items. Nothing very weighty, and in a session lasting an hour or two, we have yet to do justice to more than one or two items.

Lengthy reports are not practical, both because of the time needed to type them, and because messages in the chat room window seem to be limited to about six lines each. Reports should be e- mailed to participants in advance. (Sorry, we have no light on how to get people to read them in advance.)

It will take more practice and more experimenting before we feel ready to try substituting online meetings for live ones. Still, the chatroom should be useful for threshing sessions, committee meet- ings and the like. It opens up a number of possibilities:

- Farflung members could serve on FQA committees without being board members.
- Members wishing to discuss a concern with members of the board may ask us to set up a chat session.
- And, of course, if anybody wants to talk about their *art*, the chatroom seems well suited for worship sharing. If you would like to try this, email me for directions, and to reserve a time.

We plan to host a series of practice chats for any FQA'ers who are willing and able to join. I will be sending out notices about times to our email list.

I have just put up a **message board** on the same page. It is as yet untried, but I aim to post some quesries to serve as beginning threads. You can post messages there, including feedback and questions.

Another small step in our ongoing attempts to help Quaker artists communicate. May it bear fruit.

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