

EUvsVirus Hackathon Project: A Case Study from a Mentor's Perspective.

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Abstract.

In early 2020, the COVID-19 (C-19) pandemic reached Europe and triggered a wave of country-wide lockdown restrictions which resulted in a pause on most social, economic and industrial activity and interaction. The EUvsVirus project was a rapid response, large-scale online phenomenon, organised by the European Commission, as a means to both reflect on but also react to this crisis at all levels within European society. Central to the project was the pan-European Hackathon which was conducted over three days from 24th -26th April, 2020. Winners from the hackathon were invited to take part in a follow-up 'Matchathon' event from 22nd-25th May 2020 to take the winning and placed projects forward, linking them with investors, developers, companies etc. Although six domains of enquiry or challenges were pursued in the project, the main focus of the case study centres on the Remote Working and Education challenge and in particular, on the author's experiences as a mentor in this challenge.

Keywords: COVID-19 restrictions; Digital collaboration; Digital tools; Education; Remote working.

1. Introduction.

From late 2019, global media began reporting of a new strain of coronavirus (termed COVID-19), apparently originating in the Wuhan district of China, which was having a deadly impact on older people and those with pre-existing conditions particularly. From early 2020, the virus had spread rapidly and on 12th March, with more than 20,000 confirmed cases and almost 1,000 deaths in the European Region, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (WHO, 2020). In line with the WHO advice, with varying degrees of urgency, many countries in Europe began implementing containment strategies to contain the disease, in tandem with efforts to control the disease. For the majority of countries, this containment strategy included a 'lockdown' on most public spaces, which included schools and colleges,

where, in a very short time frame, face-to-face classes were discontinued and replaced with a move to an online learning environment.

1.1 Context.

In the context of the Republic of Ireland, the WHO declaration of C-19 as a global pandemic was accompanied (on the same day) by a containment strategy which came into effect on the 13th March, initially until 29th March but then extended until 5th May with a slow easing of restrictions beginning from that date. The Irish lockdown closed schools and colleges with the direction that 'where possible, teaching will be done on-line or remotely' (DoH, 2020). Initial challenges centred on access to broadband and IT equipment and support, the technological skills-base of teachers, learners (and for younger learners, parents) and the difficulties of teaching certain disciplinary-specific skills in lieu of face-to-face contact e.g. practical skills training for nurses and veterinary nurses. Delivery of content, feedback and assessment all now needed to be, at least, re-considered, if not completely re-designed for the remote and online environment. As lockdown continued into April 2020, other challenges were being identified with regard to teacher stress and burn-out and student motivation and engagement.

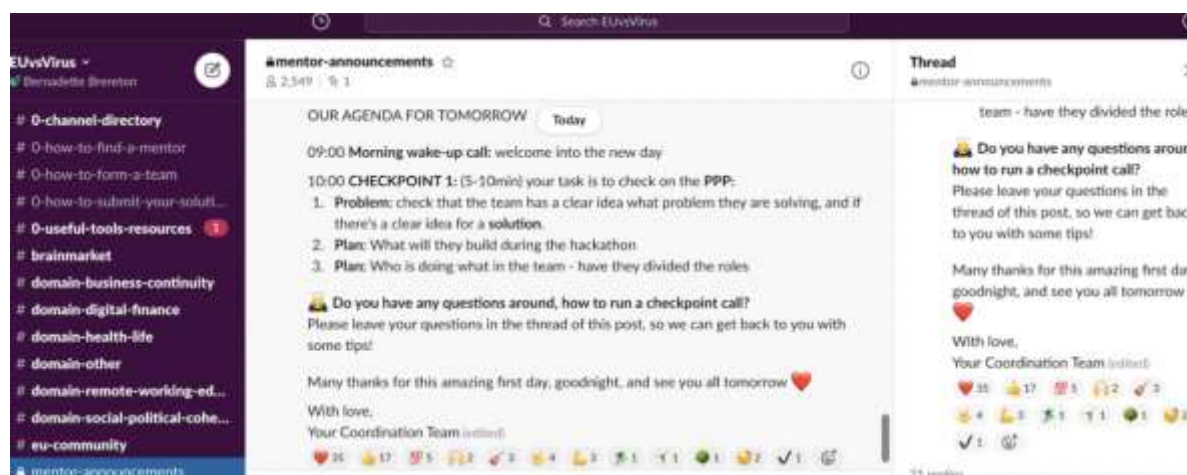
2. Intervention.

The EUvsVirus project (or 'Hackathon' as it was termed) was conceived as a pan-European rapid response to the unprecedented challenges and negative effects which the C-19 restrictions were having in European society. Launched by the European Commission (led by the European Innovation Council), in collaboration with the EU member states and under the patronage of Mariya Gabriel (European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth), the EUvsVirus project centred on a 3-day hackathon which aimed 'to connect civil society, innovators, partners and investors across Europe in order to develop innovative solutions for coronavirus-related challenges'.

Following 3 weeks of preparation and taking place online from 24th-26th April, 2020, the project facilitated online collaboration of over 20,000 volunteer participants, from over 140 countries, to devise and plan over 2,000 solutions to address key areas impacted by C-19 in six specific challenges: health and life, business continuity, remote working and education, social and political cohesion, digital finance and various coronavirus-related challenges. Within one week

of the event, the hackathon jury had released results of the winning solutions which could then receive follow-up development through the newly formed European Innovation Council (EIC) COVID platform by means of the 'Matchathon' event.

Figure 1: Screenshot of Slack platform



3. Implementation.

For a project of this scale and breadth to take place required both high level patronage and support (provided in this case through the mechanisms of the EU) but also wide-ranging ground level participation and engagement from citizens with skills relevant to the discrete domains. On an organisational level, this required that these citizens collaborate online, forming teams to 'hack' project plans intensively over the period of the hackathon and submit project proposals by the end of the weekend for assessment by a team of specialist jurors. The online workspace platform 'Slack' was used for all project communication (see Figure 1), 'Devpost' was used for working up ideas while the launch and close sessions were streamed live on 'Facebook'. To facilitate the rapid rate of work as well as the dispersed nature of the teams, individuals with expertise in the domains were invited to mentor these teams through the hackathon. Mentors could choose to mentor multiple teams ('team mentors') or to focus on one key team in their domain ('skill mentors'). Each challenge had a number of strands which mentors could designate as that of most interest or relevance to them. The task of matching mentors and teams was the responsibility of a group of 'mentor co-ordinators'. Following registration, each participant was 'recruited' to their role. In the case of the author, this meant being joined into a Slack Mentors group and then self-selecting the domains and sub-domains most relevant to

their expertise, skills and interests. While this 'onboarding' of volunteers for the hackathon took place from Tuesday 21st, the official opening of the project took place on Friday 24th April at 6pm CEST with a launch 'event', filmed in Finland and hosted by two individuals sitting 'socially-distanced' in a studio set, playing a number of pre-recorded videos and conducting a number of video interviews. A similar format was used for the official close 'event' of the project which took place on Sunday 26th at 6pm. A similar 'Breakfast Show' was also livestreamed on Sunday 26th at 9am. Apart from these 'events', the 3-day period of the hackathon was structured around a number of 'checkpoints' at which mentors and their teams would communicate, in preparation for set 'pitches' of the teams' plans. A final video was then created and uploaded for judging with a final awards ceremony staged on Thursday 30th April at 11am.

As the European Sociological Association (ESA) had registered as a partner in the hackathon, the ESA encouraged members to take part, publicising the event on their website and sending an email from the President of the ESA to members asking them 'to share their knowledge, experience, and wisdom and act as a guide and role model according to the Hackathon instructions' (ESA, 2020). As Co-ordinator of the ESA Sociology of Education Research Network, the author took up the invitation to become a mentor and registered as a mentor in the Remote Working and Education challenge. This challenge had a number of sub-challenges and the author volunteered to mentor teams in 'E-learning methods and tools' and 'University-Specific Challenges'. All mentors and mentor co-ordinators were then invited to attend an online 'Mentors Only Kick-off webinar' on Thursday 23rd at 4pm CEST, to 'share insights and address questions'. Throughout the weekend, mentors interacted with their teams to coach and address their issues and aid in the preparation of the final pitch video.

4. Evaluation.

At a macro-level, the EUvsVirus Hackathon was unique in its extremely short preparation and event period (3 weeks and 3 days), huge numbers of participants (20,000+ including individuals, groups, companies, volunteer groups, foundations etc.), and high number of final project proposals (2,000+, of which 117 were awardees with 6 overall winners in each of the 6 challenge domains). The jury selected and weighted according to impact potential (40%), technical complexity and novelty (20%), prototype completion (20%) and efficacy of business plan (20%). Cash prizes from a total of over €100,000 were distributed. The overall winner in the Remote

Working and Education challenge was a project entitled 'The Village – Where the World is your Classroom' (with team participants from Switzerland, Ukraine, United States and India) which aimed to develop an online 'village' platform to facilitate experiential virtual learning. All winning projects were invited to take place in a follow-up event (called a 'Matchathon') scheduled to take place on the new EIC COVID platform from 22-25th May. This event aimed to match projects with end-users such as hospitals, as well as providing links to investors, foundations, business companies to implement all positive social impacts possible.

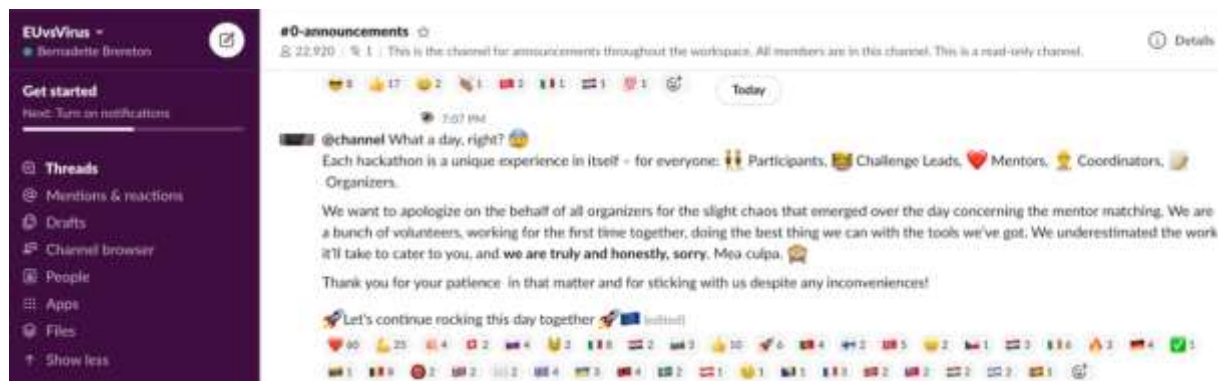
Figure 2: Screenshot of Airtable Spreadsheet

First Name	Other skills	Domain Fields	Challenge Preferences
011	Observer - European Co...	Business Conti...	Business Continuity: Demonstrate purpose
012	Mentor	Remote Workin...	Business Continuity: Efficient team work; Business Continuity: Protecting employees; Business C...
013		Remote Workin...	Remote Working&Education: E-Learning methods & tools; Remote Working&Education: Students c...
314		Health & Life	Business Continuity: New and resilient business models
016	Mentor	Digital Finance	Digital Finance: Support identification of financial shortfalls; Digital Finance: Speed-up distribution
018	University teaching	Remote Workin...	Remote Working&Education: E-Learning methods & tools; Remote Working&Education: Other
017	Mentor	Psychology	Health & Life: Realtime communication&prevention; Business Continuity: Efficient team work
018		Business Conti...	Business Continuity: New and resilient business models; Business Continuity: Value chains&logics
019	Mentor	Digital Finance	Digital Finance: Support identification of financial shortfalls; Digital Finance: Speed-up distribution
020		Remote Workin...	Remote Working&Education: University specific challenges
021	Mentor	Business Conti...	Social&Political Cohesion: Developing people-driven economies; Remote Working&Education: E-L...

On a micro-level, the author found participation in the project as a mentor within the Remote Working and Education challenge an intensive experience. The range of domains being examined and the breadth of projects being developed within these meant that large spreadsheets with many columns and rows (using 'Airtable' software, see Figure 2) had to be read and examined. Being new to the 'Slack' platform also ensured a steep learning curve to find the most efficient use of multiple channels, threads and notifications. Often, the author messaged individuals through Slack to share information in a more targeted way. Although mentors were allowed to designate blocks of time over the 3-day period during which they would be 'available' (e.g. Saturday morning, Sunday afternoon etc.), the high volume of notifications and messages through Slack as well as the set-points of the weekend such as the 'check-points' and 'pitches' leading to the final deadline at 9am on Monday 27th meant that in practice, the author spent most of all three days working in the online environment, working late into each evening and logging back in early the next morning, by which time many notifications and

messages had been received and needed to be responded to, some more urgently than others. It is highly probable that this was the experience of most mentors involved in the project, as well as team members, leaders and co-ordinators. While this was (of course) a choice of the author in extraordinary circumstances, it is not a sustainable working method nor of course does it allow any work-life balance. It is possible that while the project effected an extremely quick turn-around time over one weekend, the time pressures risked not accessing the best skills of the participants. Becoming familiar with the collaborative structures of the project whereby team members, team leaders and team mentors communicated and collaborated with the management of the mentor co-ordinators was an on-going, learning process throughout the 3 days of the hackathon. Again, the author's experience was that direct communication with team leaders and mentor co-ordinators through Slack saved time and improved the efficiency of the team. The author's prior experience of mentoring and team work was one where the majority of the collaborative work took place on the face-to-face level with online communication as a support, whereas a massive project of this kind with multiple teams working exclusively in the online sphere was more impersonal and less personally rewarding. However, there is no denying that the online sphere facilitates transnational interaction easily and quickly. Notwithstanding this, with the huge number of participants, there were technical glitches with the Devpost platform which delayed the final allocation of teams, leaders and mentors (originally due to be completed by the night of Friday 24th but not finalised until Saturday 25th). This caused a gap in communication which mentors attempted to redress through the mentors' Slack channel throughout Saturday, telling each other about teams which were in need of mentors or participants in need of teams to join. By Saturday evening with teams finalised and working, all mentors received a Slack communication that apologised for the delay and urged all mentors to continue to work hard for the hackathon (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Screenshot of Saturday evening message to mentors apologising for delays



Once again, it could be argued that a longer lead-in and operational period would have helped avoid these technical glitches and the stress they brought to the participants, though these were in part resolved by the mentors themselves through collaboration. One instance of this was when a mentor posted that he had not been assigned a team and another mentor quickly put him in touch with a team that was 'mentor-less'. Another example was when the author direct messaged another team on the 'e-learning tools and methods' domain as their project had some overlaps with her own work and immediately received a response explaining some details of the project and suggesting a follow-up meeting in the weeks following the hackathon. It was these kinds of 'filling-in-the-gaps' moments which were most rewarding for the author and made the long screen-hours more fun-filled. Throughout the hackathon, written messages of support or help were constantly being circulated, whether by the participants, leaders and mentors or by the organisers. *'Good luck with the coding'; happy to help out; we need some feedback on this programme'* were direct messages sent to the author from various participants, which brought a nice personal touch to the project. In general, supports provided were excellent and were in place before the hackathon began, which was also essential. These included a schedule of the weekend, a participant's kit, a mentor's kit and a list of 'to-dos' for each role within the hackathon. Most rewarding aspects for the author were the direct message interactions through Slack. On a more negative note, it is not possible to be sure that all ideas were equally well-mentored and whether the final 117 awardees were the best teams with the best ideas or those who 'navigated' the organisational and technical difficulties most successfully. Least interesting to the author were the 'glitzy' 'events' spread throughout the weekend which were 'Eurovision-esque' in their light entertainment approach. Of course, these were not essential for the author's engagement with the project nor indeed for the success of

the project itself.

As a follow-up activity, on Friday 8th May, the mentors held a 'community' meeting, to reflect on their experiences, trouble-shoot some final issues and also plan ahead for the Matchathon. This was an informative and pleasant meeting and an excellent way to build the community of mentors from the EUvsVirus project.

Overall, the EUvsVirus project was a means to an end: an attempt to counter the devastating effects of the coronavirus pandemic and the societal restrictions arising from it. Pooling vast amounts of people power and using various technologies to connect them in a very short time-frame, ideas were shared and plans devised which may result in positive effects, following development. For the author, the involvement as a mentor in the project was a unique experience, during which new technologies were trialled without too much anxiety, new aspects of the societal aspects of the Remote Working and Education challenge were engaged with and new connections and interests were established. For so many in Europe, this 'lockdown' phase has been one of 'anxious stasis'. Involvement in the project allowed the author to use relevant skills to contribute (in a small way) to the global efforts to counter the coronavirus pandemic.

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