Throughout its 40+ year history, the Maine Humanities Council has been dedicated to the practice of bringing people together. Our commitment is grounded in years of witnessing the power of humanities-based discussions to create connections among people, foster their sense of their own agency, and inspire them to deeper engagement with others in their communities.

With the arrival of COVID-19, gathering together groups of people, the core of our work, was rendered impossible. We took a quick, deep, collective breath and began to recalibrate. We cancelled any program we couldn’t migrate online; we talked to our partners; we listened and learned – and then we started to experiment.

We’ve learned a great deal during this time. We’ve learned that meeting online is a different way of meeting, not a worse way. We’ve seen how distance ceases to be a barrier when we meet online, and how fruitful it is for us to share connections among people, foster their sense of their own agency, and inspire them to deeper engagement with others in their communities.

The MHC cannot go back to an “old normal.” We wouldn’t even if it were possible. Rather we are working to be as resilient and adaptable as we can, so that we can continue to support people in Maine now, during this “not normal” time, and can adjust and thrive and keep supporting meaningful discussions among the people of Maine in whatever “new normal” emerges. We aim to emerge from this tumultuous time better, stronger, and more focused than we’ve ever been before.

The Discussion Project is a new, flexible way for partners to work with us to host text-focused discussions in their communities. It is also the heart of what we do: bring people together to discuss things that really matter to them.

Partners across the state told us that during this time of amplified uncertainty they needed us to keep doing what we do. We had to offer our core programming as simply and flexibly as possible, and we wanted to meet the needs of both long-standing partners and people working with us for the first time. We knew that some would be short on time and energy, and that others would be keen to try ideas of their own.

Our pilot was the Summer Discussion Project, open to any individual or organization in Maine, and offering the chance to host a discussion using a MHC-developed reading list or a list of their own. It was a resounding success.

Applications for the Fall Discussion Project just closed, and already we can’t wait for the next season.