

Crossroads: What if members of the IQSS community with technical expertise helped each other via a public forum?

The original idea from 2015 to host a public forum on Discourse

"I also wonder if we could crowdsource some of the helping-each-other-with-git across the IQSS community, where there is no doubt a significant expertise. Imagine if the IQSS community made use of modern forum software such as Discourse (by the same guy who created StackOverflow) where people get points and badges and such for helping each other out. Here's an example instance: <http://discourse.codenewbie.org> . It could be used to field much more than git questions, of course. Latex, R, you name it. People like to show off how much they know. :)"
-- Phil Durbin, February 2015 in <https://help.hmdc.harvard.edu/Ticket/Display.html?id=194001>

What problems would a public forum solve?

IQSS is full of knowledgeable people with significant technical expertise in a wide variety of areas but they are somewhat siloed in their own groups.

Currently when members of the IQSS community have a problem that requires technical expertise to solve they probably search for the answer online and if they can't readily find it they either start knocking on doors of people they know, open a support ticket, or ask in Slack. If they are lucky, they will bump into someone in the Quantina who happens to know the answer.

Crossroads would be a new public forum that's oriented towards the interests of the IQSS community, open to the entire world to view and participate, and hosted on a suitable platform such as Discourse (<http://discourse.org>).

Why would Crossroads be public?

Crossroads would be public for the same reason Stack Overflow is public. People like to show off how smart they are and many are "givers" by nature (<https://hbr.org/2013/04/in-the-company-of-givers-and-takers>) which leads to giving helpful answers the world benefits from. The givers can watch their reputation increase over time, which is a bit of a game. Managers can easily get a sense of how much time their reports are

spending in the system to ensure that not too much time is taken away from primary responsibilities.

Having a public forum is in line with the culture of transparency at IQSS, which is well expressed at <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/roadmaps> with

"We maintain these development roadmaps publicly so that all our faculty, students, and staff can remain on, or at least work from, the same page; we give everyone complete visibility into what IQSS is working toward, how we are going about it, and when we plan to get there. For each area of development, you will find the big picture and ways to drill down to whatever level of detail you desire; for some, you will find ongoing community discussion forums, and in many you can even see the raw computer code we are in the process of writing. We realize that this level of transparency is highly unusual in a large complex environment like Harvard, but our research indicates that we do a much better job when involving our community in our operations and empowering its members to fuel the growth and improvement of our products, services, and activities."

Finally, if you've got a great answer to a technical challenge, why should it be locked up in a private ticketing system or a Slack channel? You could maximize the value of your keystrokes per <http://blog.codinghorror.com/maximizing-the-value-of-your-keystrokes/> by posting it in the public and letting the world benefit. After all, "we live in a world of infinitely searchable micro-content, and every contribution, however small, enriches all of us" according to <http://blog.codinghorror.com/when-in-doubt-make-it-public/>.

While Crossroads would be hosted by IQSS, the entire world would be welcome to participate.

Why shouldn't we just use Stack Overflow?

Certainly everyone should use whatever resource they can to solve their technical problems. However, IQSS is a community so there is greater motivation to help each other. Sadly, lots of questions on Stack Overflow are ignored or summarily closed as off topic. Stack Overflow is not a community.

There's no harm in cross-posting, of course, if you aren't getting any good answers whether you start with the IQSS forum or Stack Overflow.

Why shouldn't we just open a support ticket?

Support tickets are the best and only place for questions like "Why am I having trouble resetting my password?" but deep technical questions are best answered by expert users of the

technology in question. In addition, the permissions for the support ticketing system at <https://help.hmdc.harvard.edu> are set up such that when you send links around to people who don't have access to the queue, they will see "No permission to view ticket." The knowledge can sometimes be trapped in a silo. The original idea quoted above for setting up a public forum at IQSS is hidden away in <https://help.hmdc.harvard.edu/Ticket/Display.html?id=194001> . Good luck seeing what's written there.

Why wouldn't I just swing by someone's office?

You could! You should! Face to face communication is high bandwidth and extremely effective. Of course, the person you'd like to approach may be quite busy at the moment. They might appreciate a short writeup in the Crossroads (or an email). Others would almost certainly appreciate a short writeup *after* the problem is solved.

Of course, it could be that you don't even know who in the IQSS community has expertise in the area in question. You might not know whose door to knock on.

Why wouldn't I just ask in Slack?

In 2017 IQSS started paying for Slack at <https://iqss.slack.com> and the channels are full of valuable technical discussion, but messages can fly by so quickly it can be difficult to make sure enough people see your question. Real time communication is ideal for some use cases but if you have a thoughtful complicated question that requires an equally thoughtful complicated answer, you would probably be better served by a tool that encourages "long form" writing. See also <https://m.signalnoise.com/is-group-chat-making-you-sweat-744659addf7d>

Why wouldn't I just ask in HipChat?

HMDc HipChat has a relatively small number of users. Often there were only half a dozen people in "HMDc-Main Room", the room for inter-group discussions, and the numbers are dwindling as people move to IQSS Slack.

Why wouldn't I just email ABCD?

ABCD (<http://www.abcd.harvard.edu>) is a fantastic resource but suffers from some of the same "information is siloed" problem as the IQSS support ticketing system.

With over 2000 subscribers to the main list ABCD feel less intimate and focused than IQSS. That said, because of the large subscriber base, it's the *best* place to ask Harvard-specific technical questions.

Why wouldn't I just email codecraft?

Codecraft (<http://or8.net/mailman/listinfo/codecraft>) is great but suffers from the opposite problem of ABCD. It has quite a small number of subscribers and is focused only on software development.

Why wouldn't I just post in #crimsonfu?

#crimsonfu on freenode (<http://crimsonfu.github.io>) is a fantastic resource for sysadmins who code or for anyone who has a question about Linux, security, hosting, deployment, automation, etc. The topics that the IQSS community will post about is likely to be broader. That said, cross posting is encouraged!

Why wouldn't I just post in the Research Computing Stack Exchange site?

The Research Computing Stack Exchange site (<http://area51.stackexchange.com/proposals/114273/research-computing/114275>) is just getting off the ground and is a good place for questions about research computing but not for other areas of interest for the IQSS community.

What if I don't need help but want to share something cool and technical?

Cool and technical discussions would be encouraged on Crossroads! For example a variety of technical groups within IQSS give talks and they have been encouraged in the past to post their slides to <https://lists.iq.harvard.edu/mailman/listinfo/techtalkfollowup> for followup discussion. Crossroads would be a replacement for the TechTalkFollowup mailing list.

Is there any theory behind adjusting individual incentives to build community?

Yes! In **Restructuring the Social Sciences: Reflections from Harvard's Institute for Quantitative Social Science** (<http://j.mp/17Cobeu>) there is a section on **Adjusting Individual Incentives to Build Community**:

While individual scholars are receiving these individual services for their narrow self-interests, they cross paths with other researchers often from apparently distant areas, find collaborative opportunities, and eventually make substantial contributions to building our research community. Every path that is crossed increases the probability of an intellectual connection, even if each path had nothing to do with the reason for the connection. Individual scholars are not always focused on, or even aware of, their important contribution to the collective, but the research community is much stronger as a consequence of these interactions.

The idea of Crossroads is to facilitate interactions, to help the community cross paths.

Why should Crossroads be limited to technical expertise?

Perhaps someday questions about tricky accounting problems and such could be on topic but it's probably easier to rally technical people around a forum.

Would anyone use Crossroads?

Time will tell. For the greatest chance of success it would probably be best to let a limited number of people who are enthusiastic about the ideas build up some good discussion on the forum during a beta period. Once a nice corpus has been added, newcomers would have a better first impression of the forum. This is how Stack Overflow launched. Not as a ghost town.

Given the ups and downs of an academic year it would probably make the most sense to run Crossroads for a full year to see how it goes. If it's a ghost town after a year and not providing any value, we should shut it down. The opposite extreme is also possible; after a year there could be thousands of people from across the university using the system. In that case the needs of the community would be evaluated at that time and a proposal for meeting those needs would be prepared.

What would the URL for the forum be?

<http://crossroads.iq.harvard.edu>

Who would host Crossroads? How much would it cost?

Hosting with the developers of Discourse starts at \$100/month (<https://payments.discourse.org/buy/>) but third parties offer cheaper plans (the \$20/month from <https://www.discoursehosting.com/pricing/> seems fine and there's discussion at <https://meta.discourse.org/t/what-makes-discourse-org-hosting-better-than-discoursehosting-com-if-anything/27526>).

The Discourse project explains how to run it yourself on Digital Ocean for \$10/month (<https://github.com/discourse/discourse/blob/master/docs/INSTALL-cloud.md>) plus whatever it costs to do backups to S3.

Does it have to be Discourse? Can some other software be used?

Discourse is designed to be modern forum software (<http://blog.codinghorror.com/civilized-discourse-construction-kit/>) and would probably work best because it's oriented toward having the right incentives for people to contribute. Discourse has a very good system for establishing trust (<https://meta.discourse.org/t/what-do-user-trust-levels-do/4924>) it would allow the whole world to participate.

NodeBB (<https://nodebb.org>) is similar to Discourse and is compelling as well.

Another idea is to create a GitHub repo at <https://github.com/IQSS/Crossroads> and use GitHub Issues as the forum. This solution is attractive because it's free and familiar, but it has many downsides. GitHub is oriented around code, not discussion and information sharing. Since we're targeting a technical community, they could learn to focus only on the relevant part of the system, the issues, but GitHub Issues fundamentally the wrong tool for the job.

A "Crossroads" repo on GitHub would also allow us to communicate via the chat system at <https://gitter.im> since it's free for teams of up to 25: <http://blog.gitter.im/2015/03/31/free-for-teams-of-up-to-25/> . This solution is not preferred for the reasons expressed at <https://m.signalvnoise.com/is-group-chat-making-you-sweat-744659addf7d>

There is a spreadsheet called "Crossroads Software Bake Off" where various solutions are being compared: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1tpR_nokVzAN8Yqp3sIXF_uG6kPiBtlKwr2ad7zxO-7o/edit?usp=sharing

Which communities would Crossroads serve?

Generally, Crossroads serves the community of people that want to help advance the mission of IQSS: Helping social scientists understand and solve society's greatest challenges. Does this mean that to participate you have to identify as a social scientist? Of course not. Hopefully you're at least interested in science and research. Perhaps you'd like to discuss or ask about a question related to data science in the open rather than (or in addition to) contacting Data Science Services (<http://dss.iq.harvard.edu>). Maybe you have a question about the programming language you're using and you'd like a friendlier response than you'd get at Stack Overflow. The "Crossroads Sample Posts" spreadsheet is being used to collect examples posts that seem suitable and on-topic for Crossroads:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1naM6mfKiuTQq6Pfu7M-pXC9fbTQCRydVS-DbzqNSz5s/edit?usp=sharing>

Who would the admins of Crossroads be?

Ideally there would be representation from each of the top-level groups at <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/team-profiles> as "admins" of Crossroads.

- Leadership: <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/people/leadership>
 - TODO: Ask someone from this group to be a Crossroads admin.
- Administrative Support: <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/people/administrative-support>
 - TODO: Ask someone from this group to be a Crossroads admin.
- Affiliated Faculty: <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/people/affiliated-faculty>
 - TODO: Ask someone from this group to be a Crossroads admin.
- Affiliated Undergraduate Students:
<http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/people/affiliated-undergraduate-students>
 - TODO: Ask someone from this group to be a Crossroads admin.
- Data Science & Products:
<http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/people/data-science-products>
 - Dan Cabral: <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/dan-cabral>
 - Ista Zahn: <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/ista-zahn>
 - Philip Durbin: <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/philip-durbin>
- Steering Committee: <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/people/steering-committee>
 - TODO: Ask someone from this group to be a Crossroads admin.
- Affiliated Graduate Students:
<http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/people/affiliated-graduate-students>
 - TODO: Ask someone from this group to be a Crossroads admin.
- Research Technology: <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/people/research-technology>
 - TODO: Ask someone from this group to be a Crossroads admin.

- Scientific Programs: <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/people/scientific-programs>
 - TODO: Ask someone from this group to be a Crossroads admin.
- Visiting Scholars & Fellows: <http://www.iq.harvard.edu/people/people/visiting-scholars-fellows>
 - TODO: Ask someone from this group to be a Crossroads admin.

What are the responsibilities of a Crossroads admin?

From a technical perspective, a Crossroads "admin" is an "admin" in Discourse. You can see a screenshot of this at

<https://www.digitalocean.com/community/tutorials/how-to-install-discourse-on-ubuntu-14-04#step-7-%E2%80%94-sign-up-and-create-admin-account>

There is a #crossroads-admins channel to facilitate launching Crossroads at <https://iqss.slack.com>.

TODO: Explain the responsibilities of a Crossroads admin.