10 Tips for Virtual Training Experiences

1. Everything will take just a bit longer than you probably plan

Virtual environments rely on many more technical things to be correct on both presenter and participant ends. Internet, computers, phones, and access to specific software. Each person then brings a varying degree of understanding to those different pieces of software. Many are currently at the beginning phase of learning these tools.

2. Plan for unintended distractions

Being virtual means factoring in a different environment for each individual. This may include parents, children, significant others, pets, bad lighting, distracting sounds (think lawnmowers), and too many more to list. Don't make it a big deal, prepare for distractions, and pay attention to when you may need to repeat or refresh.

3. Think outside the frame (whether phone or computer)

Typically people are now stuck in a tiny box next to other tiny boxes basically framed as talking heads. Be different, plan for people to move outside that frame. Get them to go retrieve something, open up with a shared stretch, have people move their environment, give tours, and consider that people will engage at different levels. Additionally, think how else you can use different senses in an experience. Start with music playing, have people look out their windows, describe a scent, etc. *Pro-tip warn people that they may be asked to get up and move around prior to attending, this is to guarantee appropriate attire and arrangement of their spaces.*

4. Test things before conducting the training

A few additional roadblocks pop up in a virtual environment. Take time to get comfortable with your required video conferencing software and possibly a backup in case a participant does not have the same access. When creating an event be sure to check the settings as many have default options that create distractions such as an entrance sound when a participant joins the space. Test the links you will share in multiple browsers and log out of your account to see if they are publically shared. Check your audio and camera and adjust lighting as needed. Lastly, screen sharing has many options especially if you have multiple screens therefore know ahead of time how you will share important information.

5. Consider what can be sent to participants prior to joining

Using screen time effectively in a virtual training is of the upmost importance and any step to prepare those attending will help create an efficient process. Think about what can be asked of participants before arriving to the training. Consider sending the agenda early, any worksheets to be used, possibly the presentation slides, items to have at an arm's reach, and plant seeds. A seed can be a question you ask someone to reflect on beforehand, a task to be completed such as journaling or bringing a drawing, and it can be done in a wide range of mediums. Front-loading expectations and interactions helps shape the virtual training.

6. **Leverage items that every home usually has easy access to such as cups, pens, paper, etc.**

   Adaptation is often needed as a skill for facilitators and trainings and we must now adapt to the limitations of the virtual space. Although we are unable to rely on the resources we have at our sites we can almost expect people to have certain items in their homes. Think about how an activity might be simplified or recreated using typical items in a home. Think about if you can ask participants to purchase low cost items. Think about if you can ship items to participants. In the end, have back up plan to activities if supplies might be unavailable too. An example can be the marshmallow tower building activity. Marshmallows and pasta are typically inexpensive but can you instead ask them to stack shoes, stack cups, or even frame it as 20 found items in your home. Adapt requirements to get to the core learning outcomes.

7. **Arrive early and plan for a few participants to also do the same**

   When allowing for people to enter an environment early you have an informal opportunity to engage with participants in smaller numbers to establish rapport, make a connection, gain buy-in, and possibly help shape the engagement of other participants before beginning the training. Arriving early also informs participants you respect their time and are prepared to begin at the recognized start time of the training. Usually, early arrivers are happy to serve as testers of content or delivery and asking for their assistance when checking links, sharing the screen, or using tools for the upcoming training gives a small piece of responsibility to them which establishes you value a participant's opinion and experience.

8. **Explicitly express how you want participants to interact in the online environment**

   Creating expectations is an important component of any facilitated experience. Expectations will be dependent on the nature of the experience, the group, and the time together, and other factors. Being virtual requires a few more considerations as certain visual clues used in person are lost over a screen. Express how you want people to engage: physically raise a hand, use the raise hand feature, type something in chat, wait to be called, etc. Be explicit about audio and video. Do you expect everyone to have their camera turned on so participants can see who is in the space? Do you want people to mute their mic when not speaking? You have the option to block sharing, block camera, and mute all mics when hosting. Use those tools as needed but also share that you will be doing that and why (remove distractions, clearer audio, focus on content).

9. **Build in intentional breaks**

   We all still have limitations on attention spans and energy levels and staring at a screen for extended periods of time can be exhausting. Be just as intentional online as you would be in person about how you build in breaks during your experience. Stretch, move, take 10 minutes, or pause screens and play some music. It will be refreshing and help participants reengage when starting back up.

10. **Post Training**

    Plan out how you will follow up a virtual training. Think about if you send the presentation, record answers to questions and provide an overall synopsis of the content, provide next steps for participants, and potentially get at how the virtual experience will impact their futures.

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