

Leading edge interview

Jo Cook interview

What do you say to those who argue that “virtual” can never be as good as face to face?

This is a common misconception and easily understood from people who have attended poor virtual classroom sessions or can't quite wrap their heads around how it works. Firstly, I would say Webinar or virtual classroom delivery is not the answer to every training problem, and this is coming from someone who has a business that specialises in helping people with their live online design and delivery! Virtual classrooms have their uses and so do face to face sessions. You need to choose the right solution for your situation, factoring in cost, time and quality. I think quality is where people argue that live online can't be as good. I disagree of course and when a facilitator embraces the design and delivery of a virtual classroom session the attendees then have the opportunity to realise how good it is and, in some situations, how it can be even better!

Is it harder to keep people's attention in a virtual environment?

The technology can go wrong, low-bandwidth Wi-Fi can affect sound quality, computers do an update at the most inopportune moment [...] as well as people attending in a busy office with lots of interruptions. There are also email popups we struggle to ignore and the complete misconception that we can multi-task our learning and productivity. For some people, the perception is that if you aren't in a physical classroom you haven't had any development and that the training isn't real. None of this is true, but it's up to people like me, and trainers in organisations, to counteract these challenges with the best live online sessions possible.

How do you analyse an individual person's digital body language?

In all sorts of ways. It was Steve Woods who first wrote about it and he focused on using data to inform marketing. This could be the details from Google Analytics for example, to see if people are getting what they need from your website. This can be applied to learning analytics too, such as when people stop watching a video or their behaviour within a community. I focus on digital body language much more around the live, in-the-moment behaviour in a Webinar or virtual classroom session. What we lose by not being able to see someone's traditional body language, we can gain by using the features of the technology and our own skills, to engage individuals and understand them.

By deconstructing what you know about body language and how you present or facilitate, you can then find equivalents in a live online platform. Normally I would look around a room to see if people are understanding the conversation or look if they have questions. I can't do that without webcams in a session, so instead I could ask a closed question for people to respond with a tick/cross and then get them to expand in the chat window or on audio. I can use all sorts of activities to get that understanding from people and, in some cases, it's better than me interpreting physical body language face to face.

Do some people have a resistance to talking to a screen [. . .] is there a generation problem?

Many perceive that a Webinar or virtual classroom is just that, talking at a screen with no one there. Facilitators think that they can't feed off of the energy of the group or won't know what the group are doing. That's true if you approach it that way. However designing and delivering sessions that have interactivity and engagement planned every two or three minutes (yes, that often!) means that you can feed from that energy and know what's going on for people. It's how I approach my sessions and I love it.

As for the generational element, it's a tricky one. For some people it's true, they'll openly admit to being a "technology dinosaur" and struggle perhaps with the concept and pace. But once they have experienced a session with me and seen how engaging it is and how much relationship building you can have, they often change their minds. I don't think that age is the biggest issue here, I think its approach to change and embracing new ways of doing things, and anyone can have a challenge with that.

Are there cultural differences to overcome if learners are spread around the world and how do you overcome them?

Yes there are and you deal with them the way you do with any other communication or learning intervention. Culture is a big area to look at and can encompass geography, customs, language, behaviour and so much more. It's also not just about people around the world, but cultures distinct to organisations or industries too.

When designing a live online learning intervention for a global reach or to include any groups different to our own, there are some basics to consider, such as the language to be delivered in. When working in English, for example, and attendees are perhaps speaking in their second or third language, it affects the activities and questions you might ask, as well as the timing for responses. The culture of how people behave in a learning environment is important to understand – some cultures are great at challenging or sharing failures, others are more respectful and follow the lead of the teacher, so you can't discuss things in the same way. You can look at the imagery used and how it reflects the cultures you are working with. Remember too that this concept could include people in another country, but also you could focus on age, sex, disability and many other aspects too.

Can humour be an effective tool in a virtual classroom?

Anyone that's been on any of my sessions will know it's a yes! Trainers and facilitators aren't comedians though, and we have to be extremely careful about humour. I think we need to approach this more like lightness of the topic and allow the humour to come out, rather than trying to crack jokes or one-liners about it. And the humour doesn't have to come from us, it can come from our groups!

Virtual classroom, Webinar [. . .] what's next?

The Towards Maturity Transformation Journey report shows that there's a steady uptake in live online learning, with up to 93% of organisations investing today and planning for tomorrow in this area. But the same report shows that only 30% of organisations have got those skills – so it's quite a gap to fill! Along with that is the broader use of mobile phones and tablet technology, which means the current platforms need to adapt, as well as our design and delivery, to make sure that people accessing this way get a great learning experience.

To answer your question though, the next step from a marketing or learning content point of view is to have much more discursive or panel-based sessions and a TV-like quality and feel, including multiple camera angles. Some platforms are supporting this really well

already. Also meetings and productivity are blurring with Webinar and virtual classroom technology – Microsoft Teams already includes a version of Skype and Zoom and Slack are working closer than ever before!

What has been your biggest “lightbulb” moment?

Oh so many! I think it has to be having the lightbulb moment about what drives me and makes me happy, which is helping others to have their own lightbulb moment. I remember looking at a poster about teaching at Vauxhall tube station and it really resonated that it's the fundamental thing I do and that I can build a career and a business on that.

What can the trainers learn from the learners?

So much. If we aren't listening to the learners, either in a consultancy and design phase, in the sessions themselves or application and evaluation afterwards, there's no point in what we are doing.

How are the skills requirements of trainers going to change in the future?

There are going to be two ways that roles go – one is to be broad and diverse, and the other is to be much more specific. There's merit in both approaches and we need people with a broad skillset and experience as much as we need specialists who know something in detail. I think people developing their L&D careers now would benefit hugely from focusing on their business, data and scientific research knowledge and experience. These are basic abilities that will inform the consultancy, conversation, design, delivery and evaluation practices within organisations to make any learning intervention a success. I could say focus on technology and getting more comfortable with it, but I think far more fundamental to that is genuine curiosity, self-awareness and wanting to be a life-long learner. From that, a focus on the future and ensuring you always have a job will come

About Jo Cook



Jo Cook is a speaker, instructional designer and classroom facilitator who specialises in virtual classrooms, Webinars and live online learning technology.

Jo's passion is in helping and supporting teams, professionals and organisations embrace the benefits of the virtual classroom.

Through her company Lightbulb Moment, Jo has specialised in training learning professionals about virtual classroom design and delivery since 2013 and has spoken on various topics at conferences such as Learning Technologies, Online Educa Berlin and keynoted for Colleges Wales and E-learning Fusion.

Jo is also part-time the Deputy Editor of Training Journal magazine and website and her background includes: further and higher education; the charity sector; small and large organisations, including CNN News and Bupa International.

Keywords:
Technology,
Online learning,
Virtual classrooms

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