

The Accidental Educator's Guide

Dealing with Virtual Facilitation Challenges



Background

While online education has existed for quite some time, its prevalence has exploded since March of 2020 when the Coronavirus pandemic began. Those of us who provide education as part of our profession or passion switched quickly to online platforms. Webinars, the most common form of live online education, provide many benefits and some challenges--including successfully facilitating a group with sometimes conflicting personalities, challenging group dynamics, and existing tensions.

Generally, there will always be participants facing various personal stressors that may interfere with their ability to participate or impact the overall group dynamic. COVID-19 has only heightened the likelihood that the learner is experiencing anxiety, burn out, illness, or a wide variety of other concerns.

The following resource will address tech solutions, facilitation strategies, and content suggestions to support facilitators—or “accidental educators” -- adapting to individual participant and overall group dynamic related challenges in an online format.

Audience

This resource was created by the Institute for Leadership in Educational Development (I-LED) and is customized for Office on Violence Against Women (OVW) grantees and their partners offering virtual trainings throughout the domestic and sexual violence field.



Possible Facilitation Challenges: Group Dynamics

Group Relationships

Before an online training starts, there may be existing tensions among participants that affect the group relationship. These tensions are often related to power dynamics, turf and jurisdiction, professional roles, existing hierarchies, political issues, or overall values related to the work. It is critical for facilitators to know their audience and prepare to walk through multiple perspectives-- without shying away from addressing harmful statements and behaviors.

Successful facilitators are mindful of the participants who may be pushed to the margins when a mainstream group dynamic surfaces and are able to act accordingly in order to lift up those voices.

Multidisciplinary Engagement

Multidisciplinary trainings present unique challenges in design and delivery. For instance, advocates, community organizers, law enforcement officials, and judges each have different contexts for applying educational content on domestic and sexual violence, along with their own individual learning needs, styles, and preferences. To address this challenge, it's essential to design content that considers the diverse requirements of adult learners.

If the aim is to enhance understanding of each other's roles and improve collaboration across disciplines, fishbowl exercises can be an effective method for facilitating complex discussions and developing group dialogue skills.

Try it!
How to do a virtual fishbowl
([link](#))



Possible Facilitation Challenges: Group Dynamics

Group Personalities

In addition to the established relationships within a group, every new team cultivates its own unique personality. For instance, one group may be deeply engaged with the content and display a generally extroverted nature, while another might be more reserved, preferring not to engage in lengthy discussions or eagerly share their thoughts.

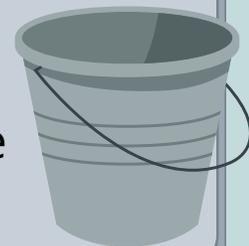
Subgroups

There may be "subgroups" or "hidden" group dynamics that function during educational sessions, often unnoticed by the facilitator. When faced with difficult participant behaviors, these subgroup dynamics can emerge, diverting the group from the session's objectives. For instance, in a training session with participants accustomed to power imbalances, such as judges and magistrates, the facilitator should intentionally address these power dynamics.

This can be achieved by openly acknowledging these dynamics as potential barriers to full participation, allowing time for affinity groups based on professional roles or identities, and providing opportunities for anonymous contributions through polls and other interactive activities.

Anonymous Virtual Activity Platforms

- Figjam
- Mentimeter
- PollEverywhere
- Slido



Possible Facilitation Challenges: Individual Personalities

Monopolizing/Disrupting

This participant tends to share more often and for disproportionately longer periods of time than the rest of the group. They may repeatedly interrupt the presentation to share more or try to take on an informal facilitator/presenter role.



Sometimes, a direct time boundary from the facilitator prevents participants from monopolizing the conversation, and other times it requires a private conversation about giving everyone space and time to share.

Silence

Generally, this characteristic is most noticeable when the group personality is a mostly quiet one or if the group is small enough for the facilitator(s) to notice who has and has not been sharing/participating.

Sometimes the group is only "silent" when the facilitator asks participants to unmute and share, but otherwise there is activity in the chat box and during activities.

If the facilitator has been utilizing multiple forms of engagement, i.e., discussion, chat box, polls, word clouds, etc., and there is still silence-- it is possible there may be tech challenges, participants may be multi-tasking/disengaged, or the facilitator is neglecting some other need of participant(s).



Possible Facilitation Challenges: Individual Personalities

Aggressive/Resistant

Sometimes this manifests as someone who engages in substantive arguments with peers or facilitators and sometimes it shows up as harmful or offensive comments.

This participant might correct the facilitator throughout the training ("well, actually...") and question their credibility as a presenter.

Aggressive and resistant behaviors can be related to a participant being outside of their comfort zone. For example, in a training on domestic violence, a group attempts to refocus a conversation away from mainstream perspectives to engage different voices. A long-time leader in the audience, accustomed to having her opinions welcomed and even prioritized in the field, might feel defensive, targeted, or excluded when her ideas are challenged. If the individual does not practice self-reflection--and the facilitator is not prepared to facilitate a conversation about the role of power dynamics in the anti-violence movement-- the participant's discomfort could manifest as aggression or resistance to the group and the educational session overall.

Multi-Tasking

This can show up as silence when the facilitator asks a discussion question, participants taking calls, logging off when there's a breakout room activity, and checking emails/doing outside work throughout the webinar.

Many DV/SA agencies require staff to be on-call for crises and participants might have to take calls throughout a webinar. Plan for whether this will be permitted in advance and include in promotional communication. It is important for on-call staff to attend--strategize ways to regroup when a participant needs to step away.

Graduated Response to Common Challenges

Beforehand

Take a moment to recognize what types of behaviors activate an uncomfortable response in you and plan for how you will self-regulate in the moment, e.g. breathing exercise, positive self-talk, asking for a moment to collect your thoughts, etc.



Get on the webinar early and invite others to enter early for informal chatting.

Set expectations for the course in advance with agendas, descriptions, presenter bios, etc.

Be prepared with a few community agreements that address common challenges, e.g. how to handle conflict when it arises and learning commitments such as, "meet judgment with curiosity" and "everyone has something to offer and everyone has something to learn."

Transitioning to online learning in the midst of a global crisis is stressful--be patient with yourself and consider reducing the amount of educational content to account for tech issues, to avoid racing through information, and to create spaciousness for discussions, reflections, and questions.

Resources to Prepare Yourself Ahead of Time

- See **Break the Rules: How Ground Rules Can Hurt Us** for more on establishing group agreements that go beyond the first 10 minutes of an educational session
- Learn more about conducting a needs assessment, writing learning objectives, finding a training team, and planning for an evaluation **here**.
- See this **Guide to Respectful Conversations** by Repair The World for facilitating deep and difficult conversations about social justice.



Graduated Response to Common Challenges

During

Use co-hosts and webinar host/producer roles to manage chat, help engage people, and manage the tech. If you do not have capacity for a co-facilitator, ask the participants for a volunteer to monitor the chat and assist with tech and then assign them as co-hosts.

Suggest an action to address the issue, e.g., "As a facilitator, I'm comfortable with silence and we can wait as a group for you to gather your thoughts."

Switch to breakout rooms and continue discussion in smaller groups.

Turn a disengaged or disruptive individual into a helper and ask them to take notes on a whiteboard or lead a discussion.

Keep people engaged-- add variety through activities, discussions, polls, storytelling, etc.-- **never lecture longer than 15-20 minutes at a time.**

For any challenging behavior that arises in an educational session, ask yourself these three questions first:

1. **Action**-- what is the problem?
2. **Reason**-- why is it happening?
3. **Response**-- do I need to respond now or would it be best to wait?

If you determine that you must address the behavior, consider employing some of the technological, facilitation, and content-based solutions starting on page 9.



Graduated Response to Common Challenges

After

After the webinar is over, debrief with the co-facilitators and do an informal evaluation together. Questions you should ask yourself include:

1

What went well?



2

What went wrong?



3

What was my part?



By asking ourselves what we can take responsibility for in the process and outcome of an educational session (including what worked!) we can better understand what is within our control to change and improve for next time. It can be helpful to process the session together as co-facilitators before reviewing the participant evaluation forms (which ideally include similar questions), because it is an opportunity to prepare for keeping an open mind to feedback.

Technology

- Co-hosts can mute participants with background noise and remind them to unmute only when speaking.
- Prepare an electronic document for participants to add thoughts and questions that may not be addressed during the session.
- To prevent disruptions from unregistered individuals in open events, implement a registration process with a link and password. If excessive disruptive behavior occurs, consider disabling sharing settings on collaborative applications.

Facilitation

- Clearly communicate the amount of time allotted for discussions, e.g., “we have two minutes to cover this topic.”
- Privately message the participant and remind them about the community guideline to ensure everyone has a chance to share.
- Use the participants’ names to make observations about who hasn’t had a chance to share yet, e.g., “We still haven’t heard from _____, _____, or _____ yet. Would one of you like to share your thoughts?”
- As a facilitator, you don’t have to call on whoever volunteers first. You can be explicit and intentional about how you’re going to choose someone who hasn’t shared or volunteered yet.

Questions for Facilitator Self-Reflection:

Why might this person feel like they need to take on an informal facilitation role? Is it possible there are subgroup dynamics playing out? Is there implicit pressure for participants to represent an experience that has not been addressed or included?



Solutions:

Monopolizing/Disrupting

Content

- Include activities requiring multiple responses, such as brainstorming, polls, and games.
- Allow time for group agreements and implement "move up, move back" guidelines in webinars to encourage participation from both talkative and quieter participants.

That’s a great idea, let’s see if anyone else has another thought or idea to add.



Technology

- Check to see if anyone is speaking on “mute”
- Check to see if YOU are speaking on “mute”.
- Use the “raise hand” function for participants who wish to speak. Some individuals may feel reticent to “jump in” and speak without being called on.

As a facilitator, I'm comfortable with silence. I'll give everyone some more time to collect their thoughts.

Solutions: Silence

Content

- Use polls, encourage participants to type in the chat, offer activities that include different ways to share thoughts and ideas.
- Interactive eLearning Tools with share options: Figjam, Mentimeter, PollEverywhere, Zoom Whiteboard
- Always include time for breaks!
- Plan for flexibility in the content—silence can be an indicator that it's time for a check-in with the group.

Facilitation

- Embrace the power of silence!
- Participants may require additional time to think, type, or might need the question rephrased. Check out these helpful questions for facilitating dialogue ([link](#)).
- Pose discussion questions that connect to participants' personal experiences and values instead of those with a definitive “right” or “wrong” answer.
- Appoint a co-host who can provide emotional support if a participant needs to process challenging content. Sessions on DVSA and related topics can be sensitive for survivors—silence may signal a need for support.

Questions for Facilitator Self-Reflection:

Is the information presented accessible and relevant to my audience?

Access considerations:

- Does my audience know how to use the technology?
- Is the pace too fast or slow?
- Are participant access needs being met? (e.g. live captioning, language interpretation, font size, emotional and physical needs met, etc.)



Technology

- Use a breakout room to privately speak with the participant about their frustration—ideally during a break. If the issue is immediate, one of the co-hosts can use private messaging or meet in a breakout room privately.
- As a last resort, the host has the capability to remove participants from the webinar--use the settings to add a wait room to avoid participants rejoining.



Solutions:

Aggressive/Resistant

Content

- Establish community agreements for conflict resolution, such as acknowledging the impact of actions.
- Regularly assess needs before, during, and after education sessions to ensure content relevance.

Can you say more about why you're feeling that way?

I understand your frustration, we'll have to talk about that later.

Facilitation

- Offer to speak with the participant during a break or after the webinar.
- Acknowledge concerns and suggest discussing them as a group.
- Refer to group agreements to address conflict, apologize if necessary, correct behavior, and focus on repair.
- After removing a participant, consult with co-facilitators to decide on follow-up actions regarding their attendance in future sessions.

Considerations for Facilitator Self-Reflection:



Grasping the significance of culture is essential when evaluating “aggression” among participants. It is vital to engage in cross-cultural efforts that do not prioritize mainstream norms over other cultures and their communication styles. Instead, collaborate with the group to create communication norms that serve their collective needs.

Multi-tasking/Disengagement

Technology

- Encourage everyone to keep their video on—but don't require it.
- Move between breakout rooms to check in.
- Incorporate cell phones into the activities throughout the webinar-- most of the software platforms recommended in this resource (mentimeter, PollEverywhere) are mobile friendly.

Content

- Preface every webinar with expectations for participation, e.g., "This highly-interactive webinar will include the following..."
- Always break up lectures with activities, discussions, stories, polls, and other engaging activities and **never lecture for more than 10-15 minutes.**
- Once again, always include breaks.
- Create interactive slides with prompts for participants to take notes in during breakout rooms-- try a shared document that anyone can edit.

Facilitation

- Engage the distracted participant by posing a content-related question or assigning a straightforward task, such as, "[Name], could you please read the quote on this slide for us?"
 - Remember: The aim is to ensure the participant can respond, not to embarrass them, but to help them refocus on the training material.
- Encourage participants to inform a co-host in advance if they can't do small group activities, like breakout rooms. Provide the entire group with clear instructions on how to request the host's assistance in a breakout room if they need to switch to one with available participants for the activity.

Questions for Facilitator Self-Reflection:

How have I prioritized the learner's experience while planning the content and facilitation of the webinar? Is the amount of content covered in the training taking priority over engaging the participants? How can I incorporate a diversity of adult learning styles into my teaching?

