

# ENGAGE AND CONNECT WITH PEOPLE THROUGH VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS AND WEBINARS

I love it how technology makes it possible for us to work at home. Especially today, the sun is shining and I am sitting outside in the garden waiting for Jo Cook to skype me and have a chat on distant learning, virtual classrooms and webinars. While checking Jo's latest facebook posts I find out that she recently did a facebook live experiment. She just got online with her mobile phone, unplanned, wondering who of her friends were going to join, testing out the features and joking around. At that moment Jo calls in.

**Hello Jo, I just saw the recording of your facebook live. It looks like you are having a lot of fun experimenting with new technologies...**

Oh no, you saw that. The image was going upside down and everything (laughing). You know, I really like to have a polished, perfect thing, absolutely. I'm very much a perfectionist. But you can't have the polished, finished thing without experimenting. It took me a long time in my career, but I got to the point now that it doesn't have to be perfect. We can practice and learn together. And you can tell me what was good, you can tell me what needs to be better. And maybe somebody else will think: "If Jo tried it, maybe I can try it". That's part of what we should

be doing as learning and development professionals. We call it working out loud or sharing out loud. Just being genuine and authentic. For instance I don't know much about Snapchat. I'm nearly 40, I think this is a teenagers app. I don't quite get it but I can see what some people do with it. So when people ask me about it I say go and ask him or her because they know far more than me. And that's what we should be doing in our profession. We should have an awareness of the horizon. Horizon scanning is what they call it in design thinking. But that doesn't mean I have to know everything. I certainly don't know everything. But I know enough to say this could be useful and these are the people to go and speak to about it.

**Exactly. Technology is changing so quickly, there are new tools appearing every day. It's just impossible to master them all.**

Absolutely, a couple of years ago I was thinking: "This year I'm going to find one of these new pieces of technology and I'm going to champion it. Everyone is going to say: Jo is the person that told us about this." Which is very very silly, and very very self centred. Because actually it takes a lot of work to find that. You have to be in a lot of different places on the internet, groups or communities, to find the little thing that might be useful somewhere else. And that's not me, that's not my niche. My niche is something else.

**Indeed, I guess that's why I was asked to interview you. We both have the same niche: webinars and virtual classrooms...**

Indeed wonderful. The biggest difference for me between a webinar and a virtual classroom is the number of people. So a webinar could be ten people, could be a thousand people, could be a hundred people. But a virtual classroom is six or eight or ten people, no more. You get to know every individual. You get to understand their questions, their problems, where they're coming from. Just like an individual persons digital body language which is some stuff I've been working on recently.

**This is a hot topic today with facebook and GDPR. Working online you gather a lot of data about people. I'm curious to learn some more about your findings on digital body language.**

Yes, it's a very fascinating topic. Everybody knows about normal body language. Right now we can see each others faces and gestures and





nods and smiles and hand movement. All of these things help with the conversation and how we get to know each other. Digital body language is the technical online equivalent. So this came from marketing. It was Steve Woods, chief technical officer of Nudge who came up with the term initially. He said it's the aggregate of everything you do and don't do on the internet. So every click that you make, every movement you make, every message whatever it might be. It could be the posts you make on LinkedIn, your tweets, pictures on Instagram, the language that you use... How you get involved in a conversation? Do you maybe come in and lurk a little bit, write comments towards the end of the conversation or do you get in there and ask the questions from the start? Do you have an agenda that is always about business or always about you making money or something else. So you can get to know people very well. As you're scrolling through social media looking at things there will always be someone of whom we think "oh, they're always talking about X" or they're always the first to complain. So you just skip, you don't even read them anymore. Because that's the digital body language that you've picked up on. There will also be people you love to follow and see what they have to say about things.

**When I host live webinars I notice that it's always the same people that ask questions, the same people that participate in the polls, the same people that leave before the q&a...**

You can start to look to all of this and see what you can do with this information. What does this tell us about the person? Maybe one person is always late to a webinar. But is that because they're really busy or because they are not interested? If you focus specifically on the virtual classroom you could notice how quickly they click the textbox and type their name. Is that because they're not very good with the technology? Is it because they were on their phone? Is it because they're thinking? For example when somebody clicks away then WebEx shows a little red explanation point next to their names. The question is why? Why have they clicked on something else? Maybe they've clicked on a link in the chat. But it could also be because they're bored. It could be that they got into Microsoft Word making notes because it's truly interesting. The technology doesn't tell everything. So the red explanation point only means they clicked on another program. But we don't know whether that's to take notes because I'm amazing or to check email because I'm boring. So then it comes to how we as a facilitator react to that. I always tell people that they are the learners, trust what they're doing. And also for your confidence, assume they're making notes because you're amazing. Then you'll feel good until you know otherwise. Thinking "oh, they clicked here, they don't like me", wouldn't help me and my confidence. So I assume they make notes, I assume they think it's brilliant. Then I

will feel better and I will deliver more confidently. Even if they were a bit bored, maybe when I deliver more confidently with my voice, they'll come back a little bit more engaged in the next part.

**When I'm helping organizations to make learning webinars it happens that I&d managers assume that the trainers will just do it like they do in classroom and that there is no need for training. While I see that even the most experienced trainers are overwhelmed by the cameras, even the experts that are used to be interviewed by the media. Trainers need to prepare differently, they need to learn a different skillset and it also acquires a specific mindset. For instance a lot of trainers tell me it's a challenge for them to teach without seeing the body language of the participants...**

Absolutely... and this is really strange because logically we know this but still it's very weird... I worked for the Turner Broadcasting Group and when I first visited the CNN News floor, I got to sit in the chair where the anchor sits to read the news. There were three cameras and there were no camera operators, it was all electronic. This is so weird because there are people who watch you, but you can't see them. I remember so clearly how that felt. That must be what trainers feel when they deliver for the first time a webinar or virtual classroom. They might have a camera on them or they might not. But they probably don't physically see their attendees. So actually they're in a room on their own talking at a computer screen and there's no microphones involved or they're all muted. It can feel the same way. And that's a huge thing to go over. So when I have people on my virtual classroom training sessions, I get them to arrive early and I have my webcam on to say hello. Depending on the group and the technology they might have their webcams on to say hello at the beginning. Then I get them talking over the microphone to make sure it works. As I'm British I would talk about the weather... This is before the official start. So it's really a great way to get people talking on the microphone or using the chat window. Those are two really important skills. Then it's about using the tools how you introduce yourself, the session and topic. So not necessarily the boring, horrible ice breaker that we've all seen on hundreds of trainings before. But just getting people involved as is appropriate in the technology and what you're doing. A webinar session usually takes about 45 minutes and that's enough to build some kind of relationship. Not the same as face to face, but something. 99 % of the time you have some kind of connection because it's about how you design it, how you deliver it. If you haven't done it and you haven't seen it done well, it could feel like you're locked in a box, talking at a computer screen. You can't feel the energy of the group. You can't make a connection. And that's the biggest thing that people say to me, I can't see them, I can't react to people. And it's absolutely not true. It's different, you have to learn different ways of doing it. But you can absolutely do it. There are so many techniques about how to get involved with people and engage them. And that goes back to the digital body language, the interaction, the activities and so much more.

**When you roll out a blended learning in company. One of the most challenging things is to have the learners actually doing the digital work in between live interventions. How do you engage and enrol the participants? Do you have any tips & tricks for that?**

Absolutely. It can be a real problem because people don't do the pre-work and they don't engage in your forum. They turn up and you expect they have seen this, read this, done this, filled in this form, know things... and people haven't done it. It can be a real challenge. So when you design interventions like that you have to take into account the culture and where you are with the individuals. Actually when I design the program, I rarely design the prework because I know usually

people won't do that. They want to but they don't have time. So what I'm trying to achieve is maybe do a little bit of something before. It could be a technical check if it is in virtual classroom. It may be just 15 minutes, they come in, everything is working, headset, connection, software, things like that. Then they have a chance to meet me and say hello. Maybe I try to get them to do a survey beforehand, just ask them a few questions about what they know and offer them something to read. It's not required but I might say: "if you want to do a two minute video or a five minute read, this will set you up. If you don't do it it's not a problem". It gives people an option to get involved. I just remind them. It's a little bit like an email campaign or a marketing campaign to remind them a few times about why it's important. I intend to design the work in between sessions, some home work or post session work. Because after the first session, people will be invested by then. It's almost like: "Oh it has started now", whereas before it might not have started yet. This is not the best way or most ideal way but it seems to be the way

that is working for people at the moment. Maybe in 5 or 10 years it will be a different thing and cultures will have changed. But for now just start with the smallest amount you can get away with beforehand and schedule everything else in between the sessions.

**One last question. How do you see your job evolving in like ten years?**

Good question. I think technology will become much easier and people will become more comfortable with it. So in some ways I'll have less of a job. But I think something new will come along. Will we have virtual reality classrooms? I don't know. Will we have Artificial Intelligence bots teach in our virtual classrooms? I don't know. But there's always going to be a need for really good quality understanding of the business and good quality understanding of the great modern learning theory. I think my job will be more and more about helping people to both design and deliver training regardless of technology. It will be about actually helping people to do their jobs better and that's what I'm really passionate about. ■



**Sandra De Milliano** helps I&d professionals to use video and webinar for more learning impact. As co-founder of WebinarSolutions she offers specialized training and coaching as well as learning video productions and professional studio webinars. [www.WebinarSolutions.eu](http://www.WebinarSolutions.eu)



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