



# ONLINE TEACHING AND FACILITATION: LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCE

Learning online has become the new reality for most of us. In this article, **Ceca Bunjevac** and **Steven Shorrock** share lessons from online teaching and facilitation, as well as their experiences in courses and conferences in the virtual world.

*“Can you hear me?” “You’re muted.” “You’ve frozen.”* These are familiar phrases in the world of virtual learning. Most organisations have had to make a rapid transition to online learning, and EUROCONTROL is no exception. The familiar classroom environment zoomed into the online world at IANS – the Institute of Air Navigation Services in Luxembourg – where courses went online within less than a month from the start of the pandemic. Virtual went viral.

As trainers who use facilitation extensively in several courses and work together often on courses including systems thinking and communication skills, we thought it might be useful to reflect on some lessons learned over the past year or so about the unique online format.

## Preparing for the Course

**Work with a co-facilitator.** This is an important lesson. A co-facilitator is your co-pilot or planner controller. They provide a back-up in case of problems, but also perform vital functions such as checking the chat, adding mentioned links to websites, making notes, spotting when someone wants to talk, noting the timing of breaks, and answering administrative and technical queries. Ideally, a co-facilitator will have complementary skills and traits. One of you might be the 'planner' type while the other is more 'tactical'. One might be a big picture thinker while the other is down in the details. But most important is to work with someone with whom you have a rapport and a good working dynamic. After a few sessions, the right dynamic means you'll be able to anticipate each other, quite like in the Ops room.

**Train in facilitation skills.** Instruction and facilitation require quite different skills. Much of the success of online facilitation will depend on facilitation skills learned and practised beforehand. We teach facilitation skills to controllers, engineers and safety specialists in an online format, and notice a common set of facilitation skills and practices, plus specific ones for in-person and online environments.

*"A co-facilitator is your co-pilot or planner controller"*

**Manage your energy.** One of the biggest predictors of how we feel about online teaching is our energy level. Without sufficient reserves, and strategies to manage energy, a three-hour session can feel like a full day at work...or more. Too much time in online learning can result in frustration, stress, and fatigue. Ensuring gaps between sessions is vital. For instance, two afternoons or an afternoon followed by a morning will usually be better than a full day. We have transformed three-day courses into three afternoons, plus some self-study elements (including online videos) for instance.

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**Prepare interactive activities.** This sounds obvious, but interactive aspects of virtual courses and events need even more preparation. Without the ability to explain in person, groups in breakout rooms need a very clear idea of what is intended.

**Prepare for technical problems.** Online platforms have a habit of updating or misbehaving at the wrong moment, for the organiser or participants. Logging in 15 minutes early to check that the platform is working, for you and other participants, will reduce stress. Having some self-study materials to hand, along with the email addresses of all participants, can also be a good idea in case of technical problems.

**Be mindful of timing.** With home working, we are having to mix responsibilities (such as home-schooling, different school trip arrangements, caring responsibilities). We have found it helpful to try to be mindful of this, and of whether people are joining from other time zones. While a European morning session may work well for those in Europe and those further east, a European afternoon session will obviously work better when there are participants in Europe and the Americas.

## During the Session

**Introduce yourselves...in the right way.** Where participants don't know each other, short introductions are vital to have an idea of each other's work and context. Where there are more than 12 or so participants, video introductions can take up too much time and lose engagement. The chat function can be useful in this case so that people introduce themselves 10-15 minutes or so before the session starts during a short 'welcome period'.

**Make careful use of the camera.** Staring at many faces for long periods is fatiguing. This is unnatural in face-to-face environments where we look at one person at a time and also have more information about body language and context. It can be helpful to turn cameras off during some periods where engagement is not expected, then turn them back on for interactive parts of the session.

**Make it interactive.** We notice a difference in feedback for more interactive sessions. This can include whole group discussion, breakout rooms work on case studies, analysing video scenarios, questions to be answered in chat, and quizzes.

**Manage fatigue.** Most of us are used to so-called 'Zoom fatigue'. Several things contribute to this. In our experience, about 80 minutes is a maximum for a session before a break, and much of this time is interactive. Non-interactive presentations and instruction should not normally exceed 20-25 minutes. The total session should not usually exceed three hours (including breaks).

**Lighten up.** Paying some attention to lighting makes remote learning and teaching better for everyone. A lamp or natural light on the face makes it easier to see expressions. Try to avoid windows or harsh lights behind you.

**Headsets.** Operational staff are, of course, used to headsets. Similarly, in online learning environments, a headset makes a big difference to sound quality for everyone, in terms of clarity of transmission, ambient noises and echoes.

**Beware the bullets.** A common mistake in presentation slide design is too much text. This is even worse when people have to read one thing and listen to the presenter say something slightly different. Text can be used but often can be presented in more interesting ways, and in fewer words. Pictures, photos and diagrams will usually be better remembered (keep longer text for the notes section of the slides).



**Consider a real white board.**

A physical white board and second camera can be a useful (and inexpensive) addition to your work or home set up. Feedback suggests that this adds a sense of normality and also allows more movement.

Be accepting of human and non-human distractors. In a home-learning environment, we have to accept, and even embrace, small interruptions from humans and animals.

**After the Session**

**Follow up.** During courses and facilitation sessions, it is likely that several items of information have come up that participants would appreciate in an email. These could include specific links in chat (but not the chat history) or other links to further information, as well as any materials used during the session. Follow up with your co-facilitator as well; note what went well between you and try to do more of it.

**Learn.** Each session offers an opportunity to learn and improve. Get friendly feedback so that the next session is even better.

**Enjoy.** After all the effort invested, we owe it to ourselves. 📺



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