

Julia
Young

Designing Interactive Webinars



From Push to Pull: The Rationale for Interactive Webinars

As a facilitator and trainer working primarily in the virtual world, I have noticed that the one-way nature of most webinars and web conferences misses an opportunity to engage an audience and draw on the wisdom of the group as well as the knowledge of the guest speaker, pitchman or trainer. As the use of web conferencing extends to management training and leadership development, interactive workshops and collaborative meetings, the requirements of webinars shift from pushing information out to pulling ideas and knowledge in through many-to-many collaboration and interaction. This requires a new look at the design and facilitation of webinars and the technology tools used to deliver them.

Face-to-face workshops employ a wide range of collaborative learning techniques from case study analysis and group problem solving to role plays, inquiry circles and brainstorming. Unfortunately as training programs and workshops have moved online they have become less interactive, limited by assumptions about technology choices and participant engagement. The opportunity presented by a more interactive and collaborative approach to webinars is to reclaim the many learning methods used in face-to-face workshops and adapt them for a virtual environment. The promise of interactive webinars is for increased learning, shorter meetings with greater participation, less multi-tasking and on-going collaboration.

This article draws on 15 years of experience designing and facilitating effective online meetings. We have distilled this experience into 8 design principles that instructional designers, conference planners and facilitators can employ to create more effective collaborative learning events, brainstorming sessions and team collaboration exercises with distributed participants. Our recommendations address session design, participant engagement and the appropriate use of technology. We'll start by laying out several design principles to guide your planning process, and will then illustrate our recommendations with an example of the design, preparation and execution of recent interactive webinar.

8 Design Principles for Creating Interactive Webinars

Design Principle 1: **Start with interactive learning objectives**

By adapting the successful participative learning strategies from our face-face-workshops, we can shift the emphasis of webinars from one-way information push to group interaction and collaboration.

Begin by defining your objectives. If you are working with an existing in-person workshop or training session, start with your existing agenda. Revisit the learning objectives, and consider whether these objectives are still current as you move to a virtual delivery model. Don't assume yet that something can't be done, just check that the objectives are still relevant and let go those that are not.

Sometimes a virtual session offers advantages over an in-person session. Don't miss the opportunity to consider new objectives that may be possible in a virtual setting, for example: increasing the number of participants, engaging individuals across cultures, linking learning to on-the-job practice, creating modules that can be mixed and matched (such as virtual cameo appearances by VIPs) or extending the reach of your training staff.

Design Principle 2: Divide learning content into three areas

As you look at your training material and learning objectives, it is useful to divide them into three types of content to help shape your webinar design and delivery. Some content elements may fit more than one of these categories; note this too.

- *Materials and Information that participants can read and review on their own.*
- *Knowledge and information that benefits from listening and questioning a subject matter expert.*
- *Shared knowledge and experiential learning that benefits from interaction between participants.*

Knowing the type of content you have allows you to start constructing your virtual program into a series of segments, including pre-work and post-work.

Design Principle 3: Use both synchronous and asynchronous learning methods

Think of the interactive webinar as a real-time event packaged with preparation and information sharing ahead of time and continued reflection and sharing afterwards. The real-time event is the synchronous portion of the webinar, generally a 60 to 90 minute real-time session combining a teleconference (or VoIP) with online web conferencing or web collaboration tool(s). The asynchronous portions, pre- and post- webinar activities, are critical components to setting up an interactive and engaging experience and maximizing the learning outcomes. Pre- and post webinar activities free up limited webinar time for the learning content most effectively done through live interaction.

Interactive Webinar Activity Examples

- *Moderated panel with Q&A*
- *Problem solving exercises with online brainstorming, categorizing, prioritizing*
- *Ideation activities prompted by images, graphics, video clips*
- *Storytelling and reflection*
- *Quick polls*
- *Team building discussions*

Asynchronous Pre/Post Activity Examples

- *Pre-reading of materials, including slide presentations*
 - *Online introductions*
 - *Self-assessment survey*
 - *Partnering activities in twos or threes*
 - *Online brainstorming & prioritizing of ideas for later discussion*
 - *Session feedback survey*
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Synchronous and asynchronous activities support each other and maximize interaction and learning outcomes. Asking participants to prioritize a list of content areas ahead of time, for example, can allow the trainer to focus the real-time webinar on the content the group finds most difficult or compelling; other content areas can be provided for self study off-line.

Design Principle 4: **The importance of pre-work**

The first aim of good prep is to get participants ready to participate - thinking about the material ahead of time and its applicability to their work, getting to know each other and opening up to sharing and exploring ideas together. Set the expectation well ahead of time that yours will be a different kind of webinar – one where you are expecting people to sit up and participate instead of sit back and listen (or multi-task). Asynchronous pre-work activities are also a useful way to have participants test and use the technology ahead of time to avoid wasting the first 15 minutes of the meeting getting everyone online.

A second aim is to get you ready to guide or facilitate the session - getting to know your audience and the relevance of your material to this particular group of participants, preparing focused questions that will stimulate ideas and start a dialogue. As virtual instructors and facilitators we need to find new ways to establish a presence at the “front of the room” and express our personality and value to the group. Time spent in advance setting expectations and building one-on-one connections is enormously valuable in creating a trustworthy and enlivened environment for true sharing and interaction.

Design Principle 5: **Include individual, small and large group activities**

Think about your training content in terms of individual, small group and large group activities both on-line and off-line to determine most effective delivery option. Varied delivery keeps participants engaged and active.

Individual learning activity – reading, listening to a podcast or watching video, on the job application, researching, practicing, and journaling.

Small group or partnering learning activity – reflection on reading materials, debriefing on exercises or practice activities, identifying issues and concerns, brainstorming ideas and solutions to bring to the whole group, action research.

Full group activity – input to shared flip charts and collaboration spaces both before and during live webinar.

Breakout groups are also a possibility with web collaboration software that allows for separate meeting rooms or electronic flip charts, and creative use of multiple phone lines or VoIP breakout room features.

Design Principle 6: **Take the role of moderator and facilitator, rather than presenter/speaker**

Keep information “push” to a minimum, and look for opportunities for sharing and interaction. We suggest no more than three slides, and not more than five minutes before an interactive exercise. Better yet, skip the slides altogether, or adapt them for a pre-work activity. If you decide to have a

presentation segment in your webinar, provide a workbook in advance to encourage participants to take notes and engage with the material as you go along. Another option is to integrate the information giving with a brainstorming or prioritizing exercise that will allow all participants to engage with the material and apply the ideas you are discussing.

Add creativity when using guest speakers and panelists in a webinar, taking care to keep the participants engaged. An interview or panel discussion format will be more engaging than a lecture, and will naturally provide opportunity to collect comments and questions from the audience. In a large group, use a moderator to gather and ask the questions or open the microphone to named individuals. Use subject matter experts to get a conversation started, then open up to all the participants having them type their ideas and comments for everyone to see; circle back around to the guest speakers to summarize what you have “heard” from the group. Web collaboration tools are designed to support this kind of interactivity and idea sharing.

Design Principle 7: **Tailor the interactive experience to the size of your group**

A virtual training session offers opportunity to increase the number of people who can participate. How many people in my webinar? How does group size affect or design? How do our objectives affect optimal group size? In general, the smaller the group, the greater the opportunity for personal interaction and sharing among the participants, while the larger the group, the less personal the experience. Creative use of technology and facilitation techniques, however, can maximize the opportunities for interactivity even in larger groups. A learning experience that consists of a series of webinars offers more opportunities for connection and depth than a one-off event.

Mini webinars: 5-10 people – These are characterized by a conversational tone, feeling of sitting around a table with everyone having air time. There is the opportunity to get to know each other and build social capital that can lead to sharing of personal stories and experiences in a trustworthy environment. Many face-to-face activities are adaptable to this size group.

Small webinars: 10-25 people – These are characterized by limited air time for all participants. Web collaboration tools allow everyone get ideas down quickly on a shared online flip chart to stimulate and focus the discussion. Voting tools facilitate collection of prioritize and opinions. Share materials ahead of time for more interactive discussions.

Medium webinars: 25-50 people – Here, the connection with and between participants is more distant and less personal. Web collaboration tools are critical for a high level of interaction and to keep people engaged. Guest speakers help focus discussion and create interesting debrief on group input. Webinars of this size require tightly facilitated Q&A.

Large webinars: 50-150 people - Panel point-counter point discussions keep audio conversation lively while collecting comments back and forth between participants on a shared flip chart. Deliberative polling (pre- and post-) focuses participant attention on the key issues and illustrates changes in ideas over the course of webinar. Capture group comments online for a documented takeaway.

Very large webinars >150 – No matter how designed, here the interaction is limited. Webinars of this size tend to be more communication venues with a subject matter expert or panel in conversation or making a presentation. They can be compared to a radio or TV show with text messages or blog entries from participants. Interaction may continue asynchronously after the webinar.

Design Principle 8: Select the right technology to facilitate participant interaction/engagement

To get great results from virtual meetings it is important to match the tools and technology to your meeting objectives. While traditional web conferencing tools focus on information push, web collaborative meeting software such as FacilitatePro provide options for brainstorming and idea generation, categorizing and organizing, voting and prioritizing, action planning and documentation. These tools enable workshop activities that draw on the wisdom of the group and keep everyone engaged.

As virtual meeting facilitators we need to be aware of the full range of technology tools available to us and become practiced and proficient in their use. As facilitators, we must take the time to become adept at using virtual meeting tools, so that we can focus on the content, agenda and the group dynamics of the meeting and not worry about the technology.

Collaborative Meeting Software

Web collaboration software tools focus on pulling information in from participants and creating a highly interactive meeting environment for both real time and asynchronous collaboration. These tools are designed with a facilitated workshop process in mind. Technology includes tools for:

- *Brainstorming*
- *Categorizing*
- *Voting / Prioritizing*
- *Group decision making*
- *Surveys*
- *Action plans*
- *Meeting Documentation*

For more information about **FacilitatePro** visit www.Facilitate.com

Web Conferencing Software

Web conferencing tools are most useful for pushing information out to participants and are real time only. Technology includes tools for:

- *Presentations*
- *Shared desktop*
- *Shared applications & whiteboards*
- *Chat*
- *Quick polling*
- *Recording*

This field is in-flux and an increasing number of free and inexpensive web conferencing tools are emerging, combining presentation with VOIP and video options.

For a free copy of **Tips and Techniques for Interactive Webinar** contact MoreInfo@facilitate.com

Putting Design Principles into Practice – Case Study

One of our clients asked us to transform a one day in-house management training workshop called “Getting Great Results from Virtual Team Meetings,” into a virtual training event for a team dispersed across multiple time zones. In addition to learning virtual facilitation techniques, the client had a goal of improving collaboration and support within the team. We used the eight design principles to adapt this collaborative workshop from an in-person to a fully virtual event. We used [FacilitatePro collaborative meeting software](#) as our platform for building interactive learning components for our virtual session.

1. Start with the interactive learning objectives

We used much of the same content and materials that we had prepared for the one-day workshop, but needed to find new ways to deliver them. The number of participants increased for 15 to 25 as the costs of delivery went down and more international participants could be included. We put extra emphasis on pre-work to establish rapport amongst the group so that the collaborative group exercises would work well. We engaged the client in helping reconfirm the importance of the program to the business and had them join us in the sessions so that the team building goals could be realized.

2. Divide Learning Content into Three Areas

We identified the main learning points and associated reading materials and organized the content into buckets called Reading Material, Possible Asynchronous Exercises, Must Do Same Time Activities. Most of the materials were already prepared; some needed to be adapted. We reformatted some presentation slides into a more readable and thorough article format. We converted techniques for preparing for virtual meetings into a self-assessment survey to be taken online. We considered which of our guest speakers might be able to present their material in a podcast or recorded interview format. We took our case study and added a proposed solution as a handout for self-study after the webinar.

3. Utilize both Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning Methods

We decided on two 90 minute webinars plus homework to replace the original 7 hour workshop. Social interactions and networking opportunities at first seemed hard to accomplish outside of our familiar on-site social activities. We invested time in getting to know the participants ourselves, ensured that the client also made direct and personal contact with the participants, and we found ways to enable communication and connections between participants ahead of our webinar. Connections started with clear and enthusiastic communications from the client about the importance of our event – despite the schedule having been severely cut back. As facilitators we initiated individual exchanges via email and phone. The extra effort and attention helped us build rapport that we called on during the webinar.

4. The importance of pre-work

We used a self assessment survey as a way to introduce facilitation skills and provide an understanding as to which skill levels of this particular group. The results helped us determine which skills needed to be addressed in a group and with a subject matter expert.

We wanted to create a webinar experience that would demonstrate, rather than talk about, the skills and techniques for virtual facilitation. We selected a case study as way to delve into the design considerations for converting a face-to-face meeting to a virtual setting. As pre-work, we collected issues and concerns about the scenario online, using FacilitatePro's shared electronic flip chart and brainstorming and categorizing tools.

5. Include Individual, Small and Large Group Activities

We assigned pre-reading and paired participants up asking them to have a 15 minutes phone conversation about the materials before the webinar. This simple peer-to-peer accountability technique significantly shifted their attitude to the pre-work and increased their readiness for the webinar.

During the webinar itself we used the case study as the content of our discussions, continuing the interactivity by prioritizing issues and brainstorming solutions. We provided a document of all of the ideas that we had generated during the webinar – immediately available from the FacilitatePro

tools. We ended the Webinar with individual and then group reflections on the webinar process itself – using ourselves as test subjects for how to run an effective virtual meeting.

6. Take the role of moderator and facilitator, rather than presenter or speaker

We skipped the slides altogether and provide handouts for participants to read before the session. For our guest speaker, we chose a short interview format based on questions gleaned from participants ahead of time. We practiced the conversation with our guest so that we could keep the 10 minute discussion time focused while still maintaining a conversational tone. This introduction led to some detailed idea generation and problem solving using the FacilitatePro brainstorming tools. We returned to our guest to help us summarize the ideas that the group had come up with and reflect on particular points of interest.

7. Tailor the interactive experience to the size of your group

The number of webinar participants was larger than what we had planned for the original face-to-face workshop. To create a sense of the group we asked participants to introduce themselves ahead of time in a shared electronic flip chart, adding photos and something about themselves. In addition we used the photos to create a simple seating chart around an imaginary conference table. We shared this prop with everyone and used it to go round the table to ask questions or seek input. As facilitators we kept track of who was speaking and called on individuals by name periodically to keep everyone's attention. FacilitatePro web collaboration tools were particularly important as a way to capture ideas from the whole group at once, organizing, prioritizing and documenting as we went for a highly engaging and interactive discussion.

8. Select the right technology to facilitate participant interaction/engagement

FacilitatePro was our primary meeting tool to facilitate the level of interaction that we wanted both during the webinar and for the pre-work activities. FacilitatePro uses familiar concepts like Post-it Notes, flip charts and prioritization/voting options. Easy access, reliability and ease of use were essential. Participants accessed via the Internet from their favorite browser using a simple meeting ID and password.

For the audio component we opted for the client company's regular teleconferencing services. Our design had mostly eliminated any slide presentations in favor of pre-reading, so the web conferencing tools were not necessary.

Putting it all together

Virtual introductions and pre-work let us begin our real-time session with a sense of connection and shared experience. During the webinar, participants learned from each other as well as from the subject matter experts, exploring ideas together in a trustworthy environment. We have since expanded the program into a series of five webinars with various virtual collaboration activities in-between. Spreading the learning out over several weeks gives participants time to practice the facilitation techniques that we discuss and bring back to the group ideas and questions that enhance everyone's learning.

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***Julia Young** is Vice President and co-founder of Facilitate.com. Julia has over 20 years of experience as a facilitator and process consultant, the last sixteen of which have been focused on the integration of collaboration technology into group processes for both face-to-face and virtual meetings and interactive webinars. Julia blogs at www.facilitate.com/blog/*

Contact Julia in San Francisco, CA at Julia.Young@Facilitate.com or call +1-800-423-8890 or +1-805-682-6939.