**Throwing away the rulebook: Five things you should consider when planning interactive online events, to make them more inclusive.**

by Becki Meakin and Jurgen Grotz

After 20 years of facilitating participant centred deliberative workshops, suddenly, we are meant to do this online. We have thrown away the rulebook and come up with five basic learning points for deliberative workshops online.

**1.) A big team.**

In a physical room one or two people can facilitate groups of 10 to 15 participants in very inclusive ways. For online workshops we need, and **we absolutely mean we need, a much bigger team**. This is not optional. Here are essential roles:

* Technical Host: admits participants, allocates breakout rooms, deals with technical issues, keeps time;
* Screen Host: the facilitator, who needs to be able to be engaging online, and very aware of every participant, doesn’t forget to smile and remembers that people can still see you;
* Exercise Host: Not physical jumping but some activity is essential in long sessions. The exercise host explains large group exercises and can also be chat monitor during ‘chalk and talk’ session, see below;
* Breakout Room Hosts: one per five participants.

For a group of 15 participants this means we require a team of six hosts. The good news, we don’t have to pay for a venue, refreshments and travel, so I should have a budget for this. Also, we can have meetings of up to 30 participants with six breakout rooms, although that requires six breakout room hosts, but overall can bring down cost and effort. On the other hand, the whole team needs to be briefed and comfortable with the online streaming service.

A helpful luxury can be a ‘note taker’ who monitors and records the various strands of activities as they take place.

**2.) Keep it simple, make it fun**

The biggest challenge with online working is the very serious restrictions it places on authentic conversations within groups above five participants. You don’t have time, and it might not be very inclusive to try, to up-skill all participants to use sophisticated electronic systems in a one-off meeting.

Here exercises offer a means for all participants to bring in their personal views and experiences, for all to see and hear. Essentially you need to rely on what teachers call ‘chalk and talk’. For example: You can ask people to email a one sentence answer to a question with an image to illustrate what they want to say. The Exercise Host can collate and the Screen Host can engage individuals to elaborate. Sounds more technical than it is, try it first with a small group of friends, it’s fun.

Breakout rooms are also a welcome addition to the online toolkit as they work a little like the classic workgroups. By and large in small groups of five or six everyone can unmute themselves and a conversation can take place. The way the groups are allocated should be flowing from the aims of the workshop but unless there is a real need to change groups around, participants should stay in the same groups to reduce the need for further introductions. Breakout room participants who are familiar with each other might be comfortable without a host, but as the facilitator is unlikely to be able to support all groups, if they need help, it might be best to allocate and brief a host. It might be possible to brief participants in advance of the meeting to become breakout room hosts.

**3.) Changed Timing.**

Put aside any ideas of half day or full day workshops.

Timing is really difficult: online meetings are very tiring yet many activities require extra time. On the, admittedly very limited evidence available, we suggest two 90 minutes session with a 60 minutes break in between for a regular meeting and three 90 minutes session with one 60 minutes and one 90 minutes break in between for extended meetings. Key message: plan more - do less

**4.) Engaging before and after a meeting.**

Given the time restrictions faced in online meetings and in order to enable people to find the time and space for reflection and input, online meetings benefit from engagement both before and after the event. For example, ask participants to send in a short introduction of themselves which can be shared at the beginning of the meeting or even before and prepare some questions participants may answer after the workshop closes. To be inclusive and meet the needs of participants who may not be readily able to access the technology, name a person they can contact for support.

This also means you can prepare individual and collective feedback based on what participants have provided during the day, what you collated in chalk and talk sessions and what break out group hosts have noted.

**5.) Transparency, transparency, transparency.**

This is new ground for everyone, so it is ok to acknowledge difficulties and awkwardness. For example, the exercises we designed might have led to unconscious bias or stereotyping. We recognised this in the meeting and told participants about it. Some exercises, like emailing an image, were also not easily accessible for everyone, so we helped or tried to give participants other ways to contribute. When this was not possible, we acknowledged it.

**Summary**

At the core of inclusive workshops is the respect for every participant. This is much more difficult to express and realise when you only see each other on screen, but it is not impossible. The focus for the facilitation must remain the individual, listening to what they have to say, not wasting their time, enabling them if that is needed, not over imposing and being friendly and welcoming. This can be done online, but we had to throw away the rulebook and start over.

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