Module 3

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1. Introduction

Within this part of the course we will focus on engagement of the virtual learners, its types and the possible ways how to nurture and enhance it in its various forms. We will look closer basic division/groups of various types of facilitation tools, methods & techniques for virtual learning facilitators. Finally, we will discuss the facts which should be taken into account in order to choose the most suitable method or tool for the specific situation and group of the virtual learners.

2. Engagement of virtual learners

It takes training, practice, and experience to become an exceptional virtual facilitator. Don't expect to master the skills overnight. Study, communicate, and discuss the possibilities of using various approaches and tools with your colleagues, seek out course authors, experts, mentors and coaches to ensure you are always improving. Ask for feedback from the groups you support, analyse it and continually enhance your facilitation skills. Try to find your way of facilitation in virtual environments. Search for the tools, techniques, and approaches which suit the best your groups and the specific situation or need. Keep in mind that learners' engagement is the basis for the better results, and it is you, who can support it.

Intellectual and environmental engagement are powerful in modern learning. But at the same time facilitators have to nurture emotional engagement, which increases their effectiveness and effect by personalizing the experience.

2.1. Emotional engagement

Effective learning involves an emotional component. It is important to realize that the learning experience is changed by how learners feel about it. Facilitators should strive to enable individuals to feel good about the experience and even nurture a sense of community. To nurture emotional <u>engagement</u>, facilitators can:

1. Inspire confidence in the virtual classroom/environment experience. When a facilitator is fluent in the use of the tools, the virtual environment fades into the background and learners start to ignore the technology. This makes them feel as if they are in a "real" learning environment, encouraging them to engage more fully in the training experience.

2. Demonstrate that all contributions and interactions are valued. When learners' contributions are acknowledged and reinforced, they realize they are not anonymous and their participation in the learning environment matters. This helps them feel confident, and they tend to contribute even more.

This is especially important in the virtual classroom, or asynchronous learning where learners rarely see the facilitator or their peers.

3. Nurture an environment in which learners feel safe about offering opinions and asking questions. When learners feel intellectually "safe," they may feel more inclined to contribute to conversations and ask questions. Training should offer a safe space for making mistakes and questioning for understanding. Facilitators can contribute to the learners' beliefs that their contributions have value, even if they miss the mark.

4. Create an environment where individuals enjoy learning. When learners enjoy themselves, they feel better about being part of the experience. Spark interest! Spread joy! Even technical training can include an element of fun. Advanced facilitators can inject passion into their delivery and the environment to create a more exciting event.

5. Encourage learners by providing positive, personalized feedback on contributions and progress. When learners recognize that individual contributions are noticed, they feel valued. They will potentially contribute more, enhancing the experience for everyone. Facilitators should provide positive reinforcement throughout the process. It can be as simple as saying, "Thank you, Anita, for sharing. Your point is interesting and aligns with the content we will discuss after our break."

6. Support and sustain emotional engagement by reinforcing why the content is important. When learners recognize and internalize why certain content is important, they feel good about participating and are more open to learning. The importance of content produces a positive emotional response because the learner feels that if the content is important, the fact that they are in the classroom learning it means they are important as well. In this sense, training assumes the role of reward and recognition for the learner.

7. Encourage a community among learners. When relationships start building between learners, likelihood that they will work cooperatively within the learning experience to make it more effective for themselves is getting higher. Learners "get outside of their own heads" and start thinking about "we, the learners" within the learning experience. They will build on each other's contributions, develop and articulate positive contributions, and seek to adapt the materials to both themselves and the entire group.

2.2. Environmental engagement

Environmental engagement relates to *the perception of and interaction with the learning environment itself. We consider: How do learners perceive the learning environment? Does it create a constructive, effective experience? Does the learner interact with the environment?*

The facilitation process aligns with both design and delivery within a particular environment, like the virtual classroom. When a learner is environmentally engaged, the learner knows how to interact with the environment and easily perceives opportunities when they can connect and interact with the content, peer learners, or the facilitator. Facilitators often think the virtual learning environment exists

outside of our control. In reality, though, we can positively manage and contribute to the environment to foster strong learner engagement in the virtual classroom environment. Facilitators can foster environmental engagement by:

► *Fostering 'comfort' and digital fluency in the virtual classroom environment.* When learners are comfortable in the learning environment, they can better focus on learning. Think of the simple case of a learner intending to "raise his/her hand" to volunteer some information or an opinion. In the virtual classroom, if we do not ensure the learner knows how to interact with peers, the content, and the facilitator, the learner cannot focus on the experience. Instead, they spend their energy on the basic mechanics of interacting. Frustration follows.

► *Fostering a diverse environment that is accessible to all learners.* When learners feel like their personal needs are being met, the learning environment seems more inclusive and individuals are more open to learning.

► *Fostering diversity of opinions and open conversations.* When learners respond with "yeah, but," "what if?", and "in my experience…", you have evidence that they are listening and connecting to the content. And, when they are engaged in active conversation **with each other** over these types of comments, you have evidence that you are taking the learning to a deeper level. At that point, the role of a facilitator is to guide the discussion to ensure every learner gets the most out of that experience.

► *Fostering conversation with learners.* When there is meaningful conversation between learners and the facilitator that is evidence that the learning environment is becoming more natural, and it also indicates that the learners feel "safe" to contribute.

► *Fostering positive engagement in the learning environment.* When learners contribute to the discussion in a positive and meaningful way, the impact on the learning environment is positive, as discussions become more interesting and sophisticated. Alternatively, when learners (or even one learner) contribute in a negative way, the entire learning environment suffers.

► *Fostering a willingness to change and adopt new knowledge and skills.* Training programs are designed to assist individuals in changing how they work or behave. When the lesson is persuasive, it impacts the learner's willingness to learn new things.

► *Fostering understanding by encouraging learner questions.* Learners often feel they have more in common with other individuals in the class than with the facilitator. Therefore, when other learners have meaningful questions, it triggers individuals to pay more attention.

► *Fostering interaction between learners.* When there is meaningful interaction between learners, that is evidence that they are focused on learning and not the technology, indicating comfort in the learning environment. This is fundamentally different than two learners talking to each other – this is "building" upon another learner's contribution in an active multi-voice discussion – the learning becomes a narrative with the learners telling the story

2.3. Intellectual engagement

Intellectual engagement involves more than learners feeling mentally inspired by training content. Facilitators must recognize that the learning environment is changed by how people are learning, and how much they are learning, and manage the class accordingly.

Facilitators need to focus on specific, proactive action in order to support this dimension of engagement. Facilitators can stimulate intellectual engagement by:

► Connecting content to individual experiences. Adhering to adult learning principles is just as important in a virtual learning environment as it is in a face-to-face environment, and learners react positively when they clearly see the connection between training and their work, study and life. When learners recognize the relevance of the content to their individual situation, interest is stimulated, and they become curious to learn even more. Facilitators should clearly communicate the relevance of the blend early and often.

► Focusing on how and how much individuals are learning, and not focusing on the slides or any study material. They now guide learners through experiences. Advanced virtual facilitators estimate and evaluate their learners' needs and the benefits of the training material and bridge these two. When the intentions of the program obviously align with the intentions of the learner, learners feel the investment in their time and focus is worth it.

► *Ensuring learning is transferred.* Great corporate learning strives to impact business outcomes, and learning transfer ensures that happens. When learners can clearly self-identify that they have already gained new applicable knowledge and/or skills, it stimulates their curiosity to continue to learn. Facilitators need to consciously move beyond sharing information and toward true skill building and knowledge transfer.

► Demonstrating subject matter expertise. In the virtual classroom, both technical proficiency and subject matter competence matter to learners. When you share useful information/data that is not previously known, while also managing the virtual platform smoothly, your expertise is recognized, and learners stay interested because they assume more meaningful information will be shared.

► Highlighting and incorporating course materials into the content flow. When learners realize the value of content offered outside of the live lessons (eLearning, infographics, tools, videos, etc.) they will be more likely to access that content in other moments of learning need. As facilitators, our influence no longer ends when the live training event concludes. Rather, we also support informal training, and by positioning ourselves as experts, learners will trust the self-guided, on-demand resources, too.

3. Facilitation tools, methods & techniques for virtual learning facilitators

For you as a virtual facilitator, it is important to know what technologies, tools, techniques and approaches are available to you, and how to use them effectively. It is critical to find the right tools

that will help you facilitate your virtual meetings, workshops, and events effectively while ensuring your technologies are aligned and work cohesively together.

Yet, we have to be aware of the fact that there are technology/digital tools (for more details on these please go to the Module 2 of this course) and facilitation tools, techniques and methods (for these please check our FAVILLE digital application at https://favilleapp.ht-apps.eu).

If we have a look at the first ones – technology/digital, it is clear that these tools provide the virtual environment for our courses, training, and meetings, they are the tools for delivery and use of some of the facilitation techniques. Here we can mention e.g. videoconferencing tool (Zoom, Webex, Google Hangouts). Having the user friendly and reliable technology tools we also need a catchy high quality content and certainly skillful virtual learning facilitators. Such facilitators are able to choose the proper tools, techniques and methods suitable for the given situation, purpose, phase of the training, course, or meeting, group type and size as well as the one which is appropriate also from the difficulty and facilitation levels and comfort zone points of view.

3.1. Basic overview of tools, methods & techniques for virtual facilitation

Various resources can offer the different division and grouping of the facilitation tools, methods & techniques. For the purposes of our course we have chosen the one given below. This view is based on the curation of the widely available and frequently used approaches. However, if you find some approach which suits you better, choose and use the one. Based on our preferences we can assign the usually used facilitation tools, methods & techniques into the following groups:

1. Icebreakers
2. Energizers
3. Teamwork and Team Building Activities
4. Idea Generation and Innovation Activities
5. Issue resolution
6. Issue analysis
7. Decision Making & Goal Setting Workshop Activities
8. Leadership and Personal Development Group Activities

3.2. How to choose the most suitable facilitation tools, methods & techniques?

While trying to have a closer look at the various facilitation techniques, methods and tools we can find many different approaches and opinions and we definitely can tell that none of these is better or worse than the other. However, we have always be aware of the fact that any tool or technique has to be chosen for the specific situation, need and goal, while also the other parameters have to be taken into account. At least the following parameters should be considered:

► <u>Purpose</u>: what is the reason for using this particular tool, what is the main goal to be reached, what should be supported, developed or enhanced by using of this: There might be the following: Brainstorming, Collaboration, Concepts, Conflict resolution, Decision making, Define intentions, Design, Design-sprint, Discuss challenges, Game storming, Goal setting, Group assessment, Group commitment, Group-prioritization, Ideation & idea generation, Intragroup openness, Issue resolution, Issue analysis, Liberating structures, Meeting facilitation, Perspective, Problem solving, Project planning, Providing feedback, Accepting feedback, Team alignment, Team building, Team culture, Team work, Vision

► <u>Skills</u>: Actively used and involved skills of the participants, it is possible to perceive them as suitable prerequisites for mastering the activity/tool. There might be the following: Active listening, Appreciation, Big picture, Communication, Creativity, Empathy, Evaluation, Improvisation game, Innovation, Introspection, Leadership & Leadership development, Multi-tasking, Presentation skills, Self-esteem, Self-reflection, Storytelling

► Group size

► Time frame

► <u>Phase</u>: the choice of the facilitation method is based on the phase of the virtual event within which you want to use/need it.

- At the opening or starting the virtual event we might use:
  o Get-to-know: Activities to let people know, who they are collaborating with and to overcome or break down the formal barriers e.g. from or in a workplace.
  o Kick-off: an activity focused on getting everyone acquainted before work commences. It ensures everybody starts with the same level of information and understanding. It should focus solely on information sharing and setting the tone for the rest of the facilitation training or process/workshop/project etc.
  o Icebreaker: They help to ensure that all attendees are equal participants and they fully engage participants when you want them to own the outcomes of the meeting or session.
- At any time during the virtual event, based on the need, current situation, atmosphere or mood within the participants' groups we should use some of the following:
  o Energiser: These are short, team-building exercises aimed at overcoming shyness and boosting energy with a group of distributed people.
  o Fun: Activities that can generate laughter, relief, fun and create the atmosphere of ease.
  o Action: Tools that mobilize the attendees and require/initiate an active approach and participation.
  o Icebreaker in case if needed
- At the closing phase of the virtual event we can use:
  o Debrief: Asking the whole team "what, why, and how" questions. And the whole team analyses the project, training, or virtual meeting outcome.
  o Review: Recommended when some kind of analysis or an overview is needed.

o Closing: Recommended at the end of a facilitation process to summarize and remind people the meeting/workshop/project results and needed follow-ups.

While choosing the facilitation techniques or method we should take into account also our experience, knowledge, skills and competences. Not only the purpose, goal or needs of the participants have to be taken into account but also the fact how we as virtual facilitators can master the tool in such a way that we can achieve the desired aims. Therefore, we should think about the following parameters too:

► <u>Facilitation level</u>: Some tools are easy to use but some require the certain level of experience, therefore this filtering option allows the user to choose the facilitation level: either the level of beginner (for less experienced users, which are building their expertise in this field), or the level of a skilled facilitator (medium & advanced level of experience with facilitation, and higher level of autonomy and self-assurance)

► <u>Comfort zone</u>: A category that describes the benefit of the technique/tool from the point of view of comfort zone theory. We use 2 levels:

▪ Comfort zone (participants use what they know, what they can control and are familiar with, what they know intimately, the environment and atmosphere of well-being and relaxation, emotionally "they are at home"),

▪ Stretched zone (participants are in a situation where they experience a slight discomfort, at the same time they gain a new experience, an experience of success from the new situation, they learn, they develop)

► <u>Difficulty level</u> of the technique/tool from the point of view of readiness, maturity, seniority of the virtual event participants to master the given activity / technique, to understand the assignment and to implement it. We use three levels: Low, Medium, and High.

4. Resources

[1] https://www.td.org/insights/7-ways-to-nurture-emotional-engagement-in-the-virtual-classroom

[2] https://www.sessionlab.com/library

[3] https://blog.insynctraining.com/topic/advanced-facilitation-learner-engagement-series

[4] https://www.howspace.com/resources/digital-facilitation-tools

[5] https://www.plays-in-business.com/facilitation-formats-i-use/

[6] https://www.nj.gov/education/AchieveNJ/teams/strat14/FacilitatorToolKit.pdf

[7] https://fullcirc.com/resources/facilitation-resources/an-overview-of-online-facilitation/

[8] Top 5 tips & tricks for POWERFUL DIGITAL FACILITATION available at https://www.howspace.com/digital-facilitation

[9] https://www.td.org/insights/are-you-ready-to-facilitate-in-the-virtual-classroom

[10] Ní Shé, C., Farrell, O., Brunton, J., Costello, E., Donlon, E., Trevaskis, S., Eccles, S. (2019) Teaching online is different: critical perspectives from the literature. Dublin: Dublin City University. Doi: 10.5281/zenodo.3479402