



THE ART OF ONLINE HOSTING: FROM POWERPOINT TO POWERFUL

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There is an art to hosting online conversations. It draws less on technical proficiency and more on simple warmth and hospitality; less on lecturing and more on listening; less on facilitation and more on curiosity and open inquiry.

Based on our experience in hosting online events—ranging from a train-the-trainer webinar for 12 to a public forum on enlightened business practice for 1,200—we believe passionately in the value and potential of virtual meetings. In this article, we offer our combined experience and share our perspectives on successful web conferencing. As practitioners of the World Café principles and method, we advocate a way of connecting with others in meaningful conversation, whether online or face-to-face, called “hosting.” We’d like to show how the art of online hosting can infuse your own web meeting experience with energy and engagement, and yield new—and better—results for you and your participants.

For consultants, trainers, community activists, communicators, and people with the need to get things done quickly and efficiently, the art of online hosting offers a way to transform the dry, predictable events we have all experienced into engaging interactions. We contend that anyone can improve the effectiveness and value of their online seminars or events by using one key hosting skill and challenging five common assumptions about meetings and online learning. Follow these guidelines to explore new choices and reveal a different online experience from what most people have come to expect.

Not a Substitute, but Something Different!

Web conferencing is often seen as a poor substitute for the richness of a classroom session or face-to-face event. The comments usually go something like, “You could never experience the power of a

class on a screen” and “How can you compare being in the same room with being on the same screen?” But online engagement is not a substitute for face-to-face interaction; it’s something entirely different. Can you imagine the loss to our communication system if someone discouraged Alexander Graham Bell from inventing the telephone by insisting that just hearing someone is no substitute for seeing them?

As we get more comfortable with technology, we learn that each kind of event, executed well, has its place. We are not on a mission to create converts for online engagement; our intention is merely to demystify this powerful way to meet, learn, and collaborate so that you can view it as an opportunity that you can use to your advantage.

We further contend that the online space is sometimes actually a better—and on occasion the only—option for learning or gathering collaboratively. This is especially true when your audience is:

1. *Geographically dispersed.* For example, gathering groups of people for meetings can be impractical for companies that have corporate offices with branches all over the world or large national and multi-national organizations.
2. *Interested in germinating ideas collectively, over time.* Today’s technology allows learning to be scheduled both synchronously and asynchronously, letting ideas continue to germinate and develop between online meetings.
3. *Resource-conscious and focused on convenience.* Some groups are simply unable to make the necessary investment in time and money to travel to a common location, or members may need to gather quickly, efficiently, and often.
4. *Made up of mainly introverts.* The virtual environment can feel less threatening for this learning group, as it offers a level of protective anonymity and ample time for reflection before speaking.
5. *Concerned with environmental conservation.* It’s much less energy and resource intensive to meet online than to use limited resources for travel.

TEAM TIP

Use the ideas outlined in this article to design online events that foster collaborative learning and “unlearning.”



It's Just a Space!

People tend to assume that the online experience is somehow less real or less valuable than a bricks-and-mortar classroom or other face-to-face engagement. To combat that mental model, the art of online hosting places special attention on creating an environment that is personal, warm, and conducive to human relationship. We see a seminar or meeting primarily as a space for learning and a field of collaboration, where the principles of hospitality, clarity, focus, and intention apply, regardless of the technology being used. A good host intentionally creates what World Café co-founders Juanita Brown and David Isaacs call a “*hospitable space*.” Hospitality here means extending a sense of welcome, a kind of gracious generosity, to your participants—honoring their presence and inviting their participation exactly as you would if they were guests in your home.

We subscribe to a theory of learning that assumes, with Etienne Wenger, “that engagement in social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn.” Because learning happens socially, it flourishes in a context where we can apply our skills and competence, have the opportunity to achieve results, and engage with others in meaningful ways. Whether we are working online or face-to-face, we encounter similar choices: we can learn or not; we can reach a group decision or not; we can build relationships and communicate freely or not. Good preparation can create the conditions for participants to respond in the affirmative to each of these choices.

To take advantage of the power of online space, we must shift from presentation strategies to engagement strategies. According to Brown and Isaacs, “The setup of most meetings actually subverts collaborative efforts by focusing on deadening one-way presentations.” Their statement rings true nowhere more clearly than in many of today’s dull webinars and online presentations. You may have attended some online seminars and virtual meetings of this nature: one-way communication, unengaged participants, awkward moments . . . the result of which is a failure to learn and continued lowering of expectations for online learning/meetings as a genre.

If few of us learn just by listening to presenters and seeing their slides, why are we put on mute with limited chances to participate and interact with each other when we are online? Successful online hosts ask themselves: “What if my job is to design online conversations rather than be the focal point for the session? What if my job is creating personal connections and a hospitable space in the online meeting room?” One key skill can make all the difference.

One Key Skill

“*True conversation requires us to treat the world as if it were alive and everything in it a revelation.*”

—David Whyte

The key to online hosting is simple—*deep listening*. When it comes to using online tools, people are often distracted by technology, and distracted people don’t listen well. But we know that the best teachers in the world hear, support, challenge, and engage learners’ thinking.

Here’s the challenge: Listening online has a different quality than listening in a classroom. There are no visual clues to guide us: no eager eyes, no furrowed brows, no yawns, no raised hands. Because you can’t see participants in a virtual setting, it requires an almost Zen capacity to “lean in” to what would otherwise appear to be silence.

Deep listening in an online environment comes from a stance of deep caring. You have to give a damn. Unless you nurture a true connection with other human beings, no matter how proficient you are with the technology, your online sessions will hardly shine. Using a whimsical comparison, online hosts are like Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars*: with all the technology at their disposal, they still trust the “force” of their trained intuition to make things happen.

As an experiment, when you start your next online session, take a few moments to create an environment that is hospitable to the kinds of results you want to achieve. If you want your group to be relaxed, open, and engaged, first and most important, you yourself must be relaxed. Otherwise, you’ll find it hard to listen. Log on to the session 15 minutes early and engage in casual, friendly conversation with whoever shows up. This is a simple and effective way to model the informal, relaxed atmosphere you want to create. The pressure to appear intelligent can be oppressive for both host and participants. Sometimes we jokingly tell people “don’t do your best,” just to help them relax and be themselves.

Make peace with silence. Don’t rush to fill a break in the conversation with your own interpretations. Give time for people to think and for engagement to emerge. Silence is a necessary ingredient in a successful online interaction, because it allows people to collect their thoughts, work through a question that is not obvious, or wait for the time to be right to contribute to the conversation. Being comfortable with silence—your own and from your group—is not always as easy as it sounds. For instance, before hosting a session with 1,200 people, one of the authors spent a few quiet minutes composing her thoughts and attending to the space she was about to create. Those minutes of silence were invaluable preparation for the times in the session when patience and listening were most needed.



Five Online Hosting KDPs

In aviation, a KDP (key decision point) is a critical decision made in a few moments, based on the pilot’s judgment and assessment of external conditions. Examples include the “takeoff/no takeoff” or “landing/no landing” decisions. Those fateful choices are made by the pilot on every flight, and they largely determine its success or failure. Similarly, the decisions made by online hosts at key moments determine the results of their session.

We present five online hosting KDPs that simplify your work, whether you are planning a virtual meeting, developing materials, or delivering an online session (see “Keys to Successful Online Events”). Each KDP is also meant to explore a limiting belief and challenge a commonly held assumption with the purpose of pushing online hosts to go beyond previous limitations and access their best thinking. Whether you use all of our recommendations or only a few, we hope that you will make more conscious decisions at critical junctures and bring your full awareness to bear in truly exploring all the options you have available.

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL ONLINE EVENTS	
KEY SKILL	Listening
KEY DECISION POINTS	<p>Go from PowerPoint to powerful.</p> <p>Keep IT simple.</p> <p>Talk as little as possible.</p> <p>Unmute the line.</p> <p>When the session is over, the work is not done.</p>

KDP 1: What do we do in the session? Will we create a flashy presentation with special effects, or will we invite real engagement and design questions that matter to this group of trainees? Will we find busywork for them, or will we create hands-on tasks that they can perform and practice through interaction and conversation? *Successful online hosts go from PowerPoint to powerful.*

Learning happens when people join in conversation on questions where they do not already know the answer. If you want your webinars to become occasions for collective learning, you need to master the art of asking questions that stir things up and reveal an opportunity for real exploration. As World Café practitioners, our hosting skills were born in an environment that recognizes the efficacy of powerful questions. What makes a question powerful? It has to be of real value to your group. It has to be phrased in such a way that the responses are generative and instructive, and not just a litany of complaints or an abstract mental exercise.

Before each online event, we spend time identifying questions that will shake up what the group thinks it knows and open them up to their potential for curiosity and their excitement for learning. We always prepare at least three powerful questions that address something of personal importance for the participants, touch on key parts of the content, and build interest for the session. For example, in a session about organizational change, we might start with the question, “What is one of your most successful experiences with organizational change at work?”

KDP 2: What technology will we use? Will we use the latest state-of-the-art technology or the simplest, most appropriate tool? *Successful online hosts keep IT simple.*

The best online events are the ones in which the technology “disappears.” We want to keep the focus on people’s engagement with each other and not on the technology. In addition, people’s fear of technology or “something new” can be a real deterrent to their willingness to participate. This is especially true for otherwise highly skilled people who are in positions of authority and anxious not to appear foolish trying to learn a new system.

One way to address this challenge is to choose technology that has little or no learning curve, like the telephone-based conferencing technology we’ve found effective. When using more complex technology, give ample time before the event for practice and provide one-on-one training if needed to allow everyone to feel comfortable in the medium.

If you are interested in robust web-conferencing platforms, go with the big names. Most are easy for participants to use. It might take you a while to become fully confident in employing all the bells and whistles, but plenty of tutorials are available. Whatever your choices, we find the ability to support breakout rooms especially helpful to a conversation-based approach.

To make people comfortable with the interface, consider fun ways to engage them; for example, at the beginning of a session, use the status icon to have participants agree or disagree with statements like “I wish I were fishing” or “I’d rather be dancing.” This practice serves at least two purposes: breaking the ice and helping participants become familiar with the technology.

KDP 3: What activities should we have in the agenda? Will we talk over a presentation, or will we invite participation? *Successful online hosts talk as little as possible.*

To make acquiring new knowledge interesting and engaging, turn your teaching materials from “things learners need to know” into “things learners need to do.” By doing so, you act as a resource rather than a talking head, and let the trainees dig in



and have the experience themselves. Experiential activities might include:

1. Present information with a **slideshow**
2. Invite a **guest** to join the conference call
3. Air an **audio/video** segment
4. Engage group dialogue with an online **blackboard** or collaborative drawing tool
5. Call on participants with a **question**
6. Ask participants to answer a quick **poll** or submit comments through the **chat** function
7. Divide participants into virtual **breakout rooms** for small-group work

This interactive design recognizes and taps the rich well of intelligence, experience, and wisdom that exists in the audience. Everyone benefits when we invite audience participation into our events. In one session about negotiation, for example, we invited participants to share the deals they found during their Memorial Day weekend shopping excursions as a way to introduce a segment about successful negotiation.

KDP 4: How do we manage people’s input on the conference call? Will we command the communication, or do we allow conversation to flow organically by unmuting the lines and letting people join in? *Successful online hosts unmute the line.*

Learning happens in conversation, and if we do not allow people to engage with each other, an online session will have limited impact. You can always mute the lines if the background noise becomes too distracting. Until then, the first step toward a rich, social, learning-full experience online is allowing people to speak.

When you are working with more than about 40 people, rather than leave the audio lines unmuted, look for other methods to connect people. What’s most important is that each person has the opportunity to be heard and feel part of the conversation. If at all possible, encourage participants to speak to the whole group. In any case, always make sure they have an opportunity to express themselves in a small-group breakout.

Sometimes other modalities can be useful. For example, invite everyone to write an insight or make a drawing of something they’ve gleaned from what they are hearing. In a recent online World Café, we asked the participants to take a minute to think and then write one or two insights or ideas that they could take with them from the conversation so far. They then shared these “seeds” with the larger group as part of the event harvest. This moment of collective introspection helped everyone get present and connect with themselves and each other.

KDP 5: What happens after the session is over?

Will the work end, or will we make a point to document and share the results of learning through graphic recordings, questionnaires, post-session surveys, online evaluations, and invitations to join an online learning community or working group? *Successful online hosts know that when the session is over, the work is not done.*

Collect feedback immediately. At the end of each online session, we ask people to rate us from 1 to 5, with 1 “waste of time” and 5 “I learned a lot.” Take time to analyze those valuable results, and call participants to request additional feedback if needed. For online seminars, meeting face-to-face is an excellent follow-up; so is joining a discussion board or sharing resources online.

Conclusions and What’s More to Learn?

As online hosts, we continually strive to increase our capacity to listen deeply. We consciously use the five KDPs to create safety in the virtual room and engage our participants. We anticipate potential roadblocks to participation and come to the session prepared with ways to avoid them. We create the conditions for full participation—with our voices, our ability to listen, the design of the session, and our willingness to engage our own and the participants’ imaginations.

Making the right choices during the five key decision points will help you build an environment that communicates support for your participants and shows that you value their experience and input. In the course you choose, you are clearly defining your role as a host, creating a hospitable space, setting up your virtual room for success and high engagement, and encouraging real conversation and exchange.

We are currently exploring three other areas of online hosting:

- What are the limits of this new technology? We’ve been working with the assumption that the less technology the better, but as new technology evolves, so does our curiosity about what might be possible. What’s the point where the advantages outweigh the difficulties and the rewards are so great that even the most reluctant are willing to take the risks and learn new skills to be part of these opportunities?
- We are also interested in how to be more effective in inviting and bridging the digital divide, asking ourselves, who else needs to be part of the online conversation? If you believe, like we do, that we need everyone’s voice to provide the diversity of perspective that can best address today’s important issues, then how do we invite more under-represented populations to participate?
- Finally, what would be the most effective ways to host really large groups—two thousand and



upwards—online and still maintain a sense of intimacy and the “hands-on” care and hospitality that we believe characterizes good hosting?

We hope you have found the ideas in this article interesting and nourishing food for thought. Whether you are stimulated or challenged by what what you have read here, we invite you to share your feedback and thoughts with us, along with your own experiences and ideas about online hosting, either via email or in the World Café online community.

Let the conversations begin! ■

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