What Should I Be Doing Right Now?

A To-Do List for Wanna-Be Virtual Facilitators

"There has been an alarming increase in the number of things I know nothing about."
Jane Seabrook
in the book
Furry Logic – Wild Wisdom

If you're reading this right now, I assume you are like the rest of us. Trying to get your bearings and figure out how to move forward using virtual technology, when what you'd really like is for the world to just unwind itself and go back to the way things were before.

Well, about that... I've got good news and bad news. The bad news is, time I'm afraid, only moves forward, and unless you've got a working time machine, we're not going back to the way things were before. Some people talk about what the *new normal* will be, but I think most folks agree, it will certainly be different than it was before. The good news is, there are plenty of opportunities in the new reality. Opportunities to work with audiences virtually everywhere. Next week, for example, I am hosting a 90-minute virtual teambuilding session for an outdoor training company in Singapore and I don't even have to leave my country to do it. That, is a major improvement in my opinion.

In order to begin the process of re-imagining yourself as a virtual facilitator, I've created a list of things for you to consider. I'm not saying you have to do *everything* on this list, but in order to be as prepared as possible, you might want to delve into a couple of these recommendations.

"Be all you can be. Read."
Peter Max, in a poster for the
1969 National Library Week

1. Check your bookshelves, library, local and online bookstores for anything with the word virtual in it. There are many possibilities in the virtual world, just as there are in the real world. Reading is a great way to learn about these possibilities, but be careful. I picked up a book at my library last week related to online teaching. I keyed in on the phrase *techniques for the virtual classroom*. The first thing I noticed however, was a copyright date twenty years in the past. After scanning the book, I realized I could do better. So, read, but you might want to start with books written a bit more recently than twenty years ago.

2. If you want to find information about virtual facilitation, search for it in virtual space. I just performed a keyword search on the Internet using the phrase *virtual facilitation*. Here are six recent articles filled with helpful information about facilitating in virtual space. Read.

3. Find someone already doing what you want to do and ask them to help you. You can start with the members of the Virtual Facilitation Practice Group. You'll find their contact information on that final page of this book, but don't stop there. Look for a resource you already know. I was about to suggest someone *local*, but that word has a different meaning in virtual space. Instead, find someone you trust and learn all you can from them.

4. Leave your comfort zone. As you investigate virtual training techniques, you are going to encounter technology and possibilities that are way outside your current comfort zone. Get over it. The only way past, is through. Get used to be uncomfortable, for a while.

5. Find a virtual platform you like and explore it. Whether you plan to Zoom, WeChat, Webex, Microsoft Team, Facebook Live, Google Classroom, Facetime, Skype or dozens other possibilities, you are going to need some form of video-conferencing software to interact with your audiences. Many applications are available for free. Start with those. Then explore every element you can. Learn about chat, breakout rooms, whiteboards, share screen, muting, file sharing and other application features.

6. Practice. Offer initial programs to your friends and clients for free, just so that you can practice. I'm guessing that it took you a while to become competent with your real-world group facilitation skills. It is going to take a while to do the same virtually. Practice. A lot.

7. Don't overdue the technology. If you are working with remote participants, some of whom might be accessing the internet via dial-up connections, bandwidth is everything. Those high-resolution graphics with stunning animations and video content are amazing, but they take forever to load for participants with less-than optimal internet connections. Simplicity is absolutely the best policy.

8. When converting real-world content to virtual space, start with your best. Take the three best things you use in the real world and convert them to the virtual one. Activities, lessons, stories, curriculum, whatever you share in the real world can be converted to virtual space, and don't think for a second this is a one and done process. Keep tweaking your creations until they are as vivid and valuable for your virtual audiences as they were for you in the real world.

9. Ask for help. Every time you facilitate a virtual event, ask a friend or colleague to join as an observer and invite them to give you feedback after the event.

10. Competency in the virtual world is going to be like trying to hit a moving target. Things are going to keep changing. Video-conferencing software is going to incorporate new features. Your audiences are going to become more familiar with virtual techniques. You are going to get better at this, but don't become complacent. Keep learning. PBS had the right idea when they used the phrase *the lifelong learning channel*. Do the same. Keep learning. Get better. Continuous improvement should be your mantra.

Well, there you go. Ten tips for wanna-be virtual facilitators, but don't take my word alone for it. Throughout this book you'll find recommendations from many other talented and newly virtual facilitators. Hang on, it's going to be a bumpy ride, but don't worry. We'll get there. Together.

Real-world teambuilding guru Dr. Jim Cain of Teamwork & Teamplay, like you, struggled a bit converting his content to virtual space, but after a few dozen online presentations, he got better. For more information about this transformation, and his insights from half a century of working and playing in groups, read his new book, *Extraordinary Facilitation*, from Healthy Learning Publishers.