8 Key Learnings to Transition to the Online World

What follows is an ongoing review of some of our key learnings on maintaining a collaborative, peer-to-peer and experiential learning environment online.

1. Consider changing one-off learning events into a series

Most of our Spur Change learning opportunities are offered for free. As we reflected on how to engage in new ways online, we also remained conscious of not to reinvent the wheel.

As part of our Spur Change program, we learned that, by turning one-time events into a learning series, we could increase the participation of many SMOs, particularly those participating for the first time.

Some key considerations when creating one-time events or learning series include:
- Address the issue or problem at stake. At Spur, we try to consult with our stakeholders (both participants and implementing partners) as much as possible to not only understand their needs, but also their wants.
- Share your insights from stakeholders with your team. Brainstorm around ways to offer the best learning experience that is both timely and tailored to stakeholders.
- Cross-check information with stakeholders to find common ground. Make this process as participatory as possible to make sure that your ideas are going in the right direction.
- Find a format that works best for your stakeholders (weekly, bi-weekly, monthly). Don't forget to consult them again.
- If working with external consultants, make sure the learning process (i.e, presentations, activities, handouts, etc.) are all suited to your stakeholders. Consider how, when, and where your stakeholders will access these resources.

- Make sure you have a plan B if things go sideways. What possible scenarios can you come up with to mitigate the risk?
- Don't forget to track your progress and the experience of participants. Consider consent agreements so that you can build your monitoring and communications material.

2. Manage online learning expectations

A common concern for online learning is identifying the best possible format of our learning opportunities (i.e., time frame, reading material, breakout discussions, etc).

Drop-out rates can be high with online events. Registrants need to be engaged ahead of time to increase their level of participation. One good practice we have found at Spur is to provide future learners with clear and direct information. For instance, when offering asynchronous learning material, we make sure to specify how much time it will require to review, read and digest the information prior to the live session. During our Data Collection Training, we made sure participants had at least a week to review all the information.

Some key elements to keep in mind :
- When conducting live sessions, make sure you provide participants with an agenda and expectations for the session. What do you want them to get out of this session?
- Provide participants a shared folder with all the reading material including presentations and recordings. This will help them reference information more easily.
- Remember the KIS rule (Keep It Simple). Provide user-friendly material that is easy to read and straight to the point.
- Make sure the learning material is downloadable and accessible. Some participants may have low bandwidth where large files may not be the best option for fast download.
- Try to avoid jargon in emails. Give participants clear instructions on what to do next. This will help to create an integrative and creative thinking approach to the material you are offering.
- While there is no true formula between asynchronous and synchronous sessions, we have found that having a mix of both formats worked well for our participants. Similarly, having training sessions spaced out over a two week period provides enough time for participants to reflect on the material provided while taking in consideration other external factors (i.e., family commitments, time zones, screen time etc)

3. Identify your IT capacity well in advance

Upgrading to an online learning experience starts with addressing IT capacity. At Spur Change, we quickly realized that without the logistical burden of in-person training (i.e., booking venue, catering, printing materials etc), distance learning provides ample opportunities balanced with the need to pivot to a new set of skills and technological considerations, in order to enhance the learning experience.

Nonetheless, as the old phrase goes "technology is just a tool and not the goal", here are some considerations to take into account:

- Make sure your technology is adaptable to your home / office internet connection and that of your learners. At Spur we have learned that not all participants have the same bandwidth, therefore we ought to be conscious which tech platforms are best for different users.
- Try to use third party tools that increase engagement to your learning experience. For instance, using polling platforms such as Mentimeter, Poll Everywhere, or Kahoot can be helpful to increase user friendly information.
- Identify a couple of members of your team who can assist you during a learning opportunity. Having an extra pair of hands is always good to make sure learners are supported throughout any webinar or training.
- Don't always rely on the technology. Try to mix it up with facilitation methods that increase human interaction with online participants. *Reflect on - if this was done in a physical environment, what would you do? How might you translate the same information online?*

Set up friendly reminders:

Certain online platforms such as Eventbrite or Mailchimp provide automatic reminders for your participants. At Spur, we found that sending tailored and friendly email reminders keeps participants engaged, rather than another "automatic message".

Some key practices to consider:
- Create personalized messages to your participants in a direct and friendly manner. This will help to connect right from the start.

- Set up reminders on days that work best for your audience. At Spur, we have identified that Tuesdays to Thursdays work best to send out messages rather than Fridays where it may just be a dead-end message.
- Recognizing participants' time is key. You can do this in multiple ways such as gathering information and expectations prior to any event (e.g., set up a pre-event survey). This will help to refer their expectations during the training and connect with their needs.

5. Facilitate small group discussions

At Spur, we have recognized that online group discussions can make a big difference during a learning opportunity. While we cannot chat with our neighbour over Zoom (like we used to do in physical gatherings), it is important to consider how you can facilitate a breakout room in a way that makes participants feel welcome and safe to share their experiences.

As one participant said, "there is nothing more uncomfortable than joining a breakout room without a clear set of instructions". Here are some our own key learnings:
- If you cannot host/facilitate a breakout session, provide participants with a clear set of instructions prior to entering the breakout room. A good suggestion is to identify a volunteer facilitator ahead of time.
- If you can facilitate a group discussion, start by re-introducing yourself and your role as facilitator. At Spur we noticed this helps to keep track of time while being conscious of maintaining a safe space.
- Have a participant volunteer to take notes and then debrief once back in the main room. Volunteers are key because they can provide insights from the discussion while making sure the process is as inclusive and participatory as possible.
- Assume an inquiry-based approach when dead silence arrives. Try to pose questions to clarify thoughts or bring new ideas into the discussion.
- Make sure to take into account at least 3-5 minutes of dead time for people to settle in at the beginning of any breakout discussion. Try to refrain from limiting introductions to less than 5 minutes. That will never work.
- Do not overload the breakout session with additional presentations. We learned through our events that these are spaces for dialogue and sharing - not another powerpoint slide (if using a slideshow, then keep it minimal).
- Make sure there is enough time for a presentation, discussion and Q&A if you have a break-out room presenter.

6. Build safe spaces and strong relationships

Building a safe space requires a clear set of housekeeping rules or 'operational guidelines' on *what is the space about* and *why it is important*. By focusing on creating a safe environment, learners feel comfortable and welcome, which is especially important in online learning settings.

At Spur, we understood very early in the process that building an online space where others can connect and build upon each other's practice takes time. Therefore some key practices in developing such a space of reflection, observation and action include:

- During any live sessions, start by providing a Land Acknowledgement and invite participants to share where they are located. While physical gatherings allowed us to acknowledge the land we may have been situated on, online spaces require us to go broader and hear different regional and traditional locations.
- Add a Housekeeping slide that outlines how the event will take place. Examples may include "Please mute yourself while you're not speaking" , "Use the chat function to share your comments"
- Provide a warm "welcome back" and recognition for participants coming back to a new session. This helps not only track attendance but help build stronger ties. Moreover, this process has also encouraged participants to chat and network with one another.
- Through the creation of shared documents, we invited participants to add their thoughts/comments throughout the span of the training. For instance, at the start of a new session we circulated a participant list so that they can provide consent. Similarly, throughout the sessions we shared a "share a resource" document to track resources and later make it available for all.
- Try to invite participants to similar upcoming events at the end of your presentation.

7. Foster a peer-to-peer (P2P) environment

One key element that has differentiated our programs from others is the peer-to-peer learning structure. P2P learning is understood as learning from each other in informal ways with an emphasis on the collaborative part of the learning process. At Spur Change, we have been able to cultivate a peer-to-peer learning environment by hosting small group discussions, inviting

participants to share real-life examples or practices, and creating tailored content that meets their needs.

At Spur, our rule of thumb is to host three different activities where learners can have multiple reflections and interact in various ways. Using this model, SMOs not only learn from each other, but also reflect how their roles are shifting in their own project/program.

Key learnings to consider include:
- Try to invite an 'expert-matter' facilitator that not only provides insight into a specific topic, but also opens up the room for reflection to participants through peer-to-peer dialogues and knowledge sharing. Facilitators should leave room for dialogue rather than bombarding participants with information.
- Invite organizations to share their real-life experiences. We have seen this helps both to remove the "expert-hat" but also to increase the opportunity for knowledge sharing and solidarity.
- Group reflection activities have also been successful to apply new concepts or practices into participants' projects/programs. For instance, during our training sessions, an inquiry-based approach with future scenarios can help participants validate information in a rapid and real-time format (i.e., no need for funding or extra resources).
- Provide a wide range of learning material in different formats (i.e, pdfs, videos, documents, PPT, etc). This can help retain learner's motivation and engagement. By offering shared documents, participants feel more empowered to use and take ownership of the information. Make sure any resource is converted to the smallest file size possible to ease downloading.

8. Provide ongoing support

One of the most challenging aspects of online learning is providing ongoing support to our learners. Identifying the right formula to accommodate learners' future needs is the big quest, apart from providing post-event surveys. Some participants are very engaged, while others are ready to move on to their next activity.

Our role as learning providers is to ensure that our content, technology, and overall outcomes are accessible and sustainable and participants can decide what engagement works best for their needs post-event. Some of our key practices include:

- Make sure that information is accessible both online and in-print. Providing learners with various media formats (i.e., pdf, video, web-based) allows them to reference information, share with their peers or inquire further directly. [(See an example of our Risk Analysis Training)](#)
- If you are hosting bilingual sessions, make sure it is accessible to all participants. For us at Spur, we ensure to facilitate sessions in English as well as in French. Therefore we make sure that 1) all of our material is in both languages, 2) we work with interpreters who can be available through live interpretation or 3) host sessions separately so that content is more aligned with the anglophone / francophone audience.
- Accommodate participants in different time zones. Be cognizant of what's too early or too late and make sure to value their participation.
- Consider knowledge transfer in between sessions. For instance, invite learners to continue sharing their thoughts after a learning opportunity has ended. This can result in higher-caliber presentations (e.g. recaps or shared resource documents).
- Identify a formula that works best for your learners so that they continue to feel supported. At Spur Change, we have been experimenting with a wide range of follow-up formats from 1on1 to group based. formats.
- Adapt training materials for participants with special needs. Try to send file formats that are easy to read such as visually or hearing impaired. One key practice we found at Spur is to have a one-on-one conversation with participants in order to gain insights as to the tools and formats they are using.

Written by Nicolás Peña
Spur Change Learning Content Coordinator
December, 2020

To find out more about Spur Change programming or our annual conference visit:
https://icn-rcc.ca/en/spurchange/

To find resources visit our Resource Library: https://spurchangeresource.ca/en/