TIPS TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL LEARNING

This Tip Sheet discusses how to leverage platform features and learning techniques to increase participant engagement in training activities. It is intended for those who coordinate or lead trainings, workshops, consultations, webinars, or other virtual learning activities.

Get a Head Start Before Training Begins

Test out any features like break-out rooms, polls, etc., to ensure fluency in using those tools when the time comes. If you will be sharing content, ensure settings are set up to support this (e.g., check "share audio" if you will be sharing videos with sound). Now is also the time to set up breakout room invitations if you want to intentionally partner attendees. Breakout rooms can be established in the moment during a training, but there are several factors that should be considered, such as the number of breakout groups and number of members per group that will best fit the activities, duration of the breakout groups, and whether to manually or automatically recall participants back to the main room. Even a short email to participants expressing enthusiasm may help set the stage for a successful and engaging training. Holding a test call to practice these features will ensure that they run smoothly during the event.

Designate a support person to be present during the training. This individual can help with initial start-up, address tech-related questions that may arise, provide participants with guidance on what to do if they get disconnected, and monitor any tech difficulties throughout the training.

Start activities to increase engagement weeks **before** the training even begins. For example, you can hold brief informational webinars about the training structure and goals or disseminate materials for participants to review prior to the training via email or through a website. This can allow you to address questions that could take away from training time, and/or derail the intended goals of the training. Participants can also be asked to complete a brief assignment or task as part of registration for the training, such as identifying the top three goals they have for the training activity or completing a pre-training evaluation.

Send participants information on what software and hardware they may need for the training, such as reliable internet, a computer with a microphone and camera, headset to ensure sound quality, a private, quiet place for the duration. Remind participants that they should be in a safe location that is free from distractions, and not try to participate while driving.

Set expectations for the training: Will you require cameras to be on? Will there be attendance checks? How will the chat be managed (in real time, at breaks, someone assigned to keep an eye on it)? Will you be recording the training? Recording all virtual trainings is a good idea, even if the expectation is that all participation happens live/synchronously. Issues with technology and connectivity may prevent people from being present for the whole training. Having a recording can help fill in the blanks.

Tech Check

At least 30 minutes before the training begins, open the remote videoconference platform that will be used for the training (e.g., Zoom, Teams, Webex, etc) to provide participants the opportunity to check their computer set up. This includes checks for sound (input and output) and camera/video capabilities. Opportunities to address potential technology challenges or barriers to accessing resources ahead of the meetings not only allow participants to feel prepared, but also helps to reduce time spent problem solving and reviewing instructions during the actual training.

If digital apps, add-ins or other tools will be used during the meeting or training, this is a good time to inform participants and provide instructions on how to access and implement them. This offers learners a space to become familiar with any digital tools prior to the start of training and helps them know what to expect, what level of interaction there will be, and how to fully engage. There are a number of digital tools you can use to enhance your training experience and improve functionality and interaction. Some of these are third party (e.g., *jamboard* or *padlet* for brainstorming; *mentimeter* for polling and quizzes), and some are integrated into the training platform (e.g., whiteboard and annotation, chat, polling, breakout rooms). It is important to ensure that learners are familiar with how to use them and to work out any technical challenges before the training begins. Remember, while most of these digital tools are free or are built into the different platforms, some require that the learners and/or the host(s) download an app or change platform settings prior to the onset of training.

Attend to Accessibility Needs of Participants

Visual or auditory accessibility may be an issue for some participants. Be sure to ask about any accessibility needs in your initial training invitations so that you have time to prepare for any accommodations or specific needs that learners may have.

Most programs used in virtual learning, such as PowerPoint, allow ways to increase accessibility. Some suggestions:

- Label any graphics, tables, or charts with "alt text" to help individuals with visual limitations understand what is important in the slides.
- Create unique titles for each slide.
- Ensure there is a strong contrast between the color of the text and background.
- Use clear, simple fonts, and be aware that not all type fonts are compliant with accessibility rules. Some common fonts that are compatible include Times New

Roman, Helvetica, Calibri, Tahoma, Arial, and Verdana.
- Keep tables simple and include clear column and row headers.

These small components make a difference in how some learners interact with your content and may determine how well they engage. Also, many videoconferencing packages have an automated live-captioning feature, though this may not be perfect for your participants. Depending on the size and composition of the audience and their needs, you may need to include funds in your budget that would allow for live captioning or a live interpreter.

Getting Things Started

For longer training activities, such as a full day or multi-day workshop, beginning with a brief interactive activity can help participants get to know one another and feel more comfortable. Take a few minutes at the outset to have participants introduce themselves (if the group is small and time permits) or select another creative way to get things off the ground. For small groups, brief introductions may be possible and can include asking participants to share a 'fun fact,' favorite food, something they're currently reading, or preferred hobby. These activities can also be more professionally, rather than personally, focused. Some examples:

- What is the best advice you have been given about doing this work?
- What is the most significant challenge you face in your position?
- Share one strategy you have used to face a work challenge.
- What makes you feel most proud of your work?

For larger groups, take advantage of any features of the platform you are using, such as real time surveys or polls, or breakout rooms for small group icebreakers.

Keeping Participants Engaged

Engagement opportunities throughout the training help to keep participants tethered to the session and increase their abilities to stay connected and absorb information. For example, questions can be asked using platform specific features (e.g., the chat feature, polling) or external software tools (e.g., quiz apps) to check on participants' retention of the material or barriers to implementing the training content:

- On a scale of 1-10, how relevant is this content (training?) to the work you do?
- Raise your hand if you have experience with this.
- What are you excited to try with your own clients?
- What barriers do you anticipate when trying to implement this into your practice?
- Ask participants to state an opinion. When participants are asked to state an opinion, they become more invested in discussing it. So, consider asking a content-relevant either/or question, e.g., 'What is more essential to professional success: being organized or being creative?'

Be sure to wait for participants to respond – without the typical social cues available from in-person trainings, some people may take longer to chime in or share their thoughts. Making time for input lets participants know their consistent involvement is important and valued.

Also, when you're not sure of your audience's level of expertise, check in on participants' knowledge about a topic *before* the content is presented. Based on feedback, presenters can adjust the time spent on a topic and determine what level of detail needs to be provided.

If the audience is experienced on the topic, such as delivery of a certain treatment component, the discussion can instead focus on anticipated challenges to implementation. It can also be helpful to ask participants for their feedback on what information would be most helpful to them. Demonstrating that feedback matters can help learners engage for their own benefits.

Mix it up
Include an array of training modalities and activities to vary the learning experience for the audience. Exclusive use of slides will reduce engagement. For example, use video clips to support content or demonstrate a particular skill; have participants break into small groups (like Breakout Sessions discussed below); or have the presenter demonstrate a skill in front of the full group. Asking users to reflect on a question, provide take-aways from the day, or list topics which they'd like to explore further also helps participants feel like their involvement and contributions make an impact on the training.

Don't forget to use the *chat feature* – it helps participants remain connected throughout the training. It also allows the presenter to answer questions in real time and/or to delay if needed (e.g., if the question seems out of context and needs to be addressed during a break or at a different point in the training). It is also really helpful to have support staff (or second presenter) keep track of the chats and ensure that questions are answered.

Breakout Sessions
Breakout sessions provide a great opportunity for supporting collaborations and more intimate interactions between participants. However, they can also be awkward if participants do not engage, and/or use them as opportunities for a break. One way to minimize potential issues is to allow for a 10-minute break before moving into smaller groups. Additionally, be sure to set clear expectations for the Breakout Session activities. Consider assigning leaders and/or notetakers for each group and have trainers 'pop in' to observe and provide feedback. Once each breakout group returns, have each smaller group report out to the larger group based on their discussion or interaction. It will be helpful to let them know this ahead of time so that they can assign a person to conduct the report out.

Taking Breaks

Breaks are crucial to keeping engagement and minimizing "zoom fatigue." A rough rule of thumb is to plan for 10-minute breaks each hour and allow for *at least* 30 minutes for lunch. This can reduce the likelihood that participants will multi-task, since they know they will have the opportunity to respond to emails or make phone calls during the scheduled breaks.

During breaks, consider displaying a timer on the screen and playing relaxing music to cue participants about when they are expected to return to the session. When the session resumes, take a minute to check in with participants to get feedback on how the training is progressing. For example, questions can include: "What have you found to be most helpful so far?" or "What about this next section are you looking forward to learning about the most?".

Wrapping it up

End the training with some type of fun or inspirational activity. For example, share a video clip, tell a story that connects to the content of the training, or ask participants to share something they learned. And, as with all training activities, don't forget to get feedback by doing an evaluation (e.g., digital survey) as soon as possible after the training ends.

EQUIPTT is a national center dedicated to Enhancing Equity, QUality, and Impact of evidence-based Practices for Trauma using Technology. As a NCTSN Category 2 site, funded by SAMHSA, EQUIPTT offers consultation and mentorship to other sites interested in developing and/or revamping tech products, such as e-learning courses, podcasts, websites, webinars, and mobile apps. If your site is interested in further consultation about technology product development, please contact us via our website.