

WEBINARS

IN ADULT EDUCATION: A GUIDE



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Introduction

In the 21st century education has been transformed, from a means for increasing social mobility, to a priority and a major factor in determining social inequality. The transition to post-industrial societies and tracing the path to information¹ and knowledge² societies, has in effect turned education in the most praised resource. One issue that has often been emphasized in the past decades is the need for a more substantial relationship between the educational system and the labor market. In the knowledge-based society, with technology changing at a rapid pace, there is a growing necessity of continual development of the knowledge and skills of the workforce. This, in turn, has made lifelong learning, the commitment to formal and informal learning with the purpose of continuous development of knowledge and skills, a leading educational paradigm, placing a particular focus on the development of adult learning and distance learning.



¹ Information society refers to those societies which utilize advanced technology to transmit knowledge (Jarvis, 2007).

² Knowledge societies utilize knowledge as a major resource in the production of commodities and services (Ibid.).



Tracing a history of over 150 years, distance education was established with the main goal of providing equal educational opportunities for all members of society, particularly adults. Apart from the rather unjust perception of distance education as second best, it has constantly sought to improve the educational process through openness for technological innovations. From the first correspondence schools, to the emergence of open universities, up to the era of digital technology and online learning, distance education has persistently adhered to the needs of adult learners. In the age when learning is expected to continue well beyond the university degree, distance education has become a convenient necessity.

The 1970s marked a period of emergence of increasingly student-centered activities, with distance education gaining prominence due to its inherent inclination towards learning, rather than teaching focus. Independent work is more focused on the learning, rather than the teaching component of the educational process, and represents “a highly personalized process that converts newly acquired information into new insights and ideas” (Beadoin, 1990, p. 21). As adult education strives to incorporate and follow the fast paced societal and technological changes, new teaching and learning tools are emerging constantly, and the shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered educational process is not considered a novelty anymore. To the extent that the learning process is slowly transcending the classroom walls, new, more open and flexible learning environments appear on the horizon. Through its traditional openness towards technological innovation, distance learning “turned into e-learning, offering the advantage of de-localization and flexibility, allowing a departure from the ‘classroom paradigm’ and using the virtual space as a facilitator of knowledge and information exchange” (Mihai, 2014, p. 4). In turn, “traditional” educational institutions, universities, are slowly adapting to this paradigm shift which imposed re-invention of their purpose and a switch of focus from merely delivering instruction towards producing learning in student-centered environments (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). Teaching is not becoming obsolete, rather than it is being transformed with the instructional technology as a learning source, and the teacher increasingly playing the role of an intermediary between students and available resources (Beadoin, 1990).



The advantages from learning at one's own pace, relieved from the necessity of presence at a particular geographic location, provide innumerable opportunities for the use of flexible mix of teaching and learning methods. At the same time, the rapid improvements in information and communication technologies have facilitated the emergence of the most dominant form of distance learning today – online learning. Online learning, defined as “the use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructor, and other learners; and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience” (Khan as cited in Ally, 2004, pp. 4-5), has been evolving through different tools and methods and in every form – formal, non-formal and informal.



Online learning has been the driving factor of democratization of education, providing access to knowledge and training for adults from all around the globe. It has also played an important part in the popularization of the concept of lifelong learning, providing unprecedented opportunities for flexibility and personalization of learning in diverse social contexts. Starting with



asynchronous forms of learning, which simulate the type of interactivity from “traditional” distance learning programs, adult learners worldwide were given the tool to continue their professional development or retraining through learner-centered programs, where they can have full control of the time, pace and speed of progress of learning.

However, the flexibility provided by the self-paced learning process is somewhat outweighed by the lack of immediate feedback, which can gradually lead many distance learners into a feeling of isolation and a gradual decrease of motivation (Mihai, 2014). This is one of the main reasons for mass adoption and openness towards different synchronous tools in the recent years. Synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools play the role of a bridge between traditional classroom and e-learning, allowing participants in the educational process (both teachers and learners) to interact live.

The introduction of synchronous distance learning preceded the rise of the Internet – for decades, distance education institutions mobilized different tools to enable immediate interaction between educators and learners (video lectures, or lectures over the telephone). Nevertheless, the revolutionary possibilities for interaction and exchange over the Internet opened new opportunities for synchronous learning. The proliferation of personal computers and the availability of high speed Internet connections meant that a growing number of people could engage in learning over the Internet. This made available the introduction of synchronous CMC tools, which are mainly based on voice-over-internet protocol (VoIP), video conferencing and instant messaging, and so far provide unachievable opportunities for more direct and more quality interaction between the participants in the educational process.

Webinars, or seminars conducted over the Web, are one of the latest technological innovations in distance education. Born out of various elementary forms of videoconferencing, webinars today are powerful tools that facilitate online learning from multiple electronic devices. Since their emergence, webinars have been used for different purposes: from staff training, to ad hoc educational events, to webinar delivered (academic) courses. The later were inspiration for the The flexibility of the use of webinars presents numerous opportunities for both educators and



learners. Webinars can be organized and attended bypassing travel expenses and travel time; the only technical requirements for attending a webinar is having a personal computer or a smartphone and an Internet connection; and, most importantly, the webinar experience integrates asynchronous and synchronous methods of learning. The relevance of integration of asynchronous and synchronous interactions lies in the provision of different types of learning and engagement of learners during the educational process.

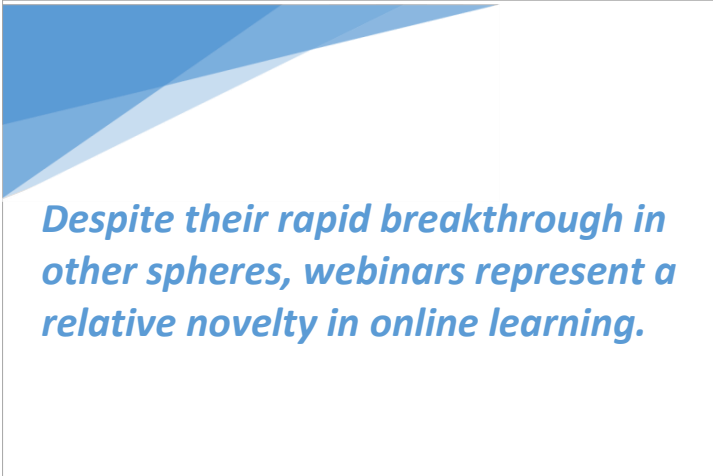
Hrastinski (2008) suggests that the immediacy of interaction provided by synchronous communication tools makes learners more committed and motivated to provide feedback. In asynchronous communication, the receiver has more time to process and comprehend the information. Therefore, asynchronous and synchronous e-learning are more complementary than mutually exclusive. He concludes that “the combination of these two types of e-learning supports several ways for learners and teachers to exchange information, collaborate on work, and get to know each other” (Hrastinski, 2008, p. 55).

This exploration of the wide range of uses of webinars in adult education will be the focus of this guide. The following chapters will provide an overview of the emerging opportunities webinars introduce in adult education; the quality of learning compared to the traditional classroom education; overview of different types of webinars according to the learning goals and outcomes; the levels and types of interactivity and engagement provided by different webinar tools; possibilities for complementarity with asynchronous CMC tools; as well as strategies for organization and deliverance of successful webinars.



Webinars: A General Overview

A webinar is an online tool for computer-mediated communication. The term itself is a contraction of the terms “web” and “seminar”. The term webinar was coined in 1998 by Eric R. Kolb to describe the online meeting service developed by his company. The technological advancements throughout the years have transformed webinars from basic videoconferencing software into a powerful educational tool, easily accessible from any portable device through the Internet. Due to the possibility to cut costs on traveling and accommodation, webinars were quickly adopted by the business community, becoming an indispensable tool for various purposes: from on-line meetings, contact with customers and sales, to training of employees.



Despite their rapid breakthrough in other spheres, webinars represent a relative novelty in online learning.

Despite their rapid breakthrough in other spheres, webinars represent a relative novelty in online learning. The educational sphere which has always been disinclined concerning the adoption of technological novelties, has only recently started to take a more serious interest in synchronous tools for distance learning, such as webinars. The reasons for this reluctance are multiple: from the traditionally underestimating stance towards distance education, to its hesitancy regarding new concepts in learning (student-centered approach). Therefore, there is little research on the use of webinars in education and further efforts are needed in the research of webinar-related pedagogies.

The development of webinars has evolved through various stages, and the attempts to make a precise distinction between webinars and other forms of CMC, such as webcasts, MOOCs, or web-conferencing are very fluid, due to the overlapping of functions and possibilities all of these



tools offer. Thus, the concept of a webinar is quite general and encompasses multiple features and possibilities this CMC tool provides, however, a single definition does not (and cannot) refer to the numerous possibilities for the use of this technology, which educational providers utilize and adapt in various ways to suit their needs. Nevertheless, there are certain characteristics and common uses that apply to the term webinar (Zieliński, et al., 2013, p. 7):

- “On-line environment;
- Use of software;
 - o Webinar providers require specific software;
 - o Participants must have Internet access;
- Live event (scheduled at a precise time);
- Participation by invitation only;
- Limited duration of 1-2 hours for presentation of content (using audio, video, sharing screen, PowerPoint presentations, etc.);
- Interaction with participants (audio, chat, quizzes, surveys, whiteboard, “hands up” button, etc.);
- Partial anonymity of participants;
- Giving authorizations: the person running the webinar may give different authorizations to the participants (e.g. make them presenters). It gives the participants more options (e.g. screen sharing, file sharing, etc.).”

Webinars are mostly delivered live, but they can be recorded and delivered “on demand”, providing flexibility to the learner as an asynchronous CMC tool. Furthermore, many webinar providers opt for a “blended learning” version webinars, combining online synchronous learning with asynchronous support (emailing, streaming of “on demand” webinars, downloadable



supplementary learning materials, etc.). Distance learners can have unlimited access to the educational content, and have immediate feedback from the educators. Furthermore, the possibility for synchronous interaction provides the educators with a better insight regarding the motivation, interests, as well as learning difficulties of the learners, and thus provide them with adequate support during the learning process.

Due to this, webinars are very convenient tool for educational purposes, especially in distance learning, successfully bridging the spatial gap between the educator and the learners. Not only they reduce the overall costs of distance learning, online forms of learning, particularly synchronous tools such as webinars, help in achieving a more quality interaction between the educators and the learners. Although distance education has slowly started to embrace online synchronous learning technologies, one segment has been particularly stagnant, especially in its formal type – adult education.



Webinars in Adult Education



Adult education, especially in the form of distance learning, has become the educational sector with the fastest growth in recent years. Today, online learning and training takes a range of forms, with the most widely used and studied being asynchronous training, where course materials are uploaded to a website or intranet which participants can access at any time and have control of the pace and progress of learning. This type of training includes discussion boards, surveys, quizzes, questionnaires, video clips and readings (Yates, 2014, p. 246). From different programs for asynchronous distance learning in formal education, to attending a webinar lecture on a smartphone device, adults today are provided with tremendous opportunities for personal and professional development. Nonetheless, webinars have been introduced as a tool for adult learning relatively recently, mainly due to the lag of institutions of formal education concerning their openness towards technological and pedagogical innovations in the educational process. Despite the rather timid introduction of webinars in adult education, they are a tool that is



gaining large popularity fast, due to their multiple advantages, which slowly outperform other means of synchronous learning:

1. Lifting logistical and other expenses: since webinars are delivered to geographically dispersed audiences, the travel expenses and time lost travelling are no longer a problem for both educators and learners. Webinars can be delivered and attended from the comfort of one's home or office. Additionally, the fees for attending webinars are usually much lower than other training options, and there are many webinars which do not charge a fee. Furthermore, multiple participants can enroll in a webinar at a single location paying only for one connection, thus additionally lowering the costs for this type of learning. Cost reduction usually refers to the following aspects (Wang & Hsu, 2008, p. 177):
 - a. time commitment required by the trainees;
 - b. travel and accommodation;
 - c. training materials;
 - d. evaluation of training;
 - e. post-training materials preparation.
2. Webinars are convenient: the majority of webinar providers take into account the everyday load and obligations of adult learners. Most webinars are delivered at a time which is convenient for learners with a job, and the short duration of the webinar session compared to traditional courses makes them appealing for adults that would not otherwise have the time and motivation to engage in learning;
3. Efficiency: since most webinar sessions last from 60-90 minutes they are very convenient learning tool for busy professionals, which prefer a lot of information packed into a short time;



4. Lasting value: the possibility to record webinars and to access the content and related materials later means that participants can review the presentation multiple times, and revisit the materials for reference as much as they need, thus enhancing the effectiveness of the webinar learning experience;
5. Easiness of use: the process of registering and attending a webinar is fairly straightforward, requiring only the use of Internet through a standard Internet browser, while the use of most webinar software requires no specific computer skills. Therefore, webinars are a useful learning tool even to less computer proficient users;
6. Complementary to other forms of education: webinars can be easily adapted into blended learning programmes, complementary of the standard face-to-face classes. In addition, webinars can be used as a tool for effective management of the discrepancies in learning performance among students. Educators today can design and create “custom made” webinars to assist students with specific needs or encounter specific learning difficulties, and thus to help them keep up with the general course work (Jozwiak, 2014). These webinars can be focused on some aspects of the course, which has been proven to pose difficulties to learners, or to provide classes for advanced students i.e. webinars which address and seek to develop their specific interests in a field.

The abovementioned advantages of using webinars in educational purposes are providing adult education with new perspectives and broaden the scope of its possibilities. Although continuous development and learning have become the imperative of contemporary society, adult education has until relatively recently been on the margins. In this context webinars bring adult education to new audiences, and play an important role in continuous education. The following subchapters will explore the benefits of the use of webinars in adult education.



Webinars: The Optimal Tool for Adult Learners

The novelty new technological innovations bring in the changing educational paradigm is related to the removing of learning from the classroom and the re-definition of education provider. Education is no longer the sole responsibility of schools, and experts in different fields are now equipped with numerous possibilities to share their knowledge.

Although the general profile of webinar audience are highly educated individuals, which are mostly driven by the motivation for professional development and career advancement, the accessibility and straightforwardness of webinars means that their audiences can be expanded to include people which were previously in a disadvantaged position in terms of access to education and training: individuals living in remote locations, marginalized individuals, people with disabilities, the unemployed, stay at home mothers, individuals overloaded with professional and personal commitments. With webinars, learners can choose the time and pace of learning, with the possibility for direct interaction with the educator.

Webinars can act as a bridge for reducing the discrepancies in educational possibilities for learners worldwide. A webinar can be attended by learners from all around the globe, which are able to interact and exchange knowledge and experiences with each other and the lecturer. Individuals which have been left out from the job market for a prolonged period of time are quickly faced with the grim reality of obsolete skills and outdated knowledge. Webinars can provide them with the possibility to upgrade their skills, or even of retraining, at a cost that will



not exhaust their already fragile domestic budgets. Furthermore, the possibility of contacts and cooperation with peers, or individuals with similar interests and occupations can be beneficial in their quest for a job. Webinars, as a low-cost means of education and training, can provide support to unemployed adults in a variety of ways: webinars remove all the costs related to spatial distance and travelling, which are a burden to many unemployed people; second, there are many organizations that provide webinars at little or no cost for the participants; this type of training and education helps maintain a pro-active stance in the process of getting a job. Many individuals who are unemployed could benefit greatly from the possibility to upgrade their knowledge and skills at low or no cost at all. The processes of retraining could be more effectively supported through the use of webinars.

Adult learners represent a specific type of students, due to their position in society. Generally speaking, most adult learners are participating fully in their communities: they have created families, they have job(s) and multiple other responsibilities that can prevent them from committing to an education program. Stay at home mothers, or individuals that are working can find going back to school

WEBINARS IN STAFF TRAINING

A growing number of companies in Malaysia are turning towards Webinar in their staff training to reduce the cost of training and to provide employees with greater access to instruction. Aside from cost-efficiency, organizations prefer Webinar training to increase employee retention, develop, deploy and update courses rapidly, provide effective trainings that are available anytime and anywhere, boost worker productivity, broaden training opportunities, stay competitive, improve motivation and morale, and implement strategic initiatives. With the development of webinar technology, Malaysian firms hope to gain benefit from this trend. The shift from the traditional method of training using face to face to the Webinar training is a good opportunity for companies to improve the skills of their employees and to meet the demand of life-long learning (Malik, Naufal Umar, Salbani Moghni, & Ahmad Jaafar Wan Yahaya, 2015, pp. 1759-1760).



overburdening and demotivating. The flexibility of webinars can be beneficial here as well. Namely, learning can be scheduled or deferred to fully suit the needs of the learner.

Webinars are an excellent tool for people with disabilities, whose attendance of traditional education courses can be hindered. They can attend the webinar from the comfort of their home. Furthermore, associations of people with disabilities can develop webinars that are best suited for the needs of the specific group. Victims of discrimination and marginalization can ease their integration in society with this type of learning that provides them equality to all other participants in the educational process.

Effectiveness of Learning through Webinars

The main advantage of webinars compared to other forms of asynchronous and synchronous learning tools is the immediacy and quality of interaction which is assured through different tools that are suited according to the diverse preferences of adult learners: video and audio contact, chat messaging, the polling tool, the whiteboard, etc. Furthermore, an additional advantage is the possibility to transform the webinar into both synchronous and asynchronous learning tool. This is important since the nature of interaction and the type of instructor support required by asynchronous and synchronous learning environments are different; and the use of synchronous conferencing techniques has unique benefits in education. Firstly, real-time interaction allows simulation of a real classroom learning situation and immediate interactive clarification of meaning. Furthermore, synchronous conferencing through the Internet offers participants a “feeling of immediate contact, motivation, and even some fun, which is especially valuable for distance learners” (Ng, 2007, p. 1).

On the other hand, Johnson (2006, p. 51) highlights that “asynchronous discussion facilitates student learning and higher-level thinking skills, perhaps due to the cognitive processing required



in writing, time to reflect upon posted messages and consider written responses, and the public and permanent nature of online postings. Structured and mandated asynchronous discussion is associated with better cognitive outcomes than non-structured and optional discussion.” The possibility to interact synchronously (through videoconferencing, chat, sharing of content, polling) and asynchronously (streaming a recorded webinar, re-viewing interesting or missed parts, provision of additional materials, continuous contact with the lecturer through e-mails, etc.) is what makes webinars the optimal tool for adult learners.



One important characteristic of webinars is the fact that the term applies to wide varieties of online lecturing, which are modified and specified according to the particular needs and preferences of the lecturer and the target audience. The most typical webinar formats (presented in Table 1) give us insight in the enormous possibilities for personalization and adaptation



webinar tools provide. To this end, webinars are suited to fit a variety of needs of adult learners, and to deliver information and training in ways that maximize the effects of the learning process.

Table 1. Popular webinar formats (Source: Peters & Griffiths, 2012).

	DESCRIPTION	PROS	CONS
One Speaker	A single presenter speaks, demonstrates, and answers questions from the audience.	Fewer people to coordinate and train on the Webinar tool.	A lone presenter is more likely to become the authority at the "front of the room," which might make some in the audience reluctant to participate and ask questions.
Interview Style	Interviewer asks a set of predetermined questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More engaging to hear multiple voices.• The fact that the interviewer is asking questions of the expert(s) often encourages the audience to do the same.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More people to train and coordinate.• Scheduling the run-through and the actual webinar may be more difficult.
Moderated Panel Discussion	Multiple people on the line at the same time, with a moderator facilitating the discussion.	Offers a variety of voices and perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More people to train and coordinate.• Scheduling the run-through and the actual webinar may be more difficult.• Can be challenging to keep panelists from talking over each other.
Interactive	Audience members participate fully via instructor-led exercises and facilitated conversations.	If done well, participants receive a deeper understanding of the topic because they're fully engaged in the dialog and the exercises.	Can only accommodate a small group. Requires a very skilled, experienced teacher/facilitator.



Quality of Learning: Webinars Vs. Traditional Classroom

Many new technological tools are being used without prior examination of their educational merits. It is very common that teaching methods developed for the traditional classroom learning environment are being merely transposed in distance learning environments, without strategy in adopting and using the emerging tools prevents them from reaching their full potential and determines both teachers and students to prematurely label them as insufficient or inadequate for the educational purpose” (Mihai, 2014, p. 5).

Additionally, multiple studies have been centered on the effectiveness of online learning versus the traditional classroom. One of the main focuses of these research has been the level and quality of interaction facilitated in these different settings. One of the reasons for this is that interaction has long been a defining and critical component of the educational process, and as such has always presented problems for distance education – starting from its most rudimentary, independent study format. In this context, the effectiveness of the interactivity on the overall learning effectiveness, however, is influenced by a range of diverse and complex factors (Ng, 2007).

One of the crucial factors that arises when comparing classroom education and online learning is distance. In this context, “distance” can be explained using the concept of “immediacy.” Immediacy primarily refers to the verbal and nonverbal behaviors used by instructors to reduce psychological distance between students and instructors (Park & Bonk, 2007, p. 308). In a traditional classroom, nonverbal immediacy is perceived as physical cues such as facial expressions, gestures, body position, smiling, eye contact, whereas verbal immediacy refers to addressing students by name, using personal examples and humor, providing and inviting feedback, encouraging students to participate etc. There is consensus among researchers that both nonverbal and verbal immediacy have a positive influence on student motivation and cognitive and affective learning (Park & Bonk, 2007).



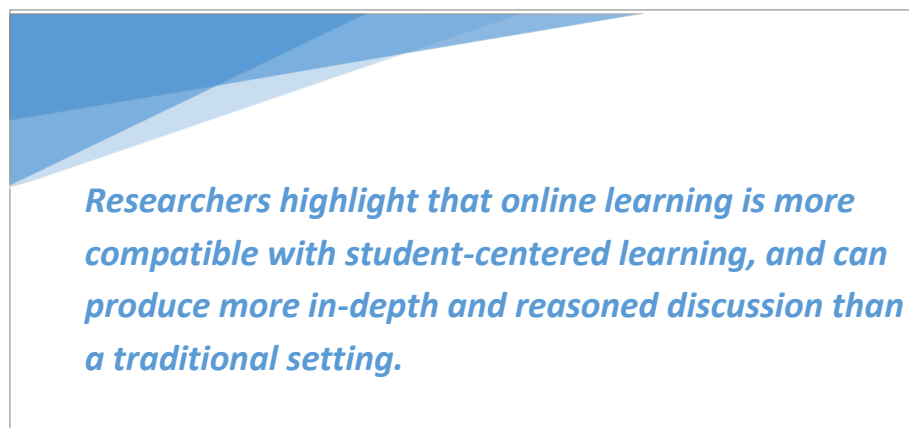
The lack of face-to-face collaboration in distance education has contributed to its focus on a more student-centered approach, which imposes a rather different role of teachers/lecturers in the educational process. This is one of the major contributors concerning the neglecting and resistance towards distance education on behalf of traditional educational institutions. The major shift from the European model of “the teacher as the exclusive source of information to learners who become more active participants in the process” (Beadoin, 1990, p. 21), presents challenges for teachers/lecturers, whose professional identities are bound to the traditional image of the teacher in the center of the educational process.

Due to the physical distance factor, distance education has often been criticized as a type of education that fosters dependence rather than nurture of critical thinking, that distance education is rigidly prescriptive, impersonal, with minimal need of faculty and lack of quality control mechanisms. The opponents of this view assert that students which study independently, but receive periodic contact with supervisors, as well as adequate feedback and evaluations, are “far more likely to feel a bond with their institution than is the student commuting to a campus one or two evenings a week, sitting anonymously in a classroom of 40 to 50 students where interaction with the teacher is limited despite their physical proximity to one another” (Beadoin, 1990, p. 22). Carefully designed and delivered distance education, consequently, can facilitate promotion of autonomy and self-directed approaches to learning.

Interaction has long been considered to play a crucial role in learning. Vygotsky suggests that learning takes place in a social context, with students learning from each other as well as from the educator. Another perspective, a social cognitive view of learning supports the idea that learning takes place by students confronting their peers’ views and ideas which may be different from their own. The theory of social modelling suggests that learning is co-constructed, by students building on each other’s ideas. Therefore, it is very important to examine the levels and quality of interactivity in a virtual learning environment. Sims (2003) argues that the success of online learning depends in part on the preparedness of learners to take a more active role, and

Ritchie and Newby (as cited in Yates, 2014, p. 246) conclude that “high levels of interaction online lead to better performance and a more positive attitude”.

The challenges related to establishing and maintaining quality and meaningful interaction target both educators and students. Differently from the conditions and roles in the



traditional classroom, where the teacher/lecturer’s role is to remain concentrated on delivering of educational content, in the virtual environment teachers are expected to fulfill many more roles which are equally important and necessary for the overall success of the learning experience (Ng, 2007). One of the most common mistakes made by lecturers in the design of an online lecture is related to the adhering to the same approach and structure of the lecture as in traditional classroom. These challenges are related to the very nature of the medium, implying the “lack of nonverbal communication and the high level of anonymity (students are reduced to a list of names and sometimes a webcam image), while others are linked to the teaching methods that can or cannot be used successfully in the virtual environment” (Mihai, 2014, p. 10). Synchronous e-learning also presents a few challenges. Firstly, it cannot replace face-to-face communication due to the lack of non-verbal communication capabilities, which are not unimportant in the educational setting.

A powerful advantage of the traditional classroom is the multi-sensory interactivity. This is reflected in verbal and non-verbal interaction between the lecturer and other learners, participation in face-to-face group discussions, the possibility to pose questions during the lecture. The possibility to ask a question, share an opinion or disagree with someone’s point of



view has always been considered a part of the fundamental learning activities (Ya Ni, 2013). With learners struggling to maintain their focus, the exchange of dialogue that constantly evolves in the classroom can help them stay engaged and retain knowledge. Another aspect deemed important by researchers is the sense of community developed in the classroom, the personal and professional relationships with peers and educators. Some forms of asynchronous online learning have high dropout rates mainly due to the lack of such interactivity, which then transfers into a sense of isolation and negatively impacts learners' motivation. Generally speaking, online learning requires certain adjustments by instructors as well as students in order to establish successful and effective interaction. Different evidence from a number of studies (e.g. Ng, 2004) indicate that some learners find online interaction less effective than in a traditional "bricks and mortar" setting, particularly in the cases when they do not have pre-existing relationships with fellow students.

On the other hand, some researchers that online learning is more compatible with student-centered learning, and can produce more in-depth and reasoned discussion than a traditional



setting. Although online learning can refer to diverse formats and types of education, some general conclusions can be made on the type of interactivity it provides. Ya Ni's summary of the



most prominent features of interaction in online classes and traditional classroom is presented in Table 2.

For instructors delivering an online course, tutoring can be done at any time and from any place. Course materials can be updated and modified online, and learners receive immediate notifications of the changes. With learners being able to access materials on the Internet, it is much easier for the educator to direct them to appropriate information based on their needs. Ally suggests that “if designed properly, online learning systems can be used to determine learners’ needs and current level of expertise, and to assign appropriate materials for learners to select from to achieve the desired learning outcomes” (Ally, 2004, p. 5). It has to be noted that some researchers oppose strongly to the idea that synchronous learning tools such as webinars act as a substitute for the classroom, since a number of them think that webinars facilitate even more dynamic interaction than in the traditional classroom.

Through a carefully planned online course learners are able to construct their own knowledge rather than straightforwardly accept all information provided by the instructor. Knowledge construction is fostered through good interactive online instruction, since the students are expected to show initiative to learn and to interact with other students and the instructor, and due to the fact that the learning agenda is controlled by the student. According to Ally, “in a traditional lecture, the instructor contextualizes and personalizes the information to meet their own needs, which may not be appropriate for all learners. In online instruction, learners experience the information first-hand, which gives them the opportunity to contextualize and personalize the information themselves” (Ally, 2004, p. 18). Many formal education institutions have made efforts to minimize the deficiencies of both formats by merging traditional and online education through blended learning, which gradually transformed into the middle ground adopted by the majority of educational institutions, playing the role minimizer of the feeling of isolation common for distance learners (Mihai, 2014) and the rigidity of brick-and-mortar education.



Table 2. Comparison of interaction between online and face-to-face settings (Source: Ya Ni, 2013, p. 202)

ONLINE		FACE-TO-FACE
Mode	Discussions through text only; Dense; permanent; limited; stark	Verbal discussions; a more common mode, but impermanent
Sense of Instructor Control	Less sense of instructor control; Easier for participants to ignore instructor	More people to train and coordinate. More sense of leadership from instructor; Not so easy to ignore instructor;
Discussion	Group contact continually maintained; Depth of analysis often increased; Discussion often stops for periods of time, then is picked up and restarted; Level of reflection is high; Able to escape conversation on basis of ongoing understandings and reflection	Little group contact between meetings; Analysis varies, dependent on time available; Discussions occur within a set of a time frame; Often little time for reflection between meetings; Conversations are less likely being shaped during meeting.
Group Dynamics	Less sense of anxiety; More equal participation; Less hierarchies; Dynamics are 'hidden' but traceable; No breaks, constantly in the meeting; Can be active listening without participation; Medium (technology) has an impact;	Anxiety at beginning/during meetings; Participation unequal; More chance of hierarchies; Dynamic evident but lost after the event; Breaks between meetings; Listening without participation may be frowned upon; Medium (room) may have less impact; Certain expectations about participation; Quicker, immediacy of interactions or discussions.



	Different expectation about participation; Slower, time delays in interactions or discussions.	
Rejoining	High psychological/emotional stress of rejoining	Stress of rejoining not so high
Feedback	Feedback on each individual's piece of work very detailed and focused; Whole group can see and read each other's feedback; Textual feedback only; No one can "hide" and not give feedback; Sometimes little discussion after feedback; Group looks at all participants' work at the same time.	Less likely to cover much detail, often more general discussion; Group hears feedback; Verbal/visual feedback; Possible to "free-ride" and avoid giving feedback; No permanent record of feedback; Immediate reactions to feedback possible; Usually some discussion after feedback, looking at wider issues; Group looks at one participant's work at a time.
Divergence/ Choice Level	Loose-bound nature encourages divergent talk and adventitious learning; Medium frees the sender but may restrict the other participants (receivers) by increasing their uncertainty.	More tightly bound, requiring adherence to accepted protocols; Uncertainty less likely due to common understandings about how to take part in discussions.

One of the disadvantages commonly experienced by learners through online methods is delayed feedback, especially when interactions mainly occur asynchronously. Students may become frustrated or demotivated when their questions are left unanswered for prolonged periods of



time and feedback on assignments is lagging. It is also important to note that in some cases it is more difficult to initiate and maintain interactivity through asynchronous learning. One possible explanation for the reduced interaction online is the way the technology is applied. Although the technology is designed to facilitate and stimulate considerable peer-to-peer and participant-to-tutor interaction, but in practice this interactive technology is not always used to its full potential (Yates, 2014, p. 247). Different online learning software facilitate a range of different kinds of interactions, such as polls, surveys and break-out rooms, but various research (Ng, 2007) found that teachers using the new software tend to stick to the traditional didactic lecture style of teaching, devoting only a quarter of the time to interactive activities online that they would in a comparable classroom setting.

One research (Yates, 2014), focused on the effectivity of webinars as substitute for traditional professional development courses and trainings, examined the differences in learning outcomes and experiences. According to the researchers, the examination of the quality of interaction established during synchronous online learning experiences strongly suggests that the participant–tutor interactions seem to be adequate, as good and occasionally superior to those found in a classroom setting (Yates, 2014). The respondents in the study reported that they had sufficient opportunities to get their point across to the tutor by asking questions or by giving comments and other feedback, and some respondents reported that webinars made it easier for them to get their point across and be ‘heard’ when given the opportunity to type their comments and questions than they do in the classroom (Yates, 2014).



Asynchronous Vs. Synchronous Online Learning

Compared to the time delayed interaction (e.g., discussion forum, Q&A forum), educators using synchronous online learning tools such as webinars indicate that real-time communication facilitates the development of a more interactive and meaningful engagement of learners during the discussions. To this end, Hrastinski (2008) suggests the existence of different types of participation depending on the nature of the interaction. He considers that synchronous communication is characterized by 'personal participation', as opposed to the 'cognitive participation' characteristic of asynchronous learning, which lack the immediate feedback but provides the learners with more time to reflect before contributing.

Other advantages of synchronous interaction benefiting students who work in different times and locations, which are highlighted by researchers is teacher immediacy and dynamic interaction. Webinars are important in this context, particularly since the "primary aim of implementing computer conferencing in adult learning is to overcome the problem of social distance between learners and teachers, not just geographical distance" (Park & Bonk, 2007, p. 308).

One of the most challenging aspects of synchronous online learning is that of the technology, which has been reported to impede learning. Some studies have repeatedly found that participants' experience of online learning is affected by unreliable technology. The crucial problem related to these challenges apart from the technology itself are the variable IT skills among participants, with some learners finding even basic combinations of functions such as microphones and PowerPoint slides confusing. A number of studies remind us that online learning, although widely accessible in some ways, relies on participants' IT skills, and that the variation in levels of participant IT skills may create barriers to learning (Yates, 2014, p. 247).

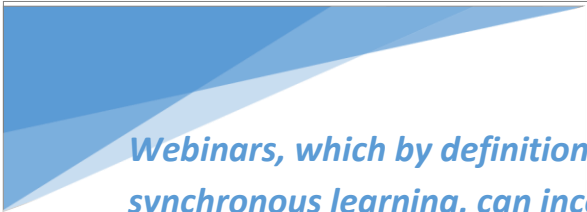
A thorough analysis of the different forms of online learning indicates that no single format, whether asynchronous or synchronous, can offer the ideal teaching and learning experience on



its own, each of these focuses on one or several distinctive aspects of the process. Hence, the optimal combination in the design online learning tools is a merging of various formats – asynchronous and synchronous – in order to provide a suitable learning structure for different learners, contexts and contents (Park and Bonk, 2007, p. 309). Webinars are a product of such an approach in designing online education.

Webinars: A Single Event or a Course?

The flexibility of webinars as learning tools means that webinars can adapt to any type of instruction, regardless of its specifics in terms of duration, specific learning goals, and amount of learning content. Educators can opt for one-off webinar event, or a series of webinars delivering learning content in a course-like manner. Needless to say, the two mentioned types are ideal types, with numerous variations throughout the spectrum, adaptable to the different needs and preferences of the participants in the process. Both types have their specificities which educators should consider carefully before making a



Webinars, which by definition are a tool for synchronous learning, can incorporate some strategies for asynchronous learning to enhance the learning effects among learners. These strategies have through the years become an essential part of the webinar experience.

final decision on the webinar format. Regardless whether learners are attending a short seminar on the latest developments in an area, or a training for acquiring more profound knowledge and skills, the educator should be well prepared to organize the content according to the selected format.



These two types of webinars also vary concerning the recommended number of participants, the type and intensity of interaction between the participants and the educator(s) (synchronous and asynchronous), and the level of involvement of participants in the learning process. The following subchapters will explore several the most basic characteristics of one-event webinars and webinar courses.

Webinar as a Single Event

Webinars as single events are much more common than webinar courses. This is mostly due to the fact that webinars are widely accepted by most entrepreneurs, marketing experts, and marketers which utilize them to bring short experiences, knowledge and motivation to a wide number of participants at once. Webinars as one-time events can be suitable for larger audiences. Since the content of the presentation is supposed to amuse and intrigue the audience, this type of webinar is more suitable for more experienced learners, both in the field of instruction, and with concern to the technological proficiency in use of webinar software. Large webinar events with audiences numbering in hundreds will create problems for participants which are using webinar software for the first time. Also, since the time for going into detailed description of the basics is very short, participants with poor knowledge of the topic of the webinar may face problems in following the presentation and productive participation. No lecturer can provide detailed explanations to one participant at a time, while the others are waiting for the continuation of the lecture.

However, webinars as one-time events can be very suitable for adults which want to update their knowledge with the latest trends in their profession, and do not have free time to study for a prolonged period of time. Dropout rates are very high among adult learners, due to the fact that many of them are already overburdened juggling between professional and personal obligations. To this end, periodic engagements with experts and colleagues in their field can



help fill the gap in their professional development.



Unlike course webinars, where the participants' input is more carefully acknowledged and evaluated, single-event webinars do not present major learning challenges for the participants, especially if they are proficient in webinar software. The lecturer may provide some supplementary course materials, but given the short duration of the learning session, mastering the content is left to the participants themselves, without making evaluations of their commitment to learning.

These types of webinars often have semi-educational purpose – apart from providing some insight into new areas of knowledge, many webinar organizers opt for this webinar format for marketing purposes, for example, presentation of a new product, or an upgraded version of an existing product. By organizing several one-time events (although this is a series of webinars, the content and presentation of each webinar are the same), the organizer can reach much wider audience and deliver a more effective presentation than a simple video commercial or tutorial.



The decision on whether one-time webinar is the right choice, should be based taking in account its characteristics:

- Recommended for individuals with **prior knowledge** in the topic: since the limited amount of disposable time prevents the lecturer to provide more extensive explanations on the topic discussed, it is preferable that one-off webinars are delivered to learners which have some prior knowledge of the subject matter. In this way, the lecturer can focus on the specific original points in the presentation, instead of constantly checking if everyone is able to follow the lecture.
- **Impersonal communication**: while there are no substantial differences in the use of communication tools and features between the one-off and the webinar course, the type of interaction realized is different, and is suited to the specific learning outcomes and limitations of the specific type of webinar. One-off webinars are a gathering place for people committed to a single learning session. The possibility for achieving a more personal interaction with lecturer, or with the other participants is very limited. This must not be treated as a disadvantage of the one-event webinar. Namely, participants which are shy or reluctant to express their opinions and/or dilemmas, could find the one-time event as a more relaxing surrounding, than interacting with the same group of people for several months, and knowing that their input in the course may be the subject of evaluation.
- They are suitable for **larger audiences**: since the degree of interaction between the participants and the lecturer is more impersonal, one-off webinars can receive several hundreds of participants. Any learning event, regardless of whether it is delivered online or in an auditorium, presents greater challenges for interaction as the number of participants increases. One event webinars can, thus, be one of the rare tools that can accommodate larger number of attendees and provide them with a more quality learning experience, facilitating interaction.



Webinar Course

Webinar courses refer to a series of webinars, structured in the form of a class, which are delivered regularly (2 to 3 games per week) over several months. Webinar courses are much less common, and are the preferred format of webinar use in formal education. In the recent years, the number of universities that have started with organization of MOOCs (a type of webinar format for distance learning) has rapidly increased, bringing for the first time high quality education into everyone's home.

Compared to one-time webinars, webinar courses are much more demanding for the participants, both in terms of their engagement in learning, and in terms of the objectives that ought to be achieved. These types of webinars are not suitable for large audiences, mainly due to the need for a greater quantity and quality of interaction realized among the participants and the lecturer. Course webinars differ from one event webinars in the learning objectives and outcomes, which are more precisely defined in the former than in the latter. Course webinars have precise objectives in terms of the skills and knowledge that have to be acquired by the participants, and include some form of evaluation of participants' individual performances. Furthermore, while webinars as one-off events are more rigorously structured in order to be able to communicate all key aspects that are foreseen to be covered, webinar courses have much more flexible structure, which is adaptable to the specific needs of the participants.

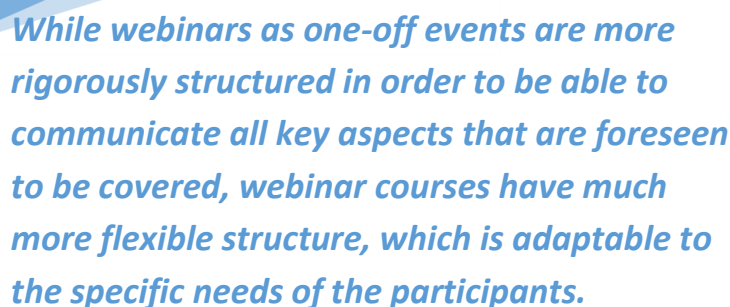
With the purpose of achieving the specific learning objectives, webinar courses rely on both synchronous and asynchronous interaction and learning. It is expected that the process of learning does not end with the webinar session, namely, webinar courses adhere to the "flipped classroom" model much more than to a traditional lecture. This means that learners often need to go through the course materials and familiarize themselves on the subject matter of the webinar session, while the session itself is more devoted to group work, problem solving, discussions and resolving of issues. Many educators expect that their learners to show up in the



webinar session relatively prepared for the topic of the “class.” Learners’ engagements are supplemented with homework, essays or other forms of off-line work, that is subjected to later evaluation. In this way, students can expect a more in-depth feedback on their learning progress from the educator, and further efforts can be devoted to help each learner achieve the overall learning objectives of the course.

Some educational institutions are making efforts to introduce webinar-based learning into formal education (the aforementioned MOOCs are one example of this practice) with the possibility of conducting an examination and awarding certificates that confirm the successful attainment of the course objectives.

However, these types of practices have a long way to develop, since there is no general consensus on the possibilities for formal recognition of these certificates, as well as on the



While webinars as one-off events are more rigorously structured in order to be able to communicate all key aspects that are foreseen to be covered, webinar courses have much more flexible structure, which is adaptable to the specific needs of the participants.

mechanisms for objective evaluation of the knowledge and skills of the learners.

Nevertheless, this type of online distance education can suit the needs of learners which do not have prior experience in webinar learning. They can gradually master the webinar software with the help of a moderator, and the recurring pattern of the webinar sessions provides them with enough time to get comfortable with the specific webinar tools and features. However, since participation in a webinar course is time consuming, both online and offline, this webinar format is not recommended for learners that want to substitute traditional courses in order to save on learning time. Participating in a webinar course can be just as demanding as a traditional course, except that it reduces the time and cost of travel. Furthermore, some experts suggest that online synchronous learning in small groups can facilitate better one-on-one interaction traditional classroom instruction.



The decision on whether to opt for a series of webinars should be based taking into account the characteristics of this webinar format:

- **Long term commitment:** participating in a webinar course often presupposes an obligation for participation, lasting from several weeks to several months. Learners which are reluctant to take part in traditional courses, should reconsider their decision to enroll in a webinar course, since webinar courses demand equal engagement from learners as traditional courses (online attendance of the webinar session, active participation in discussions, homework, papers, essays, examinations);
- Requires **supplementation with asynchronous forms of learning:** Due to the more ambitious learning objectives, the amount of learning material and its complexity, webinar courses are often supplemented with multiple asynchronous forms of learning (downloadable course materials, emailing, “on demand” webinar sessions) which are aimed at providing support to the learners in mastering the course material.
- Increased **quantity and quality of interaction:** many webinar courses provide some type of confirmation (often in the form of certificates) of the skills and knowledge the participants have attained. This imposes the existence of mechanisms for evaluation, as well as more quality interaction between the participants in the educational process. To this end, educators need to become better acquainted with their students’ performances, to evaluate their individual submissions, homework, essays, and engage in individual consultations with learners to help them overcome any problems with the course material;
- Suitable for **smaller groups:** due to the higher levels of interaction required, as well as the educator’s commitment to devote time and effort in working individually with the learners, webinar courses are more suitable for smaller groups, ranging from small groups of 3-4 participants, up to webinar courses for 15-20 participants, which is the upper limit of participants that can be provided with the essential characteristics of a webinar course.



The previous subchapters showed that the choice of a webinar format can have significant impact on the overall success of the learning process and outcomes. Educators should pay considerable attention on the nature of the learning material, the optimal number of participants, as well as make a decision on the expected learning objectives and outcomes.

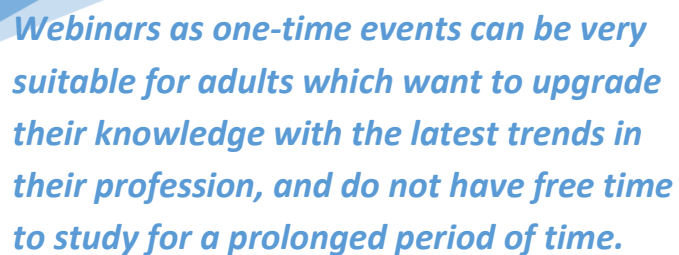
Nevertheless, the choice of a one webinar event or a webinar course will not determine the effectiveness of learning. The organization of a successful webinar (event or course) depends on a number of factors, and generally, the organization and deliverance of a successful webinar session is much more time and labor consuming than the organization of a traditional class. For inexperienced educators, the organization of a webinar may seem a daunting task. However experienced webinar organizers are not reluctant to share their experiences and positive practices. The following chapter presents some aspects that should be taken in consideration when delivering a webinar.



Webinars in Education: Strategies for Learning

There are many ways to use webinars in educational purposes. Educators turn to several popular approaches, each of which has its advantages and disadvantages. The following approaches are suitable for most educators, depending on their needs and desired learning outcomes. The three main types of webinars according to the type of learner engagement are: the didactic webinar, the engagement webinar, and the immersion webinar (Wachter, 2006).

The first type, the **didactic webinar**, is most similar to traditional face-to-face lectures. Thus, it resembles



Webinars as one-time events can be very suitable for adults which want to upgrade their knowledge with the latest trends in their profession, and do not have free time to study for a prolonged period of time.

the classroom approach where the lecturer presents the content in front of the “class” (the group of online learners). This is a much more teacher-centered approach than the other two strategies. This type of learning strategy is best employed in webinars with large number of participants, since the information flows one way, from the instructor to participant.

One of the main advantages this webinar has compared to face-to-face classroom learning refers to the possibility to simultaneously teach people at geographically distant locations. This type of webinar has a quite straightforward format, similar to classroom lectures, which means that the participants are familiar with the approach, and know what to expect from the lecture. When speaking of the disadvantages related to this type of webinar, the main is related to the low level use of features for engaging the participants in interaction. The lecturer, consequently, is never sure whether he has managed to capture the attention of the audience, or whether they are following his lecture. Therefore, it is considered that this type of approach does not lead to good retention on behalf of the participants.



The **engagement webinar** is a variation of the instructor-led training approach. This approach in webinar organizing implies more active participation from the attendees, since its main strategy is to involve participants in the process of learning (Wachter, 2006). Therefore, this type of webinar relies to a larger extent on the different webinar tools and features (text chat, Q&A, shared screen, temporary presenter capability, etc.) and provide far more opportunities for interaction between the lecturer and the participants (and between the participants as well) than the didactic webinar. This, of course, depends on the training objectives of the instructor, and the types of interaction he/she deems important for the learning process. This learning strategy is useful in smaller webinars, where all the participants can have the opportunity to engage in meaningful interaction and maximize the learning effectiveness. The type of interaction facilitated by the engagement webinar enables the participants to exchange ideas and thoughts with the lecturer, clarify points, ask questions or suggest alternative opinions.

In order to adequately engage the attendees in the learning process the lecturer can use polling, question-answer (Q&A) sessions, breakout rooms (collaboration between participants on a problem in a separate virtual room), chat, whiteboard, etc. The engagement webinar is excellent strategy for educators that want to maintain control of the learning process through continuous collaboration with the attendees. However, as in any type of engagement or interaction, the webinar session can spiral out of control if the lecturer cannot establish some ground rules for communication and make sure that the attendees adhere to these rules. Inappropriate questions may occur, or private chats between the participants that distract other participants. If the lecturer is not experienced in managing this type of webinar practice with smaller groups is recommended. On the other hand, the engaging webinar can have a tremendous potential as an education tool that can capture the attention of the learner and transform learning into a vibrant and collaborative experience.

The third learning strategy is presented in the **immersion webinar**, which is different from the didactic and the engagement webinars in that it completely involves the learner. With this type of webinar, the lecturer is more of a mentor than a mere presenter of information, like in the



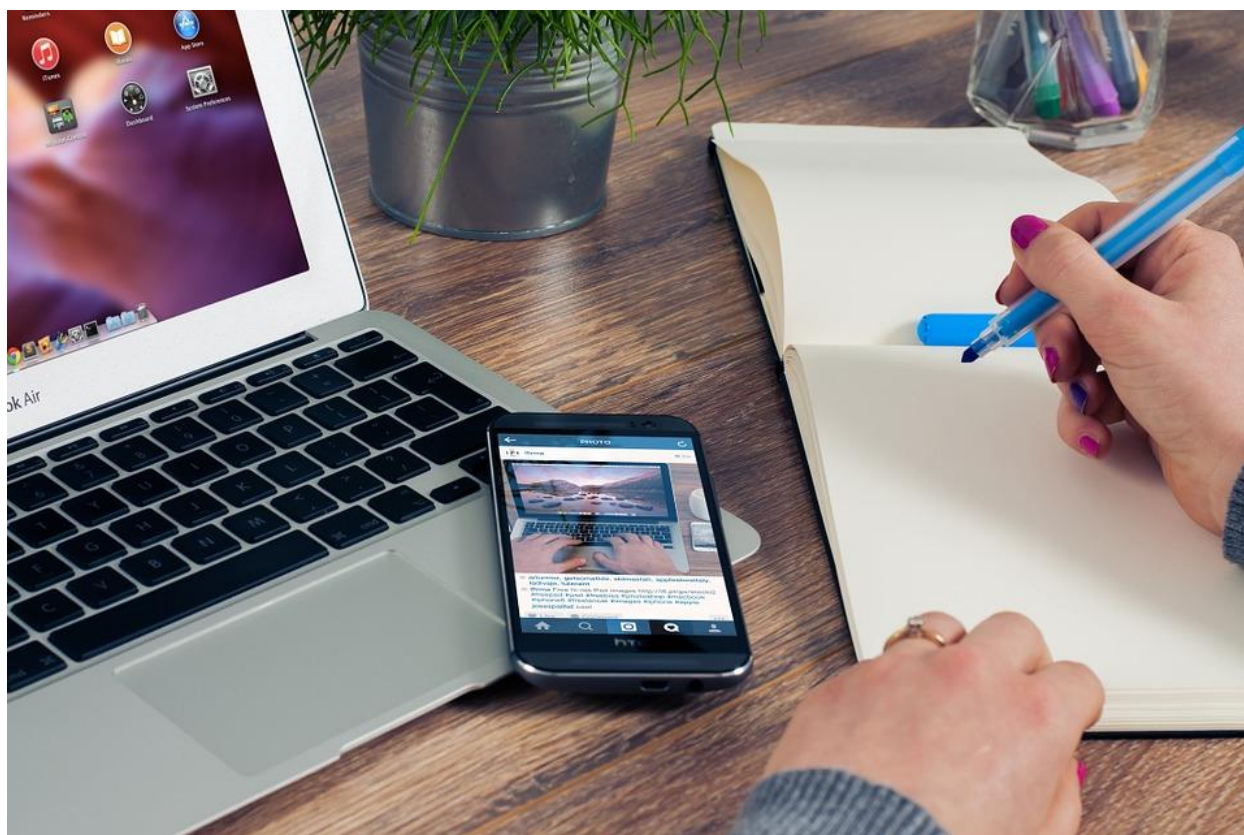
didactic webinar. The process of involving the learner(s) is facilitated by features that allow learners to take control of the webinar session. This is an ideal option for organizers that want to present new software or new features or updates in an existing software package. Aside from the presentation of the software functionalities, the lecturer can allow the participants to use the software, and create a more engaging webinar session. This approach is focused on the learner being active, involved, and absorbed in the learning process.

However, since this approach is very time intensive, it is not suitable for large webinars. The decision on whether to follow the immersion strategy depends on multiple factors: the topic of the webinar, the available time, as well as the number of learners attending the webinar session. Another setback of the immersion webinar, apart from being time consuming, is that it requires more patience of the other participants, since the process of teaching/training can be a lot slower. Furthermore, sharing controls (desktop remote control, website co-browsing, temporary presenter capability) can be risky, especially with participants that are not very proficient with the technology. On the other hand, the immersion webinar can have many benefits, especially when dealing with learning material that requires the acquisition of certain hands on skills (computer software).



Conducting a Successful Webinar

Webinar software can be a powerful educational tool, but, like all technologies, the decision to use it and the ways to integrate it in the educational process is dependent on the educator's strategic objectives and the needs of the audience. Generally speaking, the art and science of delivering a quality webinar lecture is a dilemma that renews with each webinar project. Moreover, the decision on the webinar design will depend on the choice of webinar software, platforms and features which are evolving at a rapid pace, with new tools and strategies to make webinars more effective and engaging educational means. The multiple innovations webinar platforms provide, such as high-definition video, access and participation through smartphones contribute to the rapid multiplication of new webinar users.





Regarding the structure of webinars, which can vary significantly, depending on the lecturer's preference of different webinar features, as well as the plurality and levels of interaction, and the number of participants at the live webinar session, there are several types of webinars (Zieliński, et al., 2013, p. 26):

- 1. Webinars for up to 6 participants:** Webinars with a low number of participants facilitate high levels of interactivity, since the number of participants allows peer-to-peer and participant-lecturer interaction. The structure and the content of the webinar are much more flexible, and the lecture can be adapted to the special needs or prior knowledge and specific interests of the learners.
- 2. Webinars for 7-20 participants:** The larger number of participants determines the structure and the content of the webinar lecture, which is more rigid, although it allows a moderate degree of flexibility. Interactivity is limited to a certain amount of audio/video responses (the educator can select who will be allowed to talk). Audience feedback can be ensured through the polling tools. Polls, voting and "raising hands" tools greatly facilitate interactivity for these types of webinars.
- 3. Webinars for over 20 participants:** The size of the audience means a rigid structure of the webinar, with most participants likely to stay anonymous. There is also a strong assumption that learners will not be able to follow the learning process as a group. The level of interactivity in this type of webinar depends mostly on the size of the webinar team. If the lecturer is on his/her own, only polls can be used to get feedback from the participants. If there are other personnel (moderator/other trainers) chat can be used, regarding that is pre-sorted for the trainer. The specific possibilities also depend on the technology (webinar platform) which is used.



Conducting a successful webinar is never a one-man show. Especially in the case of large webinars (for over 20 participants) it is recommended that the webinar is delivered by a team of staff members. In general, there are three main roles: the organizer/facilitator, the presenter or presenters, and assistants. The organizer may perform all these roles, but it needs to be noted that while some presenters can successfully manage all of these roles on their own, this approach is only recommended for experienced lecturers addressing a small audience. For organizing complex webinars with large audiences the webinar team may include one or more assistants.

- **Organizer/facilitator.** The organizer is the person responsible for developing and designing the topic of the webinar, providing competent lecturers, marketing the event, as well as setting up the registration and communication with participants. The organizer usually participates in the webinar as a moderator - introducing speakers, interviewing the experts, moderating audience questions, and encouraging audience participation. The organizer also monitors the progress of the webinar session and intervenes in cases of logistical and technical problems.
- **Lecturer(s).** The role of lecturers is limited to delivering a successful and engaging presentation of the subject matter. During the webinar session, their main focus is the presentation, engaging participants and answering questions of the audience. Activities like event registration, troubleshooting, and other logistical details can be distracting for presenters, and may impair their ability to give an engaging presentation. In certain formats (a panel discussion, for example), the webinar may feature more than one presenter.
- **Assistants.** Many experienced organizers organize webinars without the need of additional assistance, but there are some cases when supplementary staff is recommended: when the organizer, lecturer or the audience is unfamiliar with webinars and webinar tools; when the organizer/facilitator has an important role in the



conversation (either as an interviewer or participant); and when a large audience is expected. Assistants can help by addressing technical and logistical problems. For large webinars where it is anticipated to have more audience questions than the presenter alone can answer in the time allotted, an assistant who understands the subject matter can be assigned to help with answering chat questions (an alternative approach would be to refer all unanswered questions to an online forum where the presenter can respond at a more leisurely pace) (Peters & Griffiths, 2012).

There are multiple webinar platforms offering similar, but also some specific features. The choice of webinar software is important, and depends on the needs and requirements of the subject matter and the preferences of the lecturer. It is recommended that several webinar platforms are tested beforehand. Once the choice is made, it is more difficult to switch to a new tool, since the organizer and the lecturers have learned to use the software and the regular audience may be familiar only with this tool (Peters & Griffiths, 2012).

Introducing Educators to the Webinar Tool

Many educators working on face-to-face, classroom delivered courses, are often reluctant, resistant, and reticent to use any form of technology in their classrooms. This hesitancy should not be surprising having in mind that new educational technologies seem to emerge very fast with a host of unique expectations for instructors to consider and potentially find a way to embed in their classes. And additional challenge for educators are the synchronous instructional tools. The main reason for this lies in the fact that synchronous instruction, unlike various supplemental forms of asynchronous instruction such as online discussion forums, student online blogs and reflection tasks, may directly replace face-to-face lectures in which they have invested extensive time and effort and, thus, are highly passionate about (Park & Bonk, 2007). Professional



development and continuous stimulation and support in the area of synchronous teaching and learning is therefore crucial.

Another reason for the hesitancy for introducing new technology in the educational programmes is related to adapting synchronous approaches to existing courses, which requires new knowledge and skills on behalf of educators. Administrators should be prepared to understand and accommodate the different roles and responsibilities of online lecturers and make efforts to develop new support systems which are better suited for their contexts. To meet these needs, institutional infrastructure and support must address issues related to instructional supports (e.g., pedagogy), technology supports (e.g., software, hardware, resources, and skills), and institutional support (e.g., an incentive program). Park and Bonk (2007, p.320) suggest several aspects that should be taken in consideration:

1. **Providing technology options:** Lecturers should be provided with an introductory overview of all the technological tools available. They should be given several options of software for experimentation rather than be assigned a single software option and forced to fit it in their instructional approaches and course tasks. If the educational provider is equipped with only one software tool, instructors' evaluations of various tools should be considered before the selection. If the input provided by the teaching staff is discounted, unnecessary problems and faculty resistance to the use of the system or tool can arise.
2. **Ensuring the professional development of faculty members:** In order to avoid resistance motivated by technological incompetence, teaching staff should be provided with a development program in which they (1) can obtain information about the available technology tools, (2) share experiences on their use, and (3) acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to use a tool or system. The program should place an emphasis on developing both technological skills and pedagogical ones, thereby equipping lecturers with appropriate approaches for online teaching. The supports for design, technology, and pedagogy must be sustained continuously until instructors gradually become accustomed to effective ways of teaching with synchronous tools and systems.



3. **Provide new incentive programs:** The introduction of new technological tools and approaches and philosophies to teaching or adopting completely new ones always requires extensive time and effort. It has to be noted that problems like increasing teaching staff workload, time constraints, and a lack of systematic institutional support may negatively influence the ability to recruit qualified instructors to online teaching. Funding opportunities must be reconsidered, as well as a new reward system combined with a solid technical and instructional infrastructure must be established before planning any online program (Park & Bonk, 2007).

Preparation of Learners for the Webinar

The learners are crucial for the effectiveness of webinar learning. However, especially in the case of adult learners, they may not have experience with technology for synchronous instruction; at least not with the particular webinar tools facilitated by a specific webinar software.





Therefore, the organizer and the lecturer need to plan the preparation of learners in advance in order to ensure effective and inclusive webinar experience and pay particular attention to the following problems (Anderson, et al., 2006):

- “The online conferencing tool may be new to the tutor and the participants;
- The learning environment may provide multiple tools for communication and presentation, such as text-chat, synchronous presentation, shared whiteboard and co-browsing;
- There is a short time-frame in which to cover the required material and to solicit active participation; and
- Technical problems may arise during the session, further reducing the time available.”

To this end, it vital to provide basic introduction or training to participants on basic skills as of the technology in use as well as to explain the purposes and benefits (associated with the webinar experience. Participants should also be informed about any technological malfunctions that may impair their participation. Park and Bonk (2007, p. 319) suggest several aspects that should be taken in consideration:



1. **Clarification of the technological requirements:** Explain all technological requirements to learners and, if possible, check whether the participants are equipped with the necessary software and equipment (e.g., a headset for voice chat) as well as a stable Internet connection. Extensive preparation fosters a richer and engaging learning process, including quality group interactions and performances.
2. **Explain the desired outcomes of the lecture:** the lecturer should explicitly explain what learning outcomes and behaviors are expected from the synchronous activity. Several days before the webinar, course resources and other supplemental materials, technological guidelines and ground rules, should be provided to help learners' understanding and preparation for the webinar.
3. **Schedule practice sessions:** Organizing one or two practicing sessions (e.g., tools, activities, events, and procedures) is highly recommended especially among less technologically proficient learners. The practice sessions aim to help students become aware of the procedures and tasks required for their successful participation at the webinar as well as to become more familiar with the functions and features of the communication tools.
4. **Flexibility:** The design of the webinar session, as well as its structure should be flexible enough to accommodate learners' needs and technological proficiency. These should be taken into account when making decisions on types of communication tools, the duration and number of synchronous sessions, the number of participants per session, and the meeting time (Park & Bonk, 2007, p. 319).



Promoting the Webinar

Designing and delivering a successful webinar is not an easy task. Having in mind that one of the crucial factors for success of the webinar is attendance, developing an effective promotion strategy is one of the priorities in the period of preparation. The mere scheduling of event and sending few group emails will not bring large audience to the webinar. Moreover, if the topic of the webinar is of interest to a small target group with specific occupation and interests, the organizer has to take additional activities to ensure that as many individuals with possible interest in the topic could be reached directly or indirectly. Once the information of the webinar is disseminated, the organizer has to tackle the problem with attendance, and

The topic of the webinar should be broad enough to attract large audience, learners from different profiles, yet specialized enough to provide new and engaging information that the participants can apply effectively.

ensure that as much of the participants who registered for the webinar, actually attend and actively participate. Attendance is a problem when speaking of webinars; the statistics vary, but all data on convergence rates³ shows that less than a half of all registered participants actually attend the webinar.

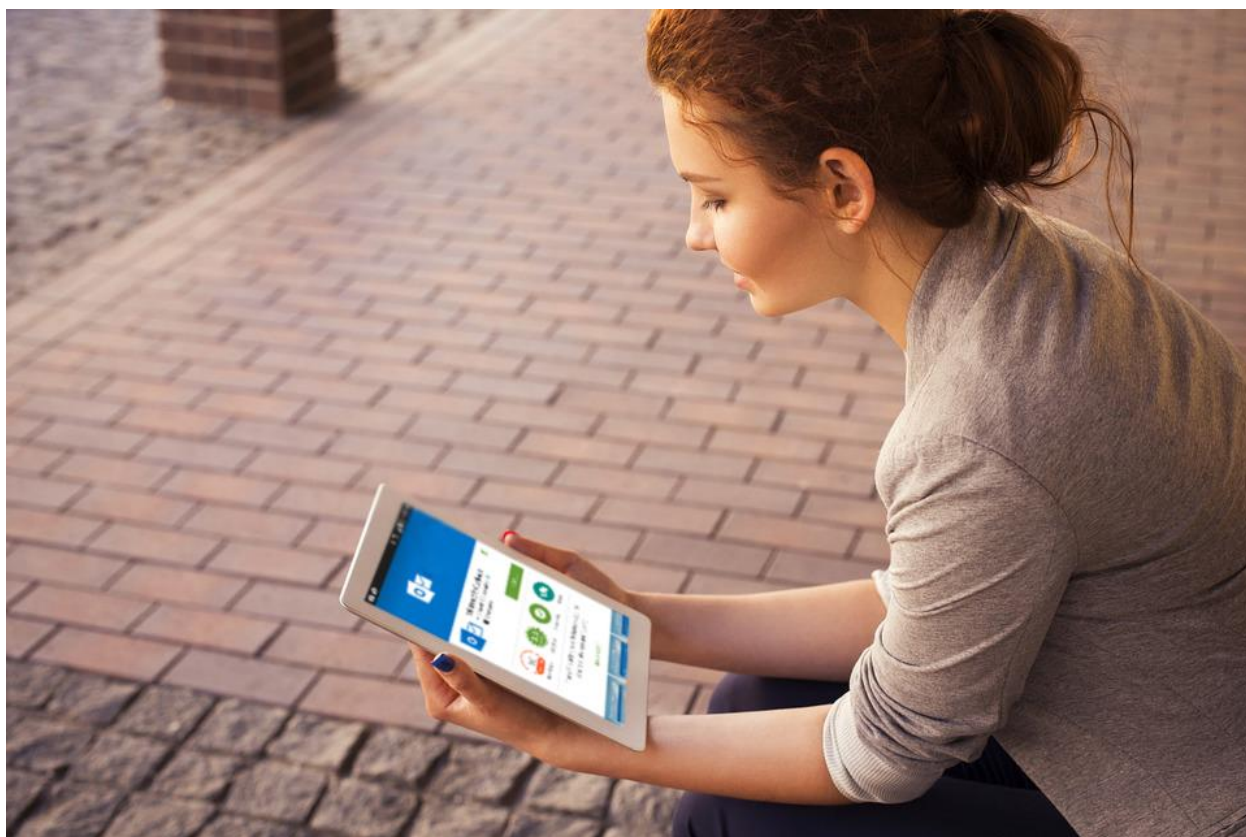
One of the first aspects that determines the audience interest in a webinar is the selection of a popular and interesting topic. The topic should be broad enough to attract large audience, learners from different profiles, yet specialized enough to provide new and engaging information that the participants can apply effectively. This does not mean that organizers and lecturers should be bound to mainstream topics to attract interest. However, the definition of the topic

³ Rate of registered participants that attended the webinar.



(no matter how specialized it is), the information it conveys, should be presented in an engaging and interesting manner.

The promotion of the webinar should commence several weeks beforehand. It is recommended that sending the first invitations should start no later than a month before the webinar. When speaking of promotion mechanisms, although social networks are very effective (but yet considered to bring much less participants than generally thought), emails remain the key way for promoting a webinar (Lisak, 2013). Aside from emailing and social media, organizers can use webinar promotion websites as well, such as Brainy Octopus⁴.



⁴ Website: <http://www.brainyoctopus.com/>. Brainy octopus is not a webinar software, but a webinar search engine that helps interested learners find webinars with topics of their interest.



In order to measure the effects of the marketing strategy the organizer should establish a registration goal. Determining a registration goal can help measure the success of the promotional campaign. Through regular tracking of the number of registered participants, the organizer can receive feedback on need for possible change of the marketing strategy.

Another aspect that should be considered in the period of preparation is setting an attendance goal. Since webinar conversion rates (percentage of participants that actually attend the webinar session) range between 25% to 42% (depending on the source), the organizer should be aware that registration rates are not fully indicative of the attendance success of the webinar. The attendance goal should be set in accordance with the registration goal and the type of webinar that is preferred by the organizer (Kolowich, 2015). There are several aspects that can help organizers determine their attendance goal (Faith, 2015):

1. **The numbers of email and blog subscribers.** The usual response rates can be indicative of the number of subscribers which are active in engaging with the topic and may be more motivated to attend the webinar.
2. **Targeting metrics**, which can provide a more precise estimate on the response of the target group.
3. **Web traffic.** If your webinar is promoted on the organizer's website during the time of traffic spike, there is much greater chance that the webinar will receive a lot of responses.

Choosing the right day and hour can be a determining factor whether a webinar will succeed or fail. Organizers should avoid scheduling webinars during weekends, when most participants are reluctant to sacrifice friends and family time to participate in a lecture in front of the computer. It is also recommended to avoid the beginning and the end of the workweek, i.e. Mondays and



Fridays, which can be packed with last minute emergencies and delayed obligations (Kolowich, 2015).

Setting up the right time for the webinar depends on the target audience of the organizer. If the webinar is focused on attracting local audience, then the organizer should take into consideration other features as well: are the members of the target audience employed, are their working hours flexible, what time zone(s) do they live in, etc. With organizers open to participants from all around the world, setting up a time that would be convenient for everyone can be quite difficult, if not impossible. Setting up the optimal webinar time is usually the result of organizer's experimentation with different days of the week and times, and a comparison of the attendance rates.

Creating an informative introductory webpage is an aspect that has to be prepared impeccably before sending the invitation emails and other promotional activities. The introductory page of the webinar is aimed at conveying all the necessary information related to the webinar. Thus, the introductory page should contain information on: the title and topic of the webinar, the date and time of the event, the profile(s) and short biographies of the lecturer(s), the main goals and outcomes of the webinar, and information about registration and possible attendance fees. There are various tools that can help maintain the attention of the potential participants, for example, tools that update information on the webinar event in participants' calendars (Kolowich, 2015). In this context, registration forms should not overly lengthy, optimally limited to 2-4 fields. Lengthy registration forms can demotivate or scare away potential participants. Polls and Q&A can provide better information on the profile of the audience than registration forms.

The majority of webinar solutions provide registration tools that allow educators to pose both open-ended and multiple-choice questions in the registration form. One benefit of open-ended questions, according to Courville (2009), is that "they elicit qualitative responses that may uncover unanticipated insights". A good example of open-ended questions in the registration form are the ones that directly address the needs of the learners, such as: "Describe what you



would most like to learn in...", or "Tell me about your experience with..." (Courville, 2009). However, including too many open-ended questions in the registration form can discourage some learners from registering, so the educator should consider including these questions as optional. Additionally, this solution can be impractical for webinars with expected larger audiences (hundreds or thousands), since the educator will hardly have the time to review all of the responses.

Registration of participants should always be followed by a conformation email. The confirmation of the registration can be supplemented with a thank-you message. This helps to establish contact with the participant, and to maintain this contact through reminder emails. Reminder emails are a very important task that should not be underestimated nor neglected, since it provides a much needed continuation of the interaction from the moment of registration of participants to the actual webinar event.

Organizers should start sending reminder emails approximately two weeks before the webinar event. These emails may also contain some additional materials from the introduction page of the webinar (general information), as well as indicate some interesting topics that will be discussed during the webinar. This approach is useful in maintaining the interest of the participants and to remind them of their initial interest in the webinar. Relevant blog posts, e-books or webinars that address similar topics can be added in the reminder emails. The emails should also contain information on the social media page(s) of the webinar or an instant messaging tool that participants can use to contact the organizer in case of a problem or to inquire for additional information. Sending last-minute reminders is also a must – at least two final reminder emails should be sent prior to the webinar (one the day before, and one a couple of hours before the start) (Kolowich, 2015).


The organizer should develop a marketing strategy with multiple platforms for promotion. Apart from the website of the organization, it is a wise move to create and maintain regularly updated social media pages of the organization and the webinar event. Social media are an excellent tool for promotion of the webinar. If the organization has a social media page, interested participants



can review their previous work and decide to commit to the webinar more easily (Kolowich, 2015). Additionally, uploading several previous webinars, or samples of older work, to be previewed for free (on a social media page or YouTube) can provide potential attendees with a clearer perspective on what they can expect from the webinar.

The promotion of the lecturers should have important place in the marketing strategy. Many individuals would rather commit to a presenter that has a good reputation or that they are familiar with, that to a specific topic. A good webinar marketing strategy has to make use of the reputation of the lecturers (Kolowich, 2015). The information page may contain quotes from the lecturers, and the lecturers themselves can disseminate information on the webinar through their channels (website, social media page, etc.).

In order to stimulate interest among the target audience, some organizers use paid media to achieve their registration goal. This is recommended only if the organizer has the adequate resources and lacks desired response from the target group (Kolowich, 2015). In other cases, an additional free source of promotion is blogging. Blogging can be an excellent way to promote an upcoming webinar. Regular blog posts on the topic of the webinar can even motivate participants to get more involved, pose questions and provide useful feedback. This type of



Regular blog posts on the topic of the webinar can motivate participants to get more involved, pose questions and provide useful feedback.

participant engagement can be of a tremendous help to the organizer/lecturer, which can utilize this feedback to finalize the presentation and put an emphasis on specific topics and issues that the participants have deemed interesting.

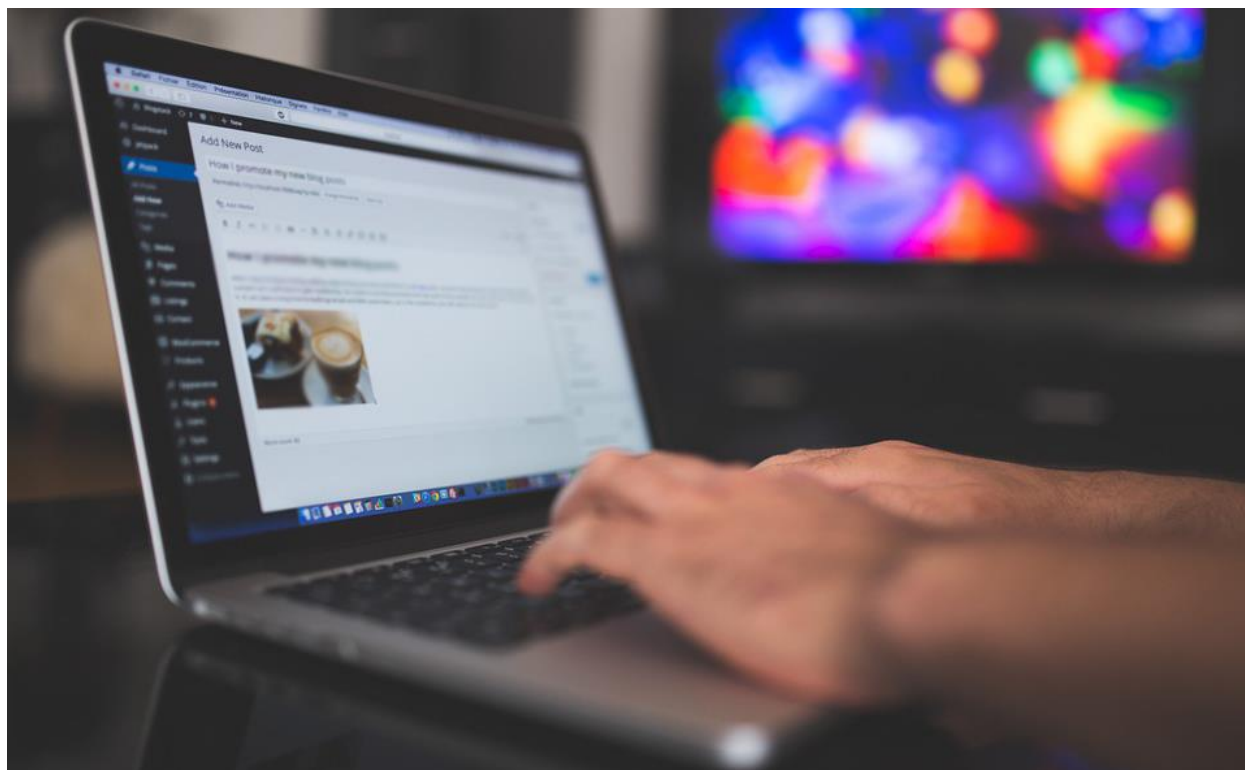
The established contact with the members of the audience, even with registered participants that have failed to attend the webinar, should be maintained well after the event has finished. The organizer should make sure to provide the participants with the recorded webinar and



supplemental materials within 24 hours after the event. These materials should be sent to all who registered, regardless of whether they attended the webinar or not. Technical problems, last minute obligations and personal issues could prevent an interested learner to attend the webinar. Prior to the webinar, participants should be informed that about this arrangement, in case they are prevented from attending, or just want to review it later.

Conducting the Webinar

During the period of preparation for the webinar, the organizer should send at least two reminder emails to registered participants, a day and an hour before the start of the webinar. It is recommended that the organizer and the lecturer are available to participants half an hour before the start of the webinar in order to provide necessary information and help, and intervene in cases of technological malfunction.





The start of the webinar session should contain some general information in order to introduce the learners more easily into the subject matter and the structure of the lecture. It is better not to start the presentation by telling what the presenter is going to do, but what the participants are going to experience, since it is considered favorable for increasing audience engagement. Other important aspects that should be highlighted at the beginning of the webinar session are (Ally, 2004, p. 8):

- “Learners should be told the explicit outcomes of the learning so that they can set expectations and can judge for themselves whether or not they have achieved the outcome of the online lesson;
- Learners must be tested to determine whether or not they have achieved the learning outcome. Online testing or other forms of testing and assessment should be integrated into the learning sequence to check the learner’s achievement level and to provide appropriate feedback;
- Learning materials must be sequenced appropriately to promote learning. The sequencing could take the form of simple to complex, known to unknown, and knowledge to application;
- Learners must be provided with feedback so that they can monitor how they are doing and take corrective action if required.”

This information can be provided either by the facilitator/organizer, or the lecturer(s), and other information may be featured in the opening title of the presentation. It is recommended that before the start of the webinar the presenter use a series of slides to convey important



information and foster participant engagement while waiting the presentation to begin, such as (Peters & Griffiths, 2012):

- An introductory slide reminding the audience how to log in to the audio, and what time the webinar will begin.
- A slide introducing each presenter, including job title, affiliation, and a photograph if available.
- An overview of the webinar agenda and the topics to be covered.
- Screen grabs of websites or tools which are going to be discussed. If possible, the sites and tools should be presented in action (rather than just the image stills) for a more dynamic group experience. Depending on the webinar software, a large number of webinar tools allow sharing of desktop, displaying in real time the lecturer's interaction with programs and websites.

Other information that is advisable to be featured in the opening slides, according to Gen Guanci (2010, p. 120), include: the conference dial-in number; what to do in case of problems; short instructions on how to ask questions and answer polls; quotes from past participants, as well as some fun facts related to the topic being presented.

Using a strong opening line instead of the classic "I will be talking about" will grab the audience's attention more effectively. The space used for the delivering of the webinar should be carefully examined and removed from all outside noise and distractions.

The choice of speaker is an important decision that could have a crucial effect on the success of the webinar. Apart from the expertise in the subject matter, as a mandatory qualification, there



are other factors that should be taken into consideration as well, such as the lecturer's proficiency in webinar software, his pedagogical approach, and his past experiences with this type of instruction.

Concerning the length of the webinar session, its duration has shown a trend of shrinking over the years, from an hour of lecturing, to 45 minutes of lecture and 15 minutes of Q&A session, to 30-minute lectures and 20-25 minutes for discussion. However, most webinar providers take in consideration the material/content and its quantity and quality. For these purposes, many lectures may be split into series of several separate webinar sessions, to avoid the content overload and attention scarcity.

An important aspect of webinar delivery is the presentation design. Unlike conventional lectures, where the PowerPoint slides are a mere support to the lecture, in webinars the visual component is crucial. Therefore, lecturers must think visually. This does not mean that every lecturer has to be proficient in graphic design, but the graphic presentation of the concepts becomes increasingly important. Aside from thinking visually, educators have to consider visual frequency (Courville, 2009). Living in a world of infinite distraction, educators should be aware not to spend too much time on a single slide. A recommended practice is to create multiple slides and move through them more quickly than in face-to-face lectures (Courville, 2009).

Q&A sessions are a very important part of the webinar experience, and in many cases they constitute an important part of the evaluation of the success of the webinar session. Participants should be encouraged to share their opinions and to pose questions in this segment of the session. However, it is advisable that lecturers have a few 'seed' questions prepared in advance in case the discussion needs a jumping-off point.

Supplementing the lecture with polling questions can help presenters to initiate a more engaging participation on behalf of the audience, by scanning their knowledge and opinions on different aspects of the topic of the webinar. Lecturers are thus provided with an immediate feedback



from the audience, at the same time boosting their participation and abandoning their passive role of listeners.

Real-time screen sharing is another useful tool for engaging the webinar audience. Using real-time screen sharing lecturers can share any application of program they are using with the participants. This is a good tool for reducing presentation fatigue and for participants which are more visual learners.

Video conferencing during the webinar session can also improve the connection and interaction between the lecturer and the audience. Drawing tools, such as marker or pointer can make PowerPoint presentations more interesting and engaging for the audience. There are different engagement tracking tools that can provide the lecturer with information on audience participation and behavior during the webinar. Since webinars rely on audio and visuals to get the message across, both should be engaging. Plain slides with a lot of text will not be as effective as interesting visuals that illustrate the topic being discussed.





Due to the lack of face-to-face interaction between the lecturer and learners, and especially the lack of interaction among learners themselves, effective teaching and learning through webinars is faced with several unique challenges. If time runs short, the presenter should be prepared to eliminate up to 25% of the presentation (Guanci, 2010). Once again, it is not recommended that the lecturer also performs the role of a moderator.

The use of quality hardware is highly recommended – lectures should not be delivered through speaker phone or mobile phone unless absolutely necessary (Guanci, 2010). In case of technical problems and loss of Internet connection, the presenter should always have a printout of the presentation slides and a possible second computer with an Internet connection available.

It is highly recommended that the lecturer makes several practices of the presentation beforehand. In this context, the lecturer should reconsider including a large number of video clips in the presentation, since they have a high rate of technical failures, and are not recommended for unexperienced presenters that manage the technical part of the webinar on their own. To this end, it is recommended that the presenter delivers information and data through graphics instead of in words, since 55% of learners are visual learners (Guanci, 2010).

Most online audiences tend to lose interest after about two hours, so the topics and information should be organized in a way so they can adequately be covered given this time constraint, contain multiple breaks. (Peters & Griffiths, 2012). However, if the audience is not accustomed to online learning, the course can be divided into several webinars delivered weekly.

During the webinar session, it is recommended that the presenter breaks the lecture in segment with short questions every 6 to 10 minutes. This can be done by having the moderator ask questions, by polling the group of students, or through short pauses in the lecture and checking are there any questions for the previously delivered segments. Furthermore, every 15 to 20 minutes the organizer/facilitator should introduce the speaker(s); for example, “We are approximately 15 minutes into today’s webinar (give title), presented by (name the speaker)”



(Guanci, 2010, p. 120). Additionally, halfway through the webinar lecture, the moderator summarizes what has been covered until then.

Post-webinar surveys are highly recommended tool for evaluation of the webinar. Participants can be asked to complete them at the end of the webinar session, or they can receive the survey by email after the webinar. Follow-up emails, containing the recorded webinar and supplemental lecture materials should be sent to all registered participants, regardless of whether they actually attended the webinar.

As noted in the previous chapters, establishing a network of interaction and supportive atmosphere are critical for motivating participants to play an active role in the webinar. Socialization and informal exchanges can play an important role for the learning process in synchronous online learning environments, as "they help build community and create a friendly and safe environment in which people can feel like people" (Ng, 2007, p. 12).

Concerning the delivery of a successful webinar, a research conducted by Osterman Research (2007) was focused on the practices and attitudes towards webinars among webinar organizers and webinar audiences. The research results showed that more than 80% of individuals that have attended webinars in the year the research was conducted, are planning to attend the same number or more webinars in the future. Among the most important reasons for attending webinars, webinar attendees singled out: obtaining more information about specific products (76%), understanding issues in greater depth (61%), evaluating products as part of a planned purchase (52%), and learning about industry trends (49%). Only 16% of the respondents answered that they were obligated to attend webinars by their employers. The Osterman Research also noted several best practices for hosting webinars, including useful guidelines provided by experienced webinar organizers (Osterman Research, 2007, pp. 3-9):



1. Using guest speakers: more than 58% of webinar organizers have reported rise in attendance rates when the webinars involve guest speakers. However, as noted in the research, most webinars feature one speaker despite the effectiveness of the approach in generating interest.
2. Rehearsing: the majority of experienced webinar organizers participating in the research reported rehearsing prior to delivering a webinar, at least occasionally. Around 60% of the respondents stated that they frequently rehearse the delivering of the webinar.
3. Promotion: one of the most challenging tasks when organizing a webinar is getting the registered participants to actually attend the event. The most effective practice for ensuring this is sending emails, reported by 75% of the respondents.
4. Obtaining registrants' profile information: it is useful to have information on registrants' profiles prior to the webinar event in order to be able to customize its content according to their interests and needs. More than two-thirds of webinar organizers consider helpful having a preview of registrants' profiles in designing the presentation.
5. Sending invitations at least one to two weeks in advance: the majority of webinar attendees (over 70%) that participated in the research reported that they prefer to receive invitations for an upcoming webinar a week or two prior to the event.
6. Do not breach the one-hour mark: webinar length can vary, although it is considered optimal to limited the duration of the webinar session to one hour. Furthermore, the research also recommends opening the webinar for attendees around 15 minutes prior to the start, which allows attendees to test the audio connection and the webinar interface, and to resolve any technical difficulties that may have arisen. It is also important to have a designated person that would provide attendees support and help in such situations – and this person should not be the presenter.
7. Providing time for Q&A: around a half of the respondents stated that they regularly use the Q&A sessions, with the rest of the attendees using it occasionally. This is good



indicator of the importance Q&A has for ensuring effective interaction among the participants and the presenter.

8. Polling: Most webinar organizers conduct at least one poll during a webinar session. Polling is a valuable mechanism for facilitating feedback from the attendees, either to keep them engaged, or to adjust the presentation due to their specific needs.
9. Post-event surveying: most webinar organizers (63%) conduct survey evaluations of the individuals that attended their events. This is good source of feedback on the event, and for additional information for future improvements.

The tasks adopted by the majority of webinar providers and the recommended timings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. List of tasks recommended for effective organization of webinars, with corresponding timings (American Marketing Association & ReadyTalk).

Task	Timing
Developing an event plan	6 to 8 weeks prior to the event
Finalize the event topic, title, landing page and speakers	6 weeks prior to the event
Setup registration and begin promotion	4 to 6 weeks prior to the event
Send email invite	2 weeks prior to the event
Draft of slide presentation	2 weeks prior to the event
Full rehearsal and event dry-run	1 week prior to the event
Final version of the slide presentation	2 to 3 days prior to the event



Send reminder email #1	24 hours prior to the event
Send reminder email #2	2 to 3 hours prior to the event
Pre-conference with moderator and speakers	30 minutes prior to the event
Edit recording (when needed)	within 24 hours after the webinar
Send follow-up emails	within 24 hours after the webinar

Engaging Learners in Meaningful Interaction

The initial aim behind a good webinar is to educate, motivate, and influence, therefore the positive results will be ensured with active, rather than passive participants. Webinar platforms provide a multitude of tools to instigate and maintain quality engagement on behalf of the attendees. Some of the tools may be used spontaneously during the webinar session, but others need to be planned in the presentation.

For delivering a successful webinar, it is not solely important that students are prepared for the synchronous instruction, but lecturers should reconsider their pedagogical techniques when delivering a lecture in the form of a webinar as well. In other words, a significant emphasis should be placed on delivering active and engaging learning approaches where the learners are in a position that makes them in charge of their own learning. More than fifteen or twenty minutes of direct instruction without engaging the learners can be devastating to their concentration and engagement. This could be prevented through occasional engagement of the participants using webinar tools such as online polling, web browsing, drawing, and chat that can involve students more in the learning process and focus their attention. The following recommendations address these issues:



1. Discussion: Instructors should not dominate the webinar session but facilitate more interactive and meaningful contributions by participants during the meeting. Instructors, as subject matter experts, information givers, and technology advisors, should use various support strategies such as clarifying meanings, authenticating students' points, providing rationale, and posing questions to keep discussion active and constructive.
2. Creating a social climate: Creating a positive and friendly environment could help learners remain engaged and reduce the problems that might hinder their participation. Engaging the learners in task-based collaboration is also important to increase connectivity among participants. Through a flexible structure, role assignment, supportive interaction, immediate feedback, encouragement, and personal messages the lecturer can facilitate a sense of community as well as accountability among the learners.
3. Provision of materials to be discussed: Topics or materials to be discussed during the webinar should be provided before the meeting. Unlike asynchronous discussion, a synchronous learning (webinar) is dependent on immediate responses from students, which often lack sufficient time to reflect upon the topics. Materials provided to learners beforehand assist them not only to think thoroughly on the given topics, but also to provide constructive feedback to the webinar session. Posing questions related to a problem-solving task every couple of minutes can transform the webinar session in engaging and exiting event. Developing presentation slides with activities instead of information presentations can boost learners' motivation and engagement.
4. Facilitation of small group discussions: If possible (depending on the number of participants) small group peer-to-peer discussions can facilitate more effective learning (Park & Bonk, 2007, pp. 319-320).
5. Active learning: Keeping the participants active and initiation meaningful activities will result in high-level processing, which facilitates the creation of personalized meaning. Ally suggests that asking learners to apply the information in a practical situation is an active process, and facilitates personal interpretation and relevance (Ally, 2004, p. 18).



There are several solutions recommended for decreasing the potential problems related to distance discourse and processes. Park and Bonk (2007, p. 309) suggest having different roles assigned to each discussion participant – a starter who reads ahead commences discussion, a wrapper which summarizes the discussion that transpired and remaining open issues, or a debater who argues the pros and cons about the given topic. There are literally dozens of additional roles that learners can be assigned (e.g., questioner, coach, optimist, pessimist, etc.) to facilitate their participant interaction and enhance the learning outcomes. In order to facilitate higher-order thinking, online learning must provide the learners with challenging activities that make linking new information to old possible, acquire meaningful knowledge, and make use of participants' metacognitive abilities; therefore, the learning outcomes are more dependent on the instructional strategy and not as much on the technology (Ally, 2004, p. 3).



Webinar Tools

The main advantage of webinars over other synchronous and asynchronous online learning tools lies in the number of features at the presenter's disposal that can make the webinar session an engaging and fruitful learning experience. Online learning, without the adequate feedback and creative engagement with the educational material can be very demotivating, especially for adult learners that struggle to devote time and resources to professional and personal development. To this end, webinars are often the online learning tool of choice due to the numerous possibilities for interaction between the educator and participants, and features that can make participants equal partners in the educational process.

The number and scope of webinar tools at the disposal of the lecturer and participants depends mainly on the characteristics of the specific webinar software. Although there are some tools that are featured by most webinar providers, there are some differences that should be taken

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in consideration. The first choice a webinar organizer is confronted with is the decision on the type of webinar service provision: either a free webinar platform or a paid subscription. This decision is related to the type of tools the organizer plans to use during the webinar, and also the number of attendees. Most webinar platforms provide some essential tools in the free version (the chat tool, video conferencing, screen sharing), and leave out other tools and features (polling, several moderators) for the paid version of the software. Some platforms offer only a



preview (free trial) version, with subscription fees dependent on the number of webinar attendees.

The fast paced technological innovations imply that new webinar platforms offering different features are emerging constantly. Existing tools and features are continuously being upgraded, and many webinar organizers regularly switch between platforms, in order to provide their audience with the best learning experience. The most popular webinar platforms and the features they provide (both free and with a subscription) are presented in Annex 1. The following subheadings will provide information on the features of the most commonly used webinar tools.

Dashboard

This is one of the basic tools that is featured by most webinar platforms. The dashboard is a feature that provides different analytical information on the ongoing webinar session. The presenter and the participants are provided with information on the duration of the session, the number of attendees, audience attentiveness, questions, active polls, and raised hands. One important feature of the dashboard is the attentiveness meter, that displays the percentage of session participants who are using the webinar application on top of all other active applications in comparison to those participants that have the webinar application running in the background. This availability of this feature, however, depends on the subscription arrangements of the particular webinar platform.

Polls

Polls are an excellent tool to receive immediate feedback on the prior knowledge or understanding of the subject matter by the attendees. Polls are also recommended for keeping the audience's attention and provoking engagement. Polls can be created in advance, before the start of the webinar session, but the lecturer/moderator also has the option to create a poll during the webinar session. Depending on the choice of webinar platform, some providers feature the option to share the poll results with the audience. The shared results display general



tendencies and total responses, thus not breaching attendees' anonymity. Anonymity is another aspect that gives polls advantage over other tools and features for interaction. Namely, being free to engage in interaction and remain anonymous keeps the participants focused on the learning. In this way the learner can, without embarrassment, admit they are finding aspects of the presentation challenging. The availability of polling tools, again, depends on the subscription arrangements with a particular webinar provider.

Polls are exceptionally important webinar tools, since they provide the possibility to maintain some form of immediate interaction in situations when other forms of interaction are less effective or possible due to the large number of participants. Polls provide the lecturer with valuable information from the audience in a fast and effective way. Thus, a lecturer that is unsure whether all participants are following the lecture and presentation can have an immediate feedback from the all of the attendees. The possibilities for the use of polls are numerous, and therefore the polling tool is recommended as an inseparable part of every successful webinar.

While the choices on a polling questing can be straightforward, with one correct answer from several options, the lecturer can intrigue the audience by listing several correct options in the poll, and thus initiate an interesting discussion. Organizers delivering multiple webinars on the same topic can set the questions and the possible answers beforehand and use them in all webinars of the series. The data obtained from the participants can be later analyzed, providing the possibility for identifying issues that have an impact on the learning outcome.

Screen Sharing

This feature enables the moderator to share the his/her screen and all the ongoing operations on the screen and the active applications during the webinar session. Consequently, moving beyond reducing the webinar experience to a simple PowerPoint presentation, this feature allows the demonstration of a software, a video, etc. In order to preserve the privacy of the lecturer, some webinar software have the option to show a desktop with hidden icons and taskbar, so that the focus remains on the content that is being presented. However, a large



number of conferencing tools allow desktop/screen sharing only for Windows computers or Internet Explorer users, therefore organizers and lecturers relying on Mac and Linux, as well as Firefox and Chrome users should be careful in selecting a webinar software that supports these features for their computers.

Some webinar platforms allow presenters to denote specific areas of their presentation or screen, and share them with participants. This provides the lecturer with an additional control of the delivery of material, focusing the presentation on certain aspects deemed important, and providing clearer instructions to the attendees.

Desktop Remote Control

The desktop remote control is a feature that moves a step beyond desktop sharing and grants control over the presenter's desktop to another user. The user can open and use applications on the presenter's computer. This feature is similar to technical support that performs remote maintenance on a computer. The feature is suitable for webinars with multiple presenters, or for webinars where the lecturer wants to engage the participants by allowing them to contribute to the lecture with their own works, or to intervene in some part of the presentation. It has to be noted that the desktop remote control is not a feature offered by all webinar platforms, or it is available in some subscription packages.

Website Co-Browsing

Not all webinar software supports this feature, at least in free version. Website co-browsing is a specialized feature that allows two users on different computers to control a shared browser instance. Along with the desktop remote control, this is another feature that enhances the engagement of participants or other presenters. It is particularly recommended for webinars with few attendees, where participants can have a more active role in the educational process.



Temporary Presenter Capability

This feature is supported by a number of webinar platforms, but is not common in free versions. This is another feature that can be useful to presenters who want a more engaging webinar experience for their participants. It allows the possibility for the presenter/moderator to transfer his moderator authorizations to other participants in the webinar session. In this way, the participants can share slides, their desktops, or applications, having for a limited time the role of presenters. In terms of audience participation this feature provides the optimal conditions for including the participants in the webinar as partners in the learning process. This feature is recommended for webinars with multiple presenters, as well as in small webinars with a low number of participants.

Text Chat

The chat tool is one of the most basic webinar and videoconferencing tools. Essentially, it allows the participants in the webinar session to communicate to other participants through a real-time text messaging tool. The management of this tool depends on the specifics of the webinar platform, as well as the preferences of the presenter/moderator. Some platforms allow all participants to see the messages, while others allow the option for one-on-one messaging between the participants/presenter. More advanced webinar platforms have “breakout rooms”, separate rooms where participants can chat privately.

The text chat is one of the most exploited webinar tools providing the basic form of interaction in all types of webinars. The “breakout rooms” in particular are especially important being one of the rare tools that facilitates group collaboration between the attendees. Using this feature, the lecturer can divide the attendees into groups, and engage them with problem solving tasks. In this way, the “breakout rooms” feature can significantly improve the effectiveness of a webinar session.



Concerning the advantages of the open vs. the limited chat, opinions are very much divided. Some educators and participants consider the open chat a must-have feature in a webinar, since it provides the possibility for participants to communicate their ideas with the entire group. However, some learners find this practice distracting, especially when the organizer is both lecturer and moderator, and there is lack of basic rules concerning the use of the chat tool. The decision on using open or closed chat is also influenced by the number of attendees of the webinar. With webinars with large numbers of attendees, an open chat tool can easily spin out of control with attendees posting all sorts of questions and ideas, with limited possibility for feedback. Such cases may affect the overall attentiveness and learning enthusiasm of the group.

Whiteboard

Whiteboards are very common in traditional classroom learning, and can be an excellent tool for developing new ideas and solutions. The webinar whiteboard functions in a similar way. However, in online learning the whiteboard tool is also important in terms of encouraging attendees to participate. The participants can create diagrams and charts, highlight text, and use a variety of different annotating tools. The lecturer can grant control of the whiteboard to the participants, which can be very effective for opening the webinar session or a brief brainstorming.

Video Sharing

The more popular (and costly) webinar platforms support sharing videos between participants at the webinar session. This can be of a tremendous help to presenters who cannot display the whole content during the live presentation, and can have some parts pre-recorded. In other cases, presenters can use the tool to illustrate a specific point of importance to the goals of the session, or even distribute a pre-recorded version of the webinar in cases when technical problems inhibit the delivering of the presentation. Earlier versions of webinar software often suffered from malfunctions, especially concerning video sharing. Therefore, a lot of presenters are still reluctant to use it. New and improved software has gradually begun to remove the stigma over the use of videos and animations in synchronous online learning. Notwithstanding,



educators should not rely on lengthy videos which can distract the attendees instead of challenging them.

Webinar Recording

The recording of a webinar feature has become one of the key webinar tools. An important aspect related to the popularity of webinars is the possibility to use it as both synchronous and asynchronous online learning tool. While real-time attendance is very important, for many participants the possibility to review the webinar session proved to be very important aspect in learning. Many participants cannot stay focused during the entire course of the webinar session, some of them are being interrupted, or they simply could not follow the lecturing pace of the presenter. With this feature the participants have an unlimited access to the webinar, and review the points that were missed. The tool can also be used as a backup in cases of malfunctioning technology. Participants that experience technical problems or are prevented from joining the webinar for other reasons can benefit greatly from a recorded copy of the webinar session.

Almost all webinar platforms offer variations of the webinar recording tool, and the more advanced provide different options for editing the recorded material.

Question-and-answer (Q&A) Session

While the feedback from the participants is very important, it can distract the lecturer during a demanding presentation. This is why a lot of webinar organizers turn to question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions, which allow the participants to submit a question electronically at any time during the webinar session, and the lecturer can devote a segment of the session to answering the submitted questions. This facilitates interaction, omitting the possible distractions that may occur. The lecturer or the moderator can read the questions at the designated time in the webinar session or afterwards and provide participants with answers. The questions and answers may be shared with the entire group, but an answer may be provided privately as well. The



possibility to submit a question at any time during the session, means that the participant does not have to wait until the Q&A session starts and possibly forget the question.

Experienced webinar organizers recommend careful planning of the Q&A session. It does not always have to be at the end of the webinar session; it can be incorporated into different segments in the presentation (Wasielewski, 2016). With webinars with large audience, the Q&A session has to be carefully planned, with enough time to respond large amount of questions. It is important to announce the start of the Q&A session at least 15 minutes before its start, so that attendees can have enough time to prepare and submit questions and not be caught surprised.

Other features that are offered by some webinar platforms are the possibility of supplementing the webinar presentation with YouTube videos, the possibility for sending automatic follow-up emails to the attendees, mobile applications that allow participating at a webinar from a smartphone, different features for real-time collaboration in various forms, etc. The wide variety of tools at the disposal of the presenter provide webinars with a much needed flexibility and adaptability in online learning, however, the effectiveness of its tools as well as its overall effectiveness depend mainly on the preferences and skills of the presenter.



Webinars as a Tool for Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning

Distance learning has traditionally been associated with asynchronous learning (correspondence schools, videotaped lectures, contact through emails, etc.). Nevertheless, the technological advancements in the recent decades have created different opportunities for real-time interaction between educators and learners, i.e. synchronous learning (instant messaging, videoconferencing, webinars, webcasts, etc.). Online learning, as a form of distance learning, has begun to rely ever more on these tools. However, as was mentioned in Chapter 4, multiple research focused on the effectiveness and quality of learning provided by these two types indicate that asynchronous and synchronous tools facilitate different types of interaction between the participants in the educational process, as well as with the learning material, and thus each approach provides different quality of learning. Consequently, it can be stated that the two approaches are more complementary than contradictory, and the new tools for distance learning should not overlook their advantages and contributions to quality learning.

Webinars, which by definition are a tool for synchronous learning, can incorporate some strategies for asynchronous learning to enhance the learning effects among learners. These strategies have through the years become an essential part of the webinar experience, such as the recording of a webinar. Other features and strategies are less obvious, but can be incorporated in the standard webinar experience. In this way, the participants of a webinar can continue with learning long after the webinar has ended, and have the opportunity for feedback from the educators. It has to be noted that the possibilities for implementing some of these strategies depend on the nature of the event and its duration (whether it is a one-off event, or a course that is divided into series of webinars). The following subchapters will explore several strategies for transforming webinar into the optimal synchronous and asynchronous distance learning tool.



Email

Email is the most conventional form for online asynchronous communication. The first possibility for email communication is established with the registration of the participant to a webinar. Aside from emailing information concerning some general information regarding the webinar itself, this contact can be used for sending materials that are related to the topic of the webinar and the learner might find interesting. Some lecturers, which are inclined towards the “flipped classroom” method, will send learning materials in advance, so that the learner will be prepared for the topic and to take part in the discussion. In this way the participants are better informed on the topics that will be discussed at the webinar session, and can prepare questions and suggestions in advance. This practice is also recommended in cases when the lecturer expects higher levels of engagement from the participants (group work on problem solving tasks, sharing functionalities, etc.). In cases when the webinars are part of an online course, sending learning materials in advance and maintaining communication through email is expected.

The email communication between the lecturer/organizer and the attendees (even the learners that registered but did not attend) does not stop with the end of the webinar session. Follow-up emails have become a regular practice among webinar organizers. Apart from the standard thank-you-for-attending message, the follow-up emails can contain additional materials related to the topic of the webinar, and can provide supplementary information on aspects that were not sufficiently covered during the webinar session.

It is recommended that the organizer/lecturer encourages further communication with the learners after the end of the webinar. Participants can get additional information, or subscribe to a newsletter of upcoming activities.

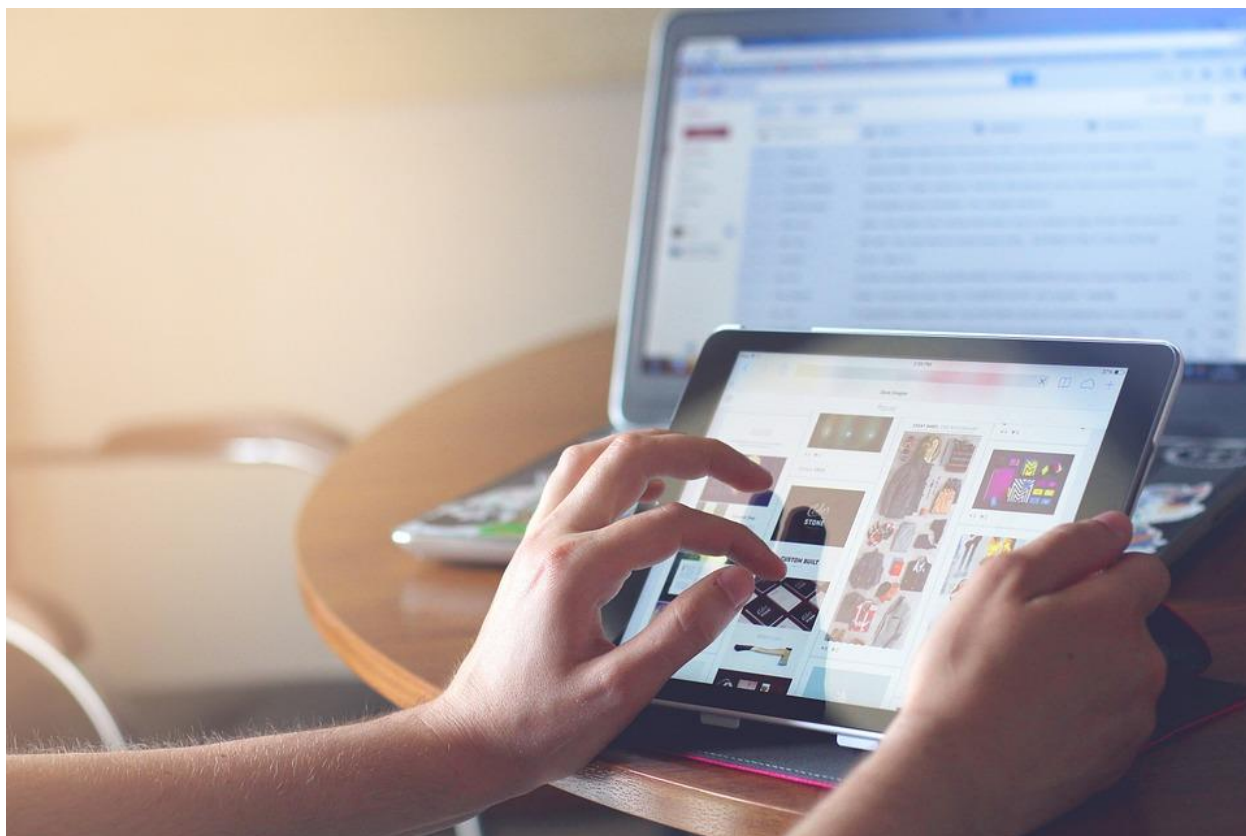


Webinar Recording

As it was mentioned in the previous chapters, the webinar recording feature has, through the years, become part of the essential webinar experience. Learners today expect to be provided with a recorded version of the event, and to have the opportunity to review the webinar session in its entirety. The recorded webinar represents another means for asynchronous learning. Learners can have unlimited access and go through the points they missed or they consider interesting. It is recommended that the organizer/lecturer sends the link for the recorded webinar to all participants, even the ones that registered but did not attend. Many webinar organizers note that many adult learners today have problems committing to group synchronous learning. Work arrangements, family chores and everyday obligations can present challenges to adult learners, and prevent them from attending live learning events. Recorded webinars, on the other hand, can be a great asynchronous learning tool that can overcome these barriers. Learners can view the recorded event and continue learning through asynchronous communication with the educator. It is especially important for educators that are new in the field of organizing webinars, to have webinar recordings (at least segments) freely available for anyone interested. This practice can help the organizer increase the average number of attendees much faster than using other marketing strategies.



Blogging



Many webinar organizers are regular bloggers. This is not a general rule, but in some fields (marketing, consulting) it happens fairly often. Blogs can be an excellent way to attract audience, and continue the established communication even after the webinar has ended. Many educators use blogs as a marketing tool; they can engage audiences prior to the start of the webinars by posting information on the upcoming webinar, creating discussion topics that intrigue the audience to take part in the webinar. Additionally, blogs are an excellent tool for communication conclusion, impressions and explanations after the webinar session.



Conclusion

Webinars, despite being a novelty in adult and distance education, have gained increasing importance and presence in recent years. However, the transition from traditional courses to synchronous online learning has not been uninterrupted, mainly because of the fact that classroom-based teaching and learning cannot be merely transferred into an online environment. In this context, it needs to be emphasized that more research on webinar-related pedagogies is needed in order to determine the optimal strategies for synchronous online learning.

Nevertheless, multiple studies highlight the fact that although webinars do not represent a substitute to the traditional classroom, if properly used, they can facilitate better quality of interaction and learning. Furthermore, taking in regard the advantages of webinars as a learning tool for adult learners (reduction of travel and attendance costs, time efficiency and convenience for busy schedules), implies that the potentials of webinars in adult education are truly innumerable.

The previous chapters explored some of the possible uses of the webinar tool in educational purposes. They highlight the fact that webinars can be used to fit a variety of needs and preferences on behalf of educators and learners. In this context, it was shown that webinars, despite being essentially a tool for synchronous online learning, are very adaptable and can be combined with various other forms of asynchronous communication. This combination of methods can facilitate a more quality learning experience and alleviate some of the drawbacks of synchronous online learning.

The wide variety of webinar tools and features presented in the previous chapters show that the use of latest technological developments in online learning facilitates unprecedented possibilities for interaction and quality learning experience. The sheer number and possibilities these features provide indicates that the flexibility of webinars as tools for learning makes them excellent tool for educators with different teaching methods and preferences.



The strategies for organization and delivering of webinars are aimed to ease the process of adaption to this new teaching and learning strategy for all the parties involved. The provide a comprehensive step-by-step guide on effective strategies in designing and conducting a successful webinar. It is implied that this guide cannot exhaust the truly numerous uses of this tool, which are emerging every day. However, it provides an overview of the most common and recommended strategies. As the number and variety of uses of webinars in educational purposes increase, the importance of webinars as an educational tool in adult and distance education is expected to gain prominence.



Annex 1

DESCRIPTION	FREE VERSION	PREVIEW VERSION	PAID SUBSCRIPTION
GoToWebinar (www.gotomeeting.com)			
GoToWebinar is a webinar software with multi-language capability that extends to the interface and chat, making it especially useful for webinar providers delivering lectures in languages different than English.	No	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reporting and Analytics • Polls, Handouts, and Q&A • Full Service Registration • Automated Emails • Custom Branding • Integrations • VOIP, Phone Audio & Toll Free • Local Recording • Online Recording • Simulated Live* • Editing Suite* • Testing and Certification* (* only with the highest subscription)
Google + Hangouts (https://hangouts.google.com)			
Google+ Hangout is not a standard premium webinar platform, but it comes with a remarkable number of features for collaborative meetings,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to 10 people in a single video/audio call. 	N/A	Free



presentations, workshops, etc. About the only thing it doesn't do (yet) is allow presenters to charge their audience to hangout or sell within a hangout.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ability to live stream straight to your attached YouTube Channel and/or a website• Can automatically record and publish hangouts to YouTube.• Works on all devices and platforms.• Send photos, emoji, and chat messages during hangout.• Screen share		
ADOBE CONNECT LEARNING / ADOBE CONNECT WEBINARS			
Adobe Connect represents a high-quality, professional webinar service, with a large set of features. This platform is recommended for businesses with serious webinar needs.	No	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mobile access• Screen / document sharing• Polls, Q&A, chat, notes, whiteboard, emoticons• Customizable layouts• Share rich media• Multiple hosts / presenters in meeting• Breakout rooms (only for Adobe Connect Learning)• Recordings (create, edit, stream)• Event promotion and registration• Lead management and analytics• Course and curricula creation and management (only for Adobe Connect Learning)• Learner tracking and certification (only for Adobe Connect Learning)



AnyMeeting (www.anymeeting.com)			
AnyMeeting is aimed at providing a solid web conferencing solution to small businesses.	No	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Custom Registration Forms• Promotion Through Facebook & Twitter• Custom Branding• Green Room / Attendee Waiting Room• Screen Sharing• Presentation Sharing• Polling• Handouts• Webinar Recording and Sharing• Support for up to 1,000 Attendees• Follow-up Emails, Surveys, or Tests
ReadyTalk (www.readytalk.com/webinars)			
ReadyTalk offers the ability to host some of the largest webinars, with its highest price tier allowing for up to 3,000 attendees, and its most basic webinar level allows for up to 150 participants.	No	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Customized branding• "Add to Calendar" invitation links for Outlook and Google• Customizable registration forms• Flexible confirmation options• Automated reminder emails• Marketing campaign tracking• Event promotion tools for LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter• Integrated audio conferencing• Presentation slides & PDFs• Share application(s) or desktop• One-click recording• Chat/Q&A sessions• Customizable Polling questions



			<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Desktop and mobile participation• Annotation tools for slides and applications• Co-presenter promotion• Present in full-screen mode• Share pre-recorded video clips• Post-meeting surveys• Follow-up emails• Extensive reporting• Recording editor• Recording hosting and distribution• Meeting archive pages
ClickWebinar (www.clickwebinar.com)			
ClickWebinar is a webinar platform with simple and direct interface. An advantage is the translation tool for multi-language webinars. This service serves as a good option for business marketing.	No	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Full desktop and browser sharing• Moderated (Q&A) and private chat• Simultaneous chat translation• Social media sharing• Polling and FAQ sessions• Record meetings• Statistics• Android App• iPhone App
Join.me (www.join.me)			
Join.me is a cloud-based software that allows people, businesses, and organizations to meet online for various purposes. It has a simple,	No	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Screen sharing• Presenter swap• Annotations• Whiteboard• Mobile apps



user-friendly structure, that allows collaboration and sharing of ideas.			•
Webinars On Air (www.webinarsonair.com)			
Webinars On Air is a wrapper that adds webinar functionality to Google Hangouts. So the software driving the webinar is Hangouts, but people access it via Webinars on Air which gives the presenter a few more features.	No	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendee tracking • Webinar recording • Desktop sharing • Custom registration page
Zoom (http://zoom.us)			
	No	Yes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feature-rich mobile apps for iOS and Android • HD video • HD voice • Dynamic voice detection • Dual stream for dual screen • Mac, Windows, Linux, iOS and Android • Group messaging • Screen share documents, photos and video clips • iPhone/iPad screen share with iOS mirror • Annotation and co-annotation • Keyboard and mouse control • Whiteboarding
WebinarJam (www.webinarjam.com)			



<p>WebinarJam is another webinar software that uses Google Hangouts and adds marketing features to it. This allows you to host very large webinars with all the powerful features of a professional webinar tool.</p>	No	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attendee spotlight• Urgency countdown timers• Unlimited attendees• Custom surveys• Automatically recorded sessions• Post-webinar reminder emails• Detailed analytics• Control and filtered chat rooms• Embedded registration on the organizer's website or blog• SMS reminders• Webcam and desktop sharing• Social media integration• Browser based viewing• Viewing on a mobile device
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