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Twelve tips to present an effective webinar

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Abstract

Educators are increasingly invited to present via webinars rather than in-person. Webinars offer multiple advantages over in-person presentations, including the ability to speak to participants across a wide geographic area and the possibility of reduced financial and time costs for the webinar organizer, speakers, and participants. To capitalize on these advantages, educators need strategies to present effectively using this medium. Here we provide 12 tips for effective webinar presentations based upon best practices identified in the literature and the authors' experience organizing educational webinars. The 12 tips are: (1) Learn webinar logistics, (2) Conduct a needs assessment, (3) Write specific learning objectives, (4) Attend a webinar, (5) Create clear, engaging slides, (6) Develop interactive learning activities, (7) Familiarize yourself with the technology, (8) Practice your presentation, (9) Be organized, prepared, and energetic, (10) Evaluate participant learning, (11) Learn from feedback, and (12) Share your experience with the organizer. We hope these tips help presenters improve the quality and effectiveness of their webinars.

Keywords

Communication skills; conferences; e-learning/computers; methods

Introduction

Webinars are live virtual events such as presentations, workshops, and seminars that allow participants to attend and participate using their computer or mobile device (Lande 2011; Zoumenou et al. 2015). Educational webinars are increasingly popular ways to convey knowledge and connect educators in different locations. Further, with the global Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) preventing group meetings and conference travel, webinars may be the only option to present information to a group of participants. Webinars have several advantages over in-person meetings, including ease of access, the creation of an on-demand, re-usable learning resource, and the ability to include participants in rural and remote settings (Hutten-Czapski 2014; Lieser et al. 2018). Further, there is minimal cost associated with webinars. Speakers and participants do not need to spend money or time to travel, and thus, there is a reduced negative impact on clinical care (Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018; Lieser et

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al. 2018; Fadlelmola et al. 2019). There is emerging evidence that webinars are both positively received by participants and successful in conveying valuable information, such as improving diagnostic skills or teaching novel procedures (Sedhom and Barile 2016; Knipfer et al. 2019; Mesquita et al. 2019).

As webinars continue to proliferate, educators will be increasingly invited to be webinar presenters. Our purpose in this paper is to identify strategies educators can use to deliver effective and impactful webinars. We base these strategies on our own experiences as presenters and webinar organizers, and, where available, on published literature.

Tip 1. Learn webinar logistics

Collect logistical information about the webinar. What is the date and time of the webinar, expected duration (including time for participant questions), and audience composition? Will there be a live video stream accompanying the webinar that allows participants to watch you speak? Will the webinar be recorded and archived for asynchronous viewing (Pickering et al. 2017)? Will any participants be physically present in the room with you during your presentation? Can participants download your materials (e.g. slides, handouts) when they join the webinar? Can they download the materials in advance of the presentation to read and become familiar with the content?

How will the webinar be evaluated? Can you receive these evaluations (Pickering et al. 2017)? If not, ask if you can distribute your own evaluation before and after the presentation to assess changes in participant learning and satisfaction with the webinar. You may inquire about the availability of teaching specialists at your institution or at the webinar organizer's institution who can help you develop your presentation (Curry and Smith 2005).

Get specific dates for when you need to send your materials (e.g. slides, handouts) to the webinar organizer. Ask if a practice session will be scheduled. In our experience organizing webinars, speakers often wait until it is so close to the date of the presentation to ask logistical questions, that it becomes too late to make modifications if the speaker's plans for the webinar differ from the way the organizers set it up. Further, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of submitting materials on time to the webinar organizer, as late submissions may negatively impact advertising, offering Continuing Education credits for the presentation, and the ability of participants to download materials ahead of time to prepare for the presentation.

Tip 2: Conduct a needs assessment

Conduct a needs assessment by asking questions of the webinar organizer and/or by surveying participants. What is the organizer hoping you can teach participants? If the presentation is successful, what new knowledge, skills, or abilities does the organizer want participants to have? Is the presentation a stand-alone webinar or part of a series? If part of a series, what topics precede and follow your presentation? How does the organizer envision your presentation fitting into the overall goals of the whole presentation series?

If possible, directly survey participants to determine current knowledge level and goals for attending your presentation. How can your presentation help participants address the issues

they are facing (Bedford 2016)? How are participants currently attempting to address these issues (Bedford 2016)? Are these interventions working?

Tip 3: Write specific learning objectives

Write relevant learning objectives based on participants' needs assessment data. For webinars that are part of a larger curriculum, gather data from the webinar organizer about expected learning objectives for your presentation in the context of the larger curriculum. For example, what specific knowledge, skills, or abilities do participants need to obtain to address the challenges they are facing? How does this relate to previous learning? How would you like participants to change as a result of attending your presentation? You may want participants to increase knowledge of a particular topic or apply skills in a specific situation. Use a learning taxonomy to write objectives that are action-oriented and attuned to the developmental needs of the participants (O'Neil and Murphy 2010). Learning taxonomies help to develop objectives that are appropriate for participants at different stages of their learning (O'Neil and Murphy 2010). For example, learning objectives for beginning learners may be knowledge based and learning objectives for more advanced learners may be focused on how this knowledge can be applied. Use these learning objectives to develop a title for the presentation that both summarizes what participants will learn as a result of attending (Bedford 2016) and motivates participants to attend.

Tip 4: Attend a webinar

Attend a webinar to understand the format and gain the experience of being an audience member (Pickering et al. 2017). Ideally, attend a webinar that will use the same platform you will use for your presentation. Pay attention to the layout of the screen and how information (e.g. slides, discussion box) is displayed. Note your own layout preferences and any changes you desire. Discuss these potential changes with your webinar organizer. Try out the webinar's interactive tools, such as polling questions, break-out rooms, and the discussion area. Consider the impact of these tools and how you can use them to increase participant involvement in your presentation.

Tip 5: Create clear and engaging slides

PowerPoint slides must be clear and engaging. Ensure that the slide font is large, and images are thoughtfully designed and organized. Clear and engaging slides are particularly important for webinars as participants may only be able to see the slides, and not the presenter, during the webinar. Further, some attendees may participate using their mobile phones, which have limited screen space. Thus, effective slides are critical to communicating information in webinars. Use a simple slide design template consistently throughout the presentation and avoid using backgrounds with patterns or contrasting colors (Microsoft; Lande 2011; NCSL 2017). Avoid using red and green colors to accommodate participants who are color blind. Consider using a dark font on a light background (Microsoft; Lande 2011). Text that is the same luminance as the background is difficult to read even if a different color.

A 32-point sans serif Arial, Helvetica, or Tahoma font is suggested (NCSL 2017). Keep a uniform font on all slides and only bold font to emphasize particular points. Avoid using

italicized fonts and all capital letters (Microsoft; NCSL 2017). Avoid complicated fonts or graphics, animations on, and in between, slides, (Bedford 2016), and sound effects, as these features may not work well on the webinar platform. If you provide links to other websites in your slides, include the full title of the website and, if possible, the full web address/URL (Microsoft). Ensure any text that has a hyperlink to another website is underlined to help people who are color blind identify there is a hyperlink (Microsoft).

Clearly define terms and concepts in your presentation. Webinar participants may be from different states or countries and may not be familiar with certain acronyms, abbreviations, or cultural references. Only include key phrases and essential information on the slides, rather than the full text of your presentation (NCSL 2017). Use the slides to summarize the presentation's main themes and messages and expand on these messages during the presentation (Bedford 2016). We have found it more impactful to include one point per slide and an engaging image related to this point, rather than having three to four points per slide. If presenters prefer the sequential disclosure of points on one slide, we suggest that the points all relate to a common topic or theme.

Images can enhance the text on the slides and provide visual representations of the concepts you are conveying (Guanci 2010). Use high-quality, clear, images (NCSL 2017) that you either have permission to use or are identified as acceptable for re-use. Do not use an image if you anticipate apologizing to the audience for the size or clarity of an image or table (e.g. 'I'm sorry you can't see this ... ') (NCSL 2017).

Include slide numbers and tell participants the slide number you are on throughout the presentation. This will help participants who are only listening to the webinar audio and have downloaded or printed out the presentation slides prior to the talk. Distributing the slides prior to the presentation will allow people who live in locations where it is difficult to access a live-stream internet presentation, to participate.

Include a slide at the end of the presentation summarizing the main points (Guanci 2010; Lande 2011; Bedford 2016). Proofread the slides for spelling and grammatical errors (Lande 2011) and ask a colleague to do the same. We have found it helpful to read the slides out loud as a means of proofreading.

Tip 6: Develop interactive learning activities

Identify ways to interact with participants and involve them in the presentation (Bedford 2016). Ask the webinar organizer what interactive features are available to use and what activities have been effective in past webinars. Webinar programs may allow for polling questions, creation of break-out discussion rooms, discussion box conversations, and use of images, such as 'raise my hand,' for participants to indicate agreement with the presenter or to indicate they have a question (Lande 2011; Zoumenou et al. 2015; Lieser et al. 2018). Polling questions allow presenters to quickly ascertain current participant knowledge (Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018) or identify the number of participants who have experienced something related to the topic being discussed (Lande 2011). The webinar program may also be able to create online break-out discussion rooms to allow participants to join smaller groups and complete exercises (Lieser et al. 2018). Plan your timing for interactive

activities, as we have found most interactive activities take longer via webinar than in person.

Handouts with questions or learning activities can increase interaction with the material. Ideally, handouts can be downloaded by participants and used throughout the webinar to further involve participants (Lieser et al. 2018). Ensure that participants who do not have access to the online webinar platform, (e.g. participants attending via audio only or who are physically in the room with you), are included in the interactive activities. Read questions and comments from the discussion box out loud, as this will help include participants who are participating by audio only.

If you plan on using the webinar program's interactive features, ensure you understand how they work. For example, how will participants ask you questions during the presentation? At the end? Throughout? Will questions be asked through the discussion box or through the audio/phone feature of the webinar program? It may be best for participants to ask questions at the end of the presentation, rather than throughout, as you may answer the participant's question at a later point in your presentation (Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018). In our experience, it is best to have participants type questions into the discussion box at the end of the presentation. This may also allow participants whose first language is not the one used for the webinar feel more comfortable asking their questions (Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018). For us, allowing participants to ask questions using audio during the presentation has resulted in background noise and poor audio quality. Clearly communicate preferences about asking questions to participants through an introductory slide and ask participants to mute their microphones.

Consider how you will involve participants who do not appear to be actively engaging in the webinar. Ask participants to respond to polling questions and check that the number of responses matches the number of webinar participants. If some participants do not respond, remind participants to complete the poll and of the importance of being an engaged participant. In webinars with smaller audiences, it may be possible to directly ask questions to certain participants via audio or the discussion box. Let participants know at the start of the webinar if you plan on asking individualized questions to help participants prepare. If permitted by the webinar platform, create break-out rooms to host small discussion groups. Develop small group learning activities and assign a role to each group member.

Tip 7: Familiarize yourself with the technology and develop a back-up plan

Familiarize yourself with the webinar platform prior to the presentation. Learn how to move slides forward and back-ward (NCSL 2017), respond to questions raised in the discussion box, and use the platform's interactive features (e.g. polling). Clarify the roles the organizer would like you to play, including uploading slides and handouts, setting up the webinar platform, and moderating the discussion box. How will the organizer begin the webinar? At what point will the organizer give you the capability to advance your slides? Test the quality of the webinar audio with your phone. Generally, it is advised to present using a headset or handset connected to a landline, rather than a speaker phone or a mobile phone (Guanci 2010; Lande 2011; Bedford 2016). We have found it best to mute all participant phone lines

to minimize ambient noise, including music and voice recordings that may occur if a participant puts the call ‘on hold.’

It is important to develop a backup plan with the webinar organizer if technological issues arise (Lande 2011). Account for multiple situations, such as a power outage (we’ve had this one), phone lines stop working (we’ve had this one too), or if the fire alarm is activated on site (not yet experienced, but we are ready!) (Lande 2011). Ask if there is a webinar planning checklist that delineates each person’s roles and responsibilities (Faddeilmola et al. 2019). This planning will help you identify the most appropriate person to contact depending on the issue. Develop a method to privately communicate with the organizer during the webinar, to confirm the technology is working correctly and problem-solve situations that may arise.

Bring a paper copy of your slides and handouts, in case the computer, webinar platform, or internet connection are not working (Bedford 2016). Save these materials on multiple, easily accessible devices, including on a media (thumb) drive and in your email.

Tip 8: Practice your presentation multiple times

Practice your presentation multiple times using the webinar technology (Guanci 2010; Bedford 2016). Time yourself giving the presentation to ensure you remain within your allotted time (Lande 2011). Take into account time for the organizer to introduce you. Consider what content can be eliminated if you end up running short. Ask colleagues to listen to your presentation and, if possible, use the webinar platform to do so. Some webinar presenters prefer to stand while presenting, as this may increase energy and enthusiasm. Explore multiple ways of presenting (e.g. standing, sitting, using hand gestures) and ask for feedback from colleagues on effectiveness (Lande 2011). Note any technology issues that arise during these practice sessions and discuss these issues and potential solutions with the webinar organizer.

Use ‘you’ language in the presentation (Guanci 2010; Lande 2011). For example, say ‘During today’s session you will learn [topic]’ instead of ‘Today I will talk about [topic]’ (Lande 2011). Using ‘you’ will help create a more one-on-one relationship with participants, despite them not being physically present in the room with you.

Tip 9: Be organized, prepared, and energetic

Log on to the webinar platform 15–30 minutes prior to the start of the webinar (Lande 2011). Conduct a sound check with the webinar organizer (Lande 2011). Use a desktop or laptop that is plugged in (Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018). If you need to use a laptop on battery power, charge the laptop prior to the presentation (Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018). If you will be presenting via video, dress professionally, ensure the space behind you is clean and organized, and remind yourself to look at the camera while presenting and not at the slides (Bedford 2016; Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018).

Present in a quiet space and minimize potential noises (Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018). This includes muting the sounds on your computer, phone, mobile device, and any other electronics in the room (Bedford 2016), and asking the webinar organizer to mute any

sounds from the webinar platform (e.g. notifications when participants join the meeting) (Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018). Close computer programs that send you notifications, such as email, to prevent distractions during your presentation (Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018). Put a 'do not disturb' note on your door (Guanci 2010). Have a glass of water and a clock close to you (Lande 2011; Bedford 2016).

Position the screen at eye level and make ergonomic adjustments so your head and neck are in comfortable positions (Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018). If you have external websites you would like participants to visit during the presentation, place a link to these websites in the discussion box (Bedford 2016). Remember to smile and be enthusiastic during the presentation!

Tip 10: Evaluate participant learning

Evaluate outcomes from your presentation. Did the participants achieve the presentation's learning goals? Use a post-webinar survey to evaluate learning outcomes and satisfaction with the presentation. Ask questions that specifically address the impact of using a webinar platform on the participant experience, learning, and interactivity. You may also ask knowledge-based questions before and after the webinar to measure change. Finally, consider surveying participants in the weeks or months after the webinar to ascertain how the learning has translated into practice.

Tip 11: Learn from feedback

Ask participants, peers, and the webinar organizer for feedback on the presentation. This feedback should include both strengths of the presentation and aspects that can be changed in the future to further strengthen the presentation. Ask for specificity in the feedback to allow you to make the necessary changes, including on the style, content, clarity, interactivity, and helpfulness of the session (Carvalho-Silva et al. 2018). Ask specific questions related to the webinar platform, including on the effectiveness of the interactive aspects and how the presentation can be improved in the future.

Feedback can be collected in a number of ways, including a post-webinar participant survey, discussions with the webinar organizer and peers, participant comments during and following the webinar, and your own self-assessment. Ask the organizer to provide you with a copy of the comments participants write in the discussion box. Encourage the organizer to distribute the feedback survey immediately following the webinar, rather than days or weeks later, to make it easier for participants to remember specific details about the webinar and potentially increase participation rates. Take time to self-assess how the presentation went, including strengths and areas that can be improved in the future. We have found it helpful to self-assess soon after the webinar ends to remember aspects that went well and aspects that we would like to change in future presentations.

Tip 12: Share your experience as a presenter with the organizer

Provide feedback to the webinar organizer on the aspects of the webinar that went well and those that could be improved in the future from the perspective of the presenter. Provide feedback on all aspects of the webinar, including the invitation, preparations, practice

sessions, the presentation itself, and the evaluation data collected. As webinar organizers, it is helpful for us to hear this feedback to allow us to make changes for future presentations. We have used this feedback to enact changes to our webinar planning and communication with presenters, which has led to an enhanced webinar experience for presenters and participants.

Conclusions

Webinars are increasingly used in education to present information and teach skills. Webinars allow for wide dissemination of presentations and may reduce costs for organizers and participants. By using the tips outlined in this paper, it is our hope that educators will be prepared to present webinars of outstanding quality. Research is needed to continue to develop methods to improve the quality of webinars and assess their impact on participants. Future research can empirically study the strategies described in this paper to better understand their effect on learning. These strategies can be refined based on the results. Over time, we hope there is an increased focus on using empirically supported teaching techniques when presenting webinars.

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