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The Big Pivot: Moving a Continuing Education Program Online

Behan and Sharpe

Abstract

In 2020, the rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic made the delivery of in-person social work continuing education impossible, suddenly leaving online training as the only viable and safe alternative. This article describes the experience of a large continuing education program, based at a school of social work, and its transition to deliver synchronous webinars for the first time. This process included cancelling 200 previously scheduled in person programs and rapidly moving to online synchronous webinars. It also led to a shift in staff roles and responsibilities and the recognition of the value of virtual mutual support among the team. Some of the key lessons learned during this transition include building staff and trainer webinar literacy, troubleshooting and navigating online platforms, development of best practice skills for online training, and evaluation of synchronous webinars.

Keywords: Continuing Education, Webinars, COVID-19, Synchronous, Transition

Introduction

In March 2020, as the impending pandemic came into focus, we knew we had a crisis. As the managing team of a social work continuing education program, we knew the pandemic posed an existential threat to our program. The program, which began in the 1970s, had grown to be the largest university-based social work continuing education program in the country. Annually, the program offered between 350-400 programs on a wide range of topics relevant to social workers. *All of them were in-person events*. The state where we operate has a two-year relicensing cycle for social workers, creating a "busy season" at the end of the cycle. In March, we were heading into the last six months of the cycle, so we had scheduled over 200 in-person workshops to meet the demand. We had to cancel all of them. Abruptly.

The program's staff consists of five people, including two faculty members who have additional academic teaching and committee responsibilities for the school. The rest of the team consists of two program coordinators, one of whom manages a grant program with 40% of her time, and a ¾ time administrative assistant. The sudden closure of the campus required all of us to work from home, literally overnight, receiving word that we needed to work remotely starting "tomorrow."

The first looming challenge was to establish new procedures quickly, as we had to manage the logistics of contacting 200 instructors and provide refunds to those who had signed up for workshops. Once we figured out how to hold staff meetings virtually, the team divided tasks and went about cancelling everything—all the upcoming sources of revenue for our self-sustaining unit.

As everyone in the larger society grappled with the fear, challenges, and confusion around the looming pandemic, our department faced an imminent existential threat—would we be able to save our program? Would we remain a viable resource within our school of social work? How would this shift in revenue impact our ability to sustain the current composition of the CE program? The next six months were slated to provide much of the revenue to sustain the program for the next two years. We concluded that our only option was to offer synchronous webinars. However, in over 40 years of operation, the program had never offered a single live online event. We shared the belief that in-person training was best, and we had been committed to that philosophy.

Getting Started

To start, we investigated different video conference apps, including the features they offered, how to get people connected to them, and best practices in hosting webinars on them. It was a steep learning curve that we needed to ascend quickly. Initially we tried Webex and then moved to Zoom, as it best fit our needs. We held simula-

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tions amongst our team, replicating the entire customer experience, including registering and paying for the webinar, steps to log in, and how to use the virtual meeting interface. We were in full out crisis mode, and unbeknownst to our group, these simulations further developed the relationships of an already strong team. In planning and preparing to meet the needs of our participants, we also met our important human needs of belongingness and mattering, which were both in dire need during the early months of the pandemic. Our simulations and regular meetings kept us connected as we invested in our common goal of providing excellent training to our participants. This experience has expanded not only our sense of teamwork, but the basic structure of our program and our overall sense of purpose.

Once we felt we had a working understanding of the process, our attention turned to offering some initial webinars. We knew we had a lot to learn, and there were many hard-won lessons to come over the ensuing months. However, aside from the pressure to reboot our program in a new way, there was a clear need to support the social work community, as the impact of the pandemic was being felt acutely. We wanted to get some programming running to address the crises social workers faced in settings such as mental health, health care, and schools.

Our initial outreach to instructors was based on two criteria, do they have expertise that will meet the needs of the moment, and can they present it online? We assembled a short list of instructors whom we thought could manage the online pivot and worked with them to create relevant webinar topics. It became clear that there was a strong need for virtual training on topics related to the pandemic such as crisis work, addressing mental health issues, how to provide telehealth services, and to validate that the pandemic also impacted those providing services. Social workers were struggling to suddenly provide virtual services—something most had received no training on—which only exacerbated the practice fears and anxiety that providers reported. We developed relevant webinars and publicized the events via email and social media. We crossed our fingers that we could pull off the technical aspects of delivering the webinars.

Identifying the Need for Virtual Connection

Aside from some minor glitches, the initial webinars went reasonably well. Attendance was strong; the six webinars offered in April 2020 averaged 119 attendees each. Clearly, there was a strong demand for virtual training, as social workers were dealing with many challenges while also feeling quite isolated. The online connection was a much-needed source of community for many. This was one of the surprising and enduring findings throughout 2020, that the virtual space was providing both vital training as well as vital connection. Seeing and hearing other social workers, having their stress acknowledged, learning strategies—all resonated with participants profoundly.

We witnessed the hunger for opportunities to learn and connect virtually, helping us realize we needed to produce more programming. This meant working with instructors outside of our initial short list, most of whom had never presented online before. We began contacting dozens of our established instructors about their willingness to conduct webinars. Some refused outright, some jumped at the chance, and most were interested but rather leery about the prospect.

Preparing Instructors to Teach Webinars

The two primary challenges involved convincing instructors that they could successfully present online (with our help) and that their established five-hour in-person trainings would need revisions to work on a video conferencing platform. Through some trial and error, we found that a three-hour webinar was the sweet spot, providing enough time for a substantive learning experience while not overdoing the required screen time. This meant instructors had to redesign any existing presentations to fit an online format. Rushing through a day's worth of PowerPoint slides in three hours would simply not work. A common message was, "I'm sure it is all good content, but chunks of it must be cut for any of it to be well received." It usually took one webinar for instructors to see the wisdom in this approach.

Two key factors helped us onboard a large contingent of instructors. The first involved training four members of our team to serve as moderators of the webinars. Basically, our staff members

served as copilots throughout the webinar process, welcoming and preparing the presenter prior to the training and assisting them during the webinar. The moderator also served as host of the webinar, warmly welcoming attendees, showing a short PowerPoint on how to use the Zoom interface, and introducing the presenter. This presence gave participants a sense of connection to the school and provided instructors with much appreciated support. The moderator would then manage the technical aspects of presenting virtually such as admitting participants, monitoring the chat box, muting and unmuting participants, uploading handouts, and keeping time. This provided quality control and allowed instructors to relax and do what they do best—teach from their expertise.

The second major necessity for onboarding new instructors was to familiarize them with how to present virtually and raise awareness of some of the interactive features available through the virtual platform. To achieve this, we developed a training program covering the basics of presenting online. In the training, we reviewed best practices and had each instructor practice displaying their slides and showing a video. In addition, with particularly anxious presenters, we encouraged moderators to meet with trainers prior to their webinar to do a dry run of the program, which ensured a polished presentation and a strong trainer-moderator team during the training day.

One of the key topics of this training was to help prepare instructors for how fundamentally *different* it feels to present online. For those used to the lively feeling of speaking to people in a classroom, the drop off in energy while presenting online can be jarring. Many instructors were thrown off their game when they did not get the verbal and nonverbal feedback they were accustomed to from in-person events. It seems participants on video conferencing platforms feel less of a need to show any type of reciprocal response to the instructor. Participants appear to experience a degree of anonymity and comfort from their home or office. By being aware of this dynamic, we were able to coach instructors to "bring the enthusiasm" instead of waiting for it to arise organically. We also learned to account for connectivity issues such as unstable Wi-Fi that could delay responses to prompts offered by the instructors.

Another aspect of the instructor training was to help them determine how they prefer to take questions during the webinar. Some preferred questions in writing via chat, while others preferred hearing the voices of participants, which involved having them virtually raise their hand and then be unmuted. The moderator would work with this preference as well as learning whether an instructor would prefer immediate questions or to take them at regular pause points during the presentation. The question format would then be described to participants at the outset of each webinar. Having these expectations clear at the outset helped webinars run smoothly.

One valuable lesson that we incorporated into the instructor training involved the use of content warnings. During a webinar on human trafficking, we received protestations in the chat box from a parent who had children in earshot when some sensitive material was discussed. With an in-person training, where a group of professionals are alone in a classroom, this type of warning is usually not necessary. However, you never know who in a home could be overhearing a webinar; thus the need for content warnings when appropriate.

In the early part of the pandemic, both instructors and participants struggled at times with the technology. We have a program ethos of providing good customer service, which was successfully put to the test during this tense time. Technology panic abounded. We painstakingly provided troubleshooting for people having difficulty registering and logging into webinars. Moderators helped attendees learn how to mute their microphones and turn their cameras on, and they helped instructors learn how to display their PowerPoint slides and videos. However, overall, instructors exceeded our expectations and they rose to the challenge of presenting online. Their in-person presenting skills were still a driving force in making their webinars engaging and useful. The same goes for participants, whose need for help steadily declined over time as everyone became more adept at functioning virtually. We expect this will be an unexpected positive outcome of the pandemic—a collective push for most of us into online competence. When grandparents are suddenly adept at initiating Zoom calls, something substantive has changed.

Meeting the Need for Online Training

Once our continuing education program got the hang of it, we found there was an ongoing high demand for webinars, so we scheduled a lot of them. After initially cancelling over 200 in-person workshops between March-August 2020, we were able to conduct over 118 live webinars during that same period serving 8,842 people. Overall, during the pandemic, from April 1, 2020 - March 31, 2021, we conducted 297 webinars, serving 15,133 people. The pivot had worked for two key reasons: our team showed great dedication during this crisis, and there was a newfound demand for webinars which we met by mobilizing our existing instructor base into the virtual space.

Lessons Learned

There were many lessons learned along the way, some of which include:

Use of PowerPoints

- Have a welcome slide to start the webinar that includes instructions on how to use the videoconferencing interface.
- Reduce the font size in PowerPoint presentations designed for classroom projection. Larger fonts can look odd when viewed on a computer or phone screen.
- Show a PowerPoint during breaks that has slides timed to count down the minutes remaining in the break. It helps ensure everyone is ready after the break. The slides can also be used to market the program.
- Participants will always ask for a copy of the webinar PowerPoint. Know in advance if this is possible and have a plan to disseminate it.
- Moderators should always have copies of all instructor materials as a backup and be prepared to display them as needed.

Use of Video

- Videos can be difficult to show correctly and often have technical issues. Encourage instructors to practice showing them before the live event.
- Have YouTube videos paused and ready to go, allowing any initial commercials to play out.

Virtual Breakout Rooms

- Breakout sessions are a key part of making a webinar interactive and engaging. Participants have indicated they enjoy the small group interactivity they offer.
- There is a disconnect between the instructor and participants in virtual breakouts, so best practices include:
  * Provide clear instructions before the breakout starts, preferably written.
  * Be sure to inform participants how long the breakout will last.
  * Suggest all participants turn their cameras on for improved interaction.
  * Advise groups to select a group spokesperson before starting an activity.
  * Remind participants that PowerPoint will not be visible in breakout room so write down activity or take a picture of the PowerPoint with a cell phone.

Using the Poll Feature in Zoom

- Polls are best setup before the webinar starts.
- Participants generally like doing them and they improve interactivity.
- They are useful at the outset of a webinar to learn about the group (e.g., work setting, years of experience).

Participation

- Advise participants that their login time will be monitored to avoid early sign offs.
- At the start, advise participants how to rejoin should they lose connection.
- Expect last-minute registrations with online programs. Participants do not feel the need to "save a seat" and will register up to the last minute.
- Email clear login instructions at least twice in the 24 hours prior to an event.
- As a webinar starts, have staff on standby to help those having trouble logging in.

As our continuing education program developed its webinar program, we created a new online satisfaction survey to gauge its success. An email

is sent to all participants after the webinar asking them to take a short survey using the cloud-based survey platform Qualtrics. The survey asks attendees to rate their overall satisfaction using a 6-point Likert scale in the following areas: a) the online format, b) the instructor, and c) the overall webinar. The mean for each area is above 5.5 on the 6-point scale, indicating a high level of satisfaction in all areas. The qualitative data collected also shows participants are extremely satisfied with their webinar experience, with a high percentage expressing gratitude for the availability of live online training during the pandemic. Many participants also appreciated the high level of convenience a webinar provides.

It is likely that this elevated demand for online training will continue even after the pandemic subsides, as people value receiving high quality training in a convenient format. One of our biggest lessons has been a humbling one. Our previous bias that in-person training is superior has been put to the test and has been disproven based on our evaluation data and informal feedback received at every webinar. Virtual training is here to stay. Time to jump on board.