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Supporting emotional participants during online group learning

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Deborah Humphrey and Claudia Filsinger look at ways to detect and manage emotions while facilitating online.

Pre Covid-19 most learning groups such as workshops and action learning sets were meeting face-to-face. Facilitators could manage the environment setting it out to suit the nature of the group and giving facilitators an opportunity to be aware of group dynamics, individuals and their body language, for example noticing when somebody is becoming distressed.

The facilitator would have a number of options afforded by the proximity to the group and by the environment to support the individual, making it easy to suggest a break, offer the participant time out and even have a quiet interaction to check on the wellbeing of the individual.

Covid-19 has changed this way of working and while many facilitators have found creative and supportive ways of taking their work online – there are some fundamentally different practice issues to consider. One of the issues that has emerged in running learning groups via video conferencing technology is how to recognise and support group members who become emotional.

Why this area of practice has become of increasing importance is explored by looking first at the current factors that can impact how individuals and groups behave in the online arena. This is followed by best practice recommendations for delivering emotionally sensitive online group facilitation.

Uncertainty

The international uncertainty caused by the pandemic affected the collective experience. This can be mirrored at the micro-level as people worry about their future and loved ones. The amount of change has been described as a similar experience to the grieving process: shock, depression, anger and for many the acceptance of the 'new normal' is yet to arrive.
Privacy

In short, people have had very little control over the changes, and the loss of liberty has had profound effects on physical, social and psychological wellbeing. Attending groups with this level of anxiety, has caused an instability in group situations that was previously not present.

This emotional uncertainty has been (for some) difficult to contain and small things can spark emotional reactions. For example, a group member may suddenly become distressed in an online group, without any seeming provocation, such as when talking about planning meetings.

Changed boundaries

Work boundaries have shifted which leads to questions about work behaviour and understanding of the new rules. When working from home becomes the 'new normal' questions about what to wear, what to do with children or animals can lead to increasing stress for participants.

The environment can be an added challenge: work meetings are suddenly happening from kitchens, sitting rooms, even bedrooms. Lighting and technology become added stressors and it is not unusual to hear a group start with 'can you hear me' or 'you are on mute'.

It seems as though this change in boundaries between work and home causes challenges and disruptions to how individuals behave in the online setting. This can cause tension or, conversely, people may become over-relaxed and over-share.

This way of working has led to what has been described as 'Zoom fatigue' and one component of this is tiredness which can lead to participants becoming emotional and distressed. Additionally, group participants can share more readily on screen and become very open in their feelings (as though the screen offers a safety blanket) which can cause them becoming visibly distressed more quickly.

These changed circumstances for participants can present a challenge also to facilitators who are likely to be having a similar individual experience. The final sections will discuss key challenges for virtual facilitators operating in an uncertain environment that can cause heightened emotions, and recommendations how to respond.

Visibility of participants and reading emotions

In a room, typically eye contact and observing body language is easily possible. In virtual groups, only the participants' heads show on video, not all participants are visible (e.g. while screensharing), and audio participants are not visible at all.

This means much less visual data to gauge the emotional state of individuals is available to the facilitator and none for audio-only participants. Also, bandwith issues can lead to misreading emotions: participants might look emotionally upset or tired when in fact the data transfer got frozen or delayed.

Generally, the practicality of managing technology can distract facilitators from reading the group.

Best-practice recommendations for virtual learning group facilitation

Pre-event

- Anticipate potential strong emotions arising in yourself as a facilitator (e.g. stress caused by technology; losing confidence caused by the delay of verbal or visual feedback by participants on mute or audio-only).
- Co-facilitating is highly recommended as is getting familiar with the technology.
- Consider inclusivity and accessibility when choosing the online platform and the impact of your design on participants' emotions.
- Sending information on the technology used in advanced with tips on how to upskill.
- Agree with co-facilitators how to respond to arising emotions that require acknowledgement and support.

During

- Create an atmosphere where everything is an invite, using inclusive language. If it is a repeat event, do introductions every time to engage all and welcome first-timers. For large events, use chat for written introductions.
- Give self-care guidance and reiterate this throughout the session. If you are using activities that are deeply reflective or involve personal sharing, suggest that participants think about their own wellbeing during the exercise.
- Explain at the start how to use chat to benefit the individual and group experience. Specifically, participants overwhelmed by emotions can use private chat to ask for support. Equally, facilitators can indicate a need for support to each other.
- Encourage participants to manage their learning by articulating any individual needs for support.
- The voice is a very good indicator of emotions, therefore get everybody to speak as early as possible to connect and check-in. Remember audio-only participants and equalise speaking time between participants.
- At the end, invite participants who are left with emotions they would like to talk about to stay behind or to contact facilitators separately.

After

- Plan time with your co-facilitator for a debrief after the event.
- Plan downtime in your schedule before the next event to re-energise.

About the authors

Deborah Humphrey is a coach and group facilitator at the www.thewellbeingstory.co.uk (http://www.thewellbeingstory.co.uk/) and Claudia Filsinger is a coach and facilitates virtual learning communities at Moving Maps Ltd. (https://www.moving-maps.com/)

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