



# 12 Ways To Design Learning Virtual-First

Create engaging and effective  
virtual learning workshops

# Why Design Learning Virtual-First?

Online, you'll find a wide range of articles about online learning vs face-to-face. However, as much of the L&D industry has moved things online, it's time we look at designing content for virtual learning first.

When designing virtual learning, it can be tempting to directly replicate what were previously face-to-face sessions, in live online classrooms. However, what we've learned is that in many situations this simply doesn't work—the learning isn't effective or engaging for a virtual audience.

This guide is here to help you effectively redesign your face-to-face training into virtual classrooms and workshops in a meaningful, engaging, and scalable way.

Beyond that, this guide can also help you to design new learning experiences with virtual or distance learning at the forefront.



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## Ways To Design Learning Virtual-First (at a glance)

There are 12 key things you need to consider when designing primarily virtual learning experiences.

- Reconsider your learners' needs and requirements now that they are virtual.
- Provide learners with multiple ways to contribute.
- Decide how you want learners to collaborate.
- Design your session(s) for distraction and dropout.
- Make time for plenty of breaks.
- Ensure lots of variety in your activities.
- Focus on building trust early on.
- Build in social learning and collaboration in a virtual context.
- Consider splitting your session up and spreading it out over time.
- Get your "studio" set up right.
- Research and facilitate with confidence.
- Plan, plan, plan. Test, test, test.

Next time you are designing or creating a virtual learning session, come back to this list and consider if you have followed each of the stages. If not, what can you add?

Over the next few pages, we'll look at each of the above items in more detail.

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## Ways To Design Learning Virtual-First (in more detail)



### Reconsider your learners' needs and requirements now that they are virtual

What is it you are looking to achieve with this session? What do your learners need from a virtual session? With this change in environment, it's important to reassess not only your learning outcomes and objectives but also the different ways to meet your learners' needs, now that they are working and learning at distance.



### Provide learners with multiple ways of contributing

We know, even from in-person training sessions, that no two people learn the same way.

It's important to consider that not everyone will be confident enough to speak in front of a group, even online, so factor in ways to encourage participation from less confident members of the session.

Provide more than one way to get your learners participating in these sessions. This could be through group discussions, polls, small group break-out sessions, virtual whiteboards, shared documents, and more.



## Decide how you want learners to contribute and collaborate

Similarly to the above, it's important to decide ahead of time the sort of interactions and collaborations you want your learners to be involved with to drive your learning goals. It's also worth considering the order and timing of each of these activities.

For example, do you want learners to reflect first and interact or collaborate with whiteboards later? Or perhaps engage in self-driven learning activities earlier in the session to ease them into the topic? This will change depending on your learners' and your objectives for the session.



## Design your sessions for distraction and dropout

Working from home, or even in different physical locations, means that distractions are much more significant than they are in a classroom learning space. Whether it's their partner, kids, or pets in the background, something being delivered, poor internet connectivity, or simply other commitments, some of your participants will be distracted and may need to leave.

We recommend establishing rules of disengagement at the start of your session. For example, if someone needs to leave, ask them to drop a message in a group chat before they go. Also, consider how a learner that misses a part of your workshop can catch up. You could record your session so that they can review it in a break.



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### Make time for plenty of breaks

This is one of the most important parts of designing for virtual. The levels of concentration needed to engage via a screen over an extended period of time means that your learners need more breaks if they are going to get value from your session.

We recommend factoring a minimum five-minute break on the hours, with a longer break of 15 minutes every two hours, as well as time for lunch breaks away from the screen.

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### Ensure lots of variety in your activities

Not only is it important to vary the times of your activities within a virtual learning session, it's also incredibly important to build in variety. Our brains are wired to seek novelty, which is part of the reason why we can get bored in extended sessions with the same activity, same speaker, same tone, or lack of interaction.

Try to vary the duration, tempo, pace, required input, levels of collaboration, and content of your activities to keep learners engaged and able to get the most out of the session.



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### Focus on building trust early on

It's important your learners feel comfortable with both you and each other early on in the session. Without the chance to meet each other in person and build trust for open and useful conversation, you need to build connections virtually.

Icebreakers serve a different purpose in virtual sessions. In virtual sessions, icebreaker activities replace the networking and socializing that takes place in corridors and foyers before face-to-face sessions.

We recommend asking questions that don't relate to work, to add a more personal but non-invasive touch to the "getting to know each other" part of the session. For example, what is something you have learned or a new skill you have picked up outside of work in the last year? What is your favorite holiday destination (and why?). Telling a group something about the area you live or work in brings you all together despite physical distance.

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### Build in social learning and collaboration in a virtual context

We all learn socially, and face-to-face learning sessions will often use learners working together in pairs or groups to drive their outcomes. You will need to consider what gaps online social learning strategies can fill. Think about the different types of group and collaborative sessions you can include, from creative collaboration to reflection and action or task-based activities. You'll also need to consider which tools you require to make this possible: virtual whiteboards, a Slack channel, breakout spaces, etc.

It's also really important to support your learners through the experience if they are interacting with these tools or these kinds of sessions for the first time. Make sure you have the support (what we call 'the scaffolding') in place until they feel comfortable.



## Consider splitting up your session and spreading it out over time

We've seen some clients do this and some clients not. Ultimately, splitting out what was previously an all-day workshop into four or five virtual sessions over a week or few works for some and not for others. In a compliance-learning context, it may not be wise to split the sessions out. However, remember that just because you used to do it one way, doesn't mean it has to stay that way.

Whether you split a full-day session into two half days or completely change the structure of your learning and add some blended elements in between, there is no right or wrong way to make this change. So don't be afraid to experiment.



## Get your "studio" set up right

As the facilitator of virtual learning, it is critical that your "studio" (whether that is your living room, dining room, office, or any other space) is set up properly for the session. This means considering everything from lighting and sound (and how these will change over the day), a clean background free of distractions, and, of course, a strong consistent internet connection.

Make sure you consider your plan B if something goes wrong. In the case of your internet, for instance, check how easily you can use your phone data instead.



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## Research and facilitate with confidence

Whether you're new to virtual facilitation or simply want to improve, it always pays to do research. There are some brilliant podcasts and recorded video sessions out there and it can definitely be worth joining sessions with seasoned virtual facilitators to watch them at work. It's great to put yourself on the other side of the experience and get a first-hand understanding of what works and what doesn't from the learners' perspective.

Not only is this research good to help you improve your facilitation skills, but being backed by this knowledge can help you gain confidence. Maintaining an image of confidence (even if you're not quite there yet) will help your learners trust you and remain more engaged in the session.

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## Plan, plan, plan. Test, test, test

Once you have the outline elements of your virtual learning session(s) in place, it's time to begin testing. Unless you're a thoroughly seasoned pro in facilitating live online sessions, there is much less room for improvisation than in a classroom. This means you need to meticulously plan your virtual learning experiences, including testing out transitions between tools and technologies, checking that the session is working, and ensuring that what you have planned fits within the time you have.

Time may feel different in an online environment than in person. You can save time in some areas—for example, pulling people out of breakout spaces instantly, instead of waiting for 5-10 minutes for groups to stop talking and make their way back to your room. This is a real time advantage of online. The lack of physical space can mean you can fit far more people in as well. But if you want to do this, make sure you plan for all of the above (especially those breaks) and test thoroughly before you begin.

Ready to take your next steps in the world of virtual learning? Or perhaps you have some questions? [Get in touch](#) with one of our experts.



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