

# Distance learning: Pros and cons

*“Everybody who is incapable of learning has taken to teaching.”* **Oscar Wilde**

Although I’m not a qualified trainer per-se (putting aside my couple of years as coach for an under 12 years-old Volley-Ball team when I was 17- # totally useless piece of information) , I did run several training sessions on various topics over my years working for Thales, gathering some experience and a relative “ease” in that exercise (at least from my point of view – maybe the trainees have a different opinion 😊).

That modest experience was put to the test recently when I had the opportunity to design and deliver a full training course around Sales & Marketing. A bit daunting at first but it is the kind of things I enjoy so I was all up for it.

The question that rose immediately was How? Since a little detail called Covid19 crashed the party we only had 2 choices:

- Postpone to run the training “as usual” (in a classroom)
- Go full digital (unchartered territory for me)

In the face of incertitude and contrary to the popular French axiom *“When in doubt, do nothing”*; we went ahead with full digital. We simply couldn’t just wait and see; continuous people development is far too important especially in times of rapid changes.

In hindsight, it is clear I underestimated the difference between in person and distance learning. Here’s why and how.

## **PLANNING**

*“Good teaching is one-fourth preparation and three-fourths pure theatre.”* **Gail Godwin**

The course as I designed it had 5 main Modules:

- Module 1: 2Hrs
- Module 2: 4 Hrs
- Module 3: 6 Hrs
- Module 4: 2 Hrs (this one was not designed nor delivered by me)
- Module 5: 2 Hrs
- **16 Hours in total**

In “normal” times (if such a thing still exists) we would have gathered all the trainees in a room for 3 days and be done with it but of course, in Covid times, we had to resort to distance learning. In that context, running long sessions is simply impossible. We knew that from the get go and decided to split it all in 2Hrs sessions, spread over 4 weeks in order to be as little disruptive as possible for the business while keeping some momentum.

Tool wise, good old Zoom was preferred, its features are actually really good and things like the ability to create breakout rooms, share whiteboards and such make it way more interactive and engaging than just a regular Visio conference. Little did I know it would no be enough... but no spoilers!

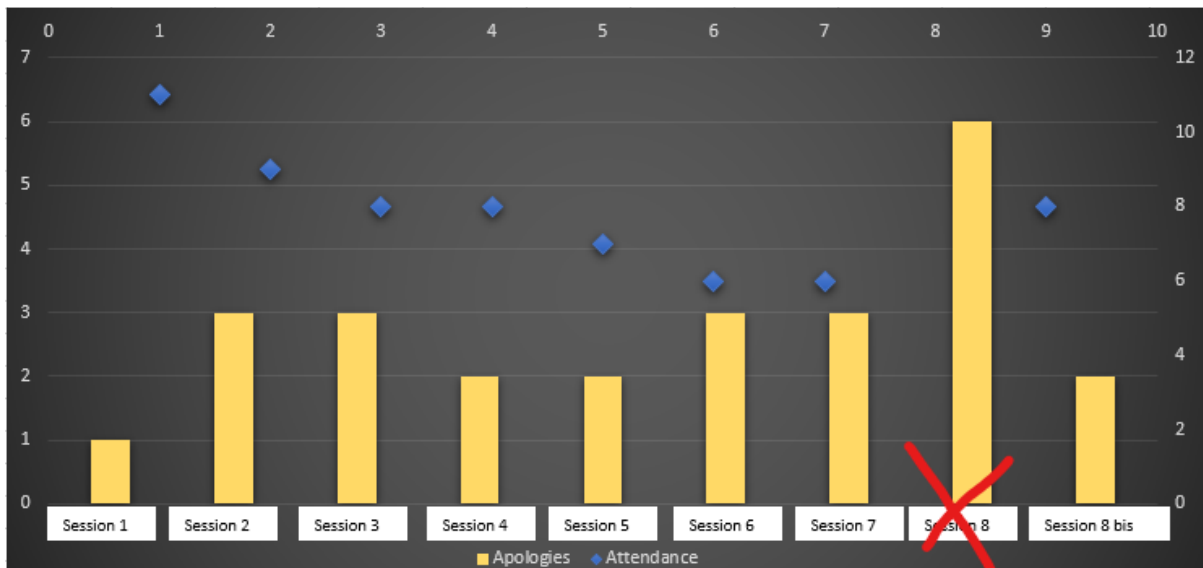
After selecting participants (it was a pilot training course), locking up the time slots and preparing the material, it was all set and ready to go!

## DELIVERY

*“Standing up and teaching is gruelling, but gruelling fun.”* **Charles E. Young**

I will not go into details but all things considered, it went pretty well. The main feedback from participants (and I agree) is that they really enjoyed the interactions: most participants did not know each other and each other’s businesses and they showed a lot of interest, engagement and active participation. The down side of course is that from a facilitation point of view it is not easy to manage the content delivery Vs the discussion time and as a consequence, some of the courses could not be completed. It was a pilot after all, I’ll do better next time 😊

The main issue has been attendance, by far. As you can see below, we aimed at a 15 people for this pilot group and ended up with 12 only (3 had left the company) and along the way, attendance simply dropped, leading us to reschedule the last session some 2 months later... Not great for keeping the momentum (some would say seeing the graph that it actually never picked up – fair enough).



They key takeaways:

- No session had a full attendance (but it is no different from any training in my experience)
- As the program progressed, participants got more and more dragged back into day to day activities, leading the attendance to drop.

- The Covid effect has also played a role. Even if Australia has been relatively spared from the pandemic, we had lockdowns, restrictions and a general deleterious atmosphere: uncertainty, economic concerns, unemployment on the rise, home schooling, toilet paper war, etc etc... All of these are mind polluting and energy sucking, eating away, bit by bit, our focus, our attention while drastically putting things in perspective. Indeed, a training course in that case may appear less meaningful; rightfully so.

Other than that, the other observations were (as per the feedback from participants):

- Surprisingly, the format/tool (ZOOM) were well rated. Thanks to functionalities I eluded to earlier.
- Timing and flow were a weak area: very fair rating considering we could not finish some of the courses as planned
- Content was rated high, and comments confirm they found it interesting
- Delivery ratings were off the charts with the unanimous comment: *"best trainer I ever had!!"*

Just Kidding; unfortunately, the delivery received the lower rates. Although slightly better than average, this is clearly where there's the most room from improvement and I actually agree. It could have been better and that is on me only.

## WHY?

*"If you're teaching today what you were teaching five years ago, either the field is dead or you are."* **Noam Chomsky**

Yes, what is behind these observations?

I will leave aside the format/tool and the content, those seemed to be adequate. There's always room for improvement but let's focus on the more problematic areas.

Regarding attendance, I actually understand, all of the participants started with a genuine will to participate and complete the course but along the way (4 weeks is a long time) life and work just happened and eventually, the course slowly goes down in the priority list. Shame, but eventually hardly evitable.

Timing, flow and delivery were off simply because of the format I believe; or more precisely, my lack of specific preparation and my failure to acknowledge that delivering a training remotely is very different from running it in person. I was OK at playing Tennis and all the sudden I have to play ping pong... Same same but different: All I saw was the racket, the ball and the net, close enough right? or so I thought...

- 2 Hours is short: I'm used to longer sessions where I play with time better. If you count the technical issues, and all, you have little time to deliver your message and almost no flexibility the swap things around as you go.
- The way I usually facilitate trainings or workshops relies a lot on the interaction with the audience, on body language, attitude etc etc... All things that usually allow me to interact better (I think) and tailor the "style" or content a little to match what I observe in the room.

Tough luck for me, behind a screen the feel is completely different and you cannot rely as much on your instincts.

- Just as the attendance dropped, my focus and motivation dropped a little over the 4 weeks... Life happens, even to me 😊. And this does not help you achieve a high-quality delivery

## **MY TOP 6 TIPS TO RUN A VIRTUAL TRAINING COURSE**

*“In the modern university, no act of good teaching goes unpunished.”* **Charlie Sykes**

**1st:** As much as you can, run trainings in person. Indeed, that will solve most of the issues I encountered. It is indeed the easy answer, but as long as it works, why not. These days, it is difficult though and as annoying as it is (for me especially) we have to get used to new ways of working.

**2nd:** Less is more. If you believe that you need 30 slides to cover the topic in 2 hours, this is probably 10 too many. Trust me, try it and you'll see.

**3rd:** Prepare, prepare and prepare some more... Even if you know the topic. Digital/virtual delivery requires a more thorough preparation. This will improve flow, timing and delivery, pretty much insuring a better overall training quality.

**4th:** Gather advice from those who know... There are more and more digital learning specialists in companies (and it is a great thing), don't hesitate to seek their assistance, they will have tips and tricks to help you play Ping Pong... hum, run a digital training course I mean 😊

**5th:** The Carrot and the stick. Whichever you prefer 😊 Jokes aside, another lever that can be used is the top down support. Engagement from the senior management can help “motivate” (for lack of better word) the troops and keep the training close to the top of the priorities list.

**6th:** Last but not least, if none of the above works, take a break have a game of tennis (or ping pong) and refer to Tip #1 😊

I hope this helps, Happy learning! As Leonardo DaVinci said *“learning never exhausts the mind”*. He did not say much about teaching though, I had a quick look, nothing. However, Jessamyn West said that *“Teaching is the royal road to learning.”*

In that case I suppose Leo's words do apply to teaching too!