	iMOtion
	Framing Informal Moments (IM) in Trainings

Six Benefits of Online Learning Opportunities

In this blog article, the author reflects about the benefit of online learning, including the topics climate, accessibility, time, diversity and economic.

From Anne Rise, adult educator, June 2023

Online learning opportunities are increasing, especially after the years of Covid 19 with its frequent lockdowns and increasing work-from-home situations. The increasing awareness of climate changes, sustainability, and minimizing of CO_2, are all adding to the many reasons for making the best use of modern IT technology. From now on, online contact will be part of everyday working life and also be the reason for the informal connecting with colleagues that used to happen around the water tank and the coffee machine.

No matter how interesting and refreshing it is to travel around the world or just your nation to participate in a course, conference, meeting, or to share your knowledge by delivering to these events, it might be more reasonable to connect, from where you are and participate virtually in an online or hybrid event.

More and more advanced platforms are offered with numerous features to optimize the outcomes. So with the use of just some of the features available, we might even make any meeting or learning opportunity more varied, efficient, and valuable than the traditional get-together, with more time to do other (important) things, less expenses, less risks, and bigger outcome.

As a teacher and facilitator of different levels of leadership learning – from academic postgraduate courses to international girl guide training platforms, and during the Covid 19 lockdowns even dog training webinars, I have tried several platforms, and reflected about the pros and cons of online learning in comparison with traditional learning situations; what can impact the learning outcome positively, and how to overcome the challenges that often occur when you sit in front of a camera and talk to a number of people who, at least when their cameras are on, look as looking at you?

In our iMOtion project we had a lot of discussions about the pros and cons of online learning. We organised a 'discussinar' about the topic and you find some of the collected benefits incorporated below. These benefits can be beneficial for providers as well as for participants. So may it be a true win-win situation.

So indeed, what are the benefits of offering online learning opportunities instead of on-site events in nice places around the world? What could convince potential participants and providers?

The convincing arguments could be based on:

Benefit 1: Climate sustainability and recyclability of knowledge

If instructors, course staff, and especially participants stay where they are based and only use their laptops, mobile phones, and the Internet – beside daily nutrition, heating/air conditioning, and their normal household, the climate would not be impacted more than usual. Some of the climate impacting issues are travelling across the world, tourist consumption, and heating/air conditioning. You could object that the airplanes go anyway – yes, but if everybody stay at their base, the need for airlines would decrease. I do also think that daily family household on average is less climate impacting than hotel keeping and restaurant kitchens.

You could also argue that the use – and production – of computers and electricity somehow also impacts the climate – yes, still less than the travel and stay abroad.

Maybe the individual in the moment feels the missing of social interaction more seriously than saving the climate – globally it will be the opposite.

You happen to meet new friends and peers at occasions like courses, seminars, etc. and sometimes you do not meet anyone, that you would like to see again. Meeting people online can also cause good vibrations – and probably nobody will object, if you maintain the relationship that started online, and later decide to meet physically somewhere for another – formal or informal - occasion.

Benefit 2: Accessibility, spontaneity, and recordability

Online learning activity is usually accessible from wherever and whenever, only needing Internet access. So for people who have little time, would not be able to travel, who are involved in another meeting, travel, or even off duty, but who are interested in a short participation or contribution, the online world is an advantage.

As a matter of fact, if an emergency occurs and need an instant reaction, anyone can turn their attention to solving the problem without too much interruption of their actual

occupation. If, for example, a surgeon discovers an unknown effect during an operation – an assistant can call for online help by other experts, no matter the time or their actual position.

As many meeting and learning platforms provide split screens in several ways, it is easy to show participants more than one window at a time: Agenda, notes, chat, Minutes, and a presentation – and still the facial screens of each participant. So if the meeting or lesson Is recorded, you have aligned information accessible.

Benefit 3: Economics

As mentioned before, it is definitely cheaper for everybody to participate in online learning and stay where you usually live and work, than to travel to a training venue. Travel, accommodation, etc. is an expense, no matter if your company is paying, or if you as a provider of the learning event have to pay for keynote speakers to travel from abroad for e.g. an hour of face-to-face speaking.

Due to these facts, any online learning event could have a smaller budget, mainly based on the session costs. This means that the participation fee can be lower and thereby attract more participants and companies / associations.

Benefit 4: Time efficiency

Any moment can be focused on the topic or the purpose of the situation, no matter if this is learning, innovation, decision making, or getting to know each other.

The only 'but' to obtain optimal time efficiency is the fact that most people concentrate so much on what is happening during the online situation, that they could need more and more frequent breaks than at on-site occasions. This fact was the reason for the Erasmus + project iMOtion: to develop ideas for efficient breaks, either to 'stretch the brain' from the occasion topic, or to dive deeper into the topic, if the person is curious and hungry for more – or to get a possibility for fulfilling your physical needs.

So the participant will spend time on the focus; the sending company/association only pays for time spent on the focus; and the provider is only responsible for filling topic elements into the event programme. If anybody wants to spend more time together, it will be on a volunteer basis and out of the official programme, except for the valuable informal moments – that actually could be the time to change camera, programme element, platform, or another technological challenge.

In case a participant wants to dive into parts of a finished learning opportunity, it is possible to revisit the recorded parts repeatably, without disturbing anybody else. So still time efficient.

Benefit 5: Online learning can reach further out – diversity, distance, and dimensions

As most of the world has nearby Internet available, at least through the mobile phone, online learning options can reach far more people than on-site: no expensive transportation needed, no time spent on travelling, participants do not need to have somebody else taking care of children, pets, plants, etc. while they are away (only during lessons). Learning providers do not need to incorporate travel expenses to keynote speakers, only paying for the online time and preparations for that. Finally, popular keynote speakers will be more available to other audiences.

This also means that people, who can not afford an on-site learning situation could be added to the number of potential participants. For some trainings this means that also reaching to the outskirt communities and societies, which again will add to the diversity of participants and to the exchange of experiences.

Benefit 6: Level, variation, diversity and width of topics

The earlier mentioned benefits that could invite more – and more diverse – individuals and groups into learning, and thereby mean an increased number of participants, could also lead to an increased number of more specialized learning offers, spreading over more levels of knowledge, deeper into elements and corners of the topics and thereby appealing to more and more people.

This may need sharp communication about the contents of the specific learning offer, and also opens up for shorter learning lessons, which would also mean more appeal to modern busy people, and time for both preparations / expectations aforehand, and afterwards digestion of the learned for respectively introvert and extravert individuals.

Adding to this, meeting different people at differently focused activities may result in curiosity for both diving deeper or discussing the topic with peers across borders and professions.

Are more benefits to be added? You can find some of the 'killing arguments' to the myths described in the other blog article and this can easily add to the benefits of online events. I could mention: People with slight illnesses or temporary disabilities (as well as chronical) do not have to excuse their presence.

Recorded lessons can be repeated whenever needed – and even be used as reference and documentation. Providers of a series of lessons can recommend recorded lessons as part of preparations for the next, so repetitions can be decreased.

Group activities are easy to arrange – in break out rooms -, to start and stop, even with re-arrangements to substitute for missing group members. Facilitators can easily move from one breakout room to another.

Conclusion

It seems that the benefits of online learning opportunities are soon to take over from the challenges, as the computer technology keeps on making inventive solutions to our (un-articulated) dreams of efficiency and sustainability.

Still, we value human interaction, and still we like to be active and learn in several varied ways. So when online learning becomes more efficient than traditional on-site learning offers, we will feel the change and value the on-site as the peaks. This could be the future – using a bridge via blended learning leading the way to the learning future.

We will see what the future brings; however, if the Internet fails, also most on-site learning will be difficult to carry out. Another, though decreasing, challenge is the language barriers. IT and other technologies are rapidly improving the possibilities for overcoming these challenges.

Looking forward to meeting you – in Cyberspace or at an exotic venue!

If you are interested in reading more about this topic, another blog article looks at "6 Myths about Online Learning".