



7 MISTAKES to AVOID WHEN PLANNING YOUR NEXT VIRTUAL EVENT, TRAINING, or CONFERENCE



by Melissa Dinwiddie of

 **Creative Sandbox™**
SOLUTIONS

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I suspect you've been to a boring virtual session of some sort.

Maybe you've been to a painfully dry virtual training you wanted to get over with as quickly as possible, where you looked for excuses to multi-task.

Or perhaps you've been on a call where not everyone had their camera on, and it felt really awkward and weird.

Then there's the really loooooong virtual conference where you just felt talked-at all day. Even with lots of breaks, those conferences are draining, and a pale imitation of what you used to get at in-person conferences.

Can you relate?

Let's face it—virtual events are complex animals!

That's why I've put together this guide. I'm going to share with you what most companies are doing wrong when it comes to virtual events, and what you need to do instead to design virtual trainings and events that attendees will rave about, while delivering the outcomes you're looking for.

Enjoy!

Melissa Dinwiddie



7 Mistakes to Avoid When Planning Your Next Virtual Event, Training or Conference

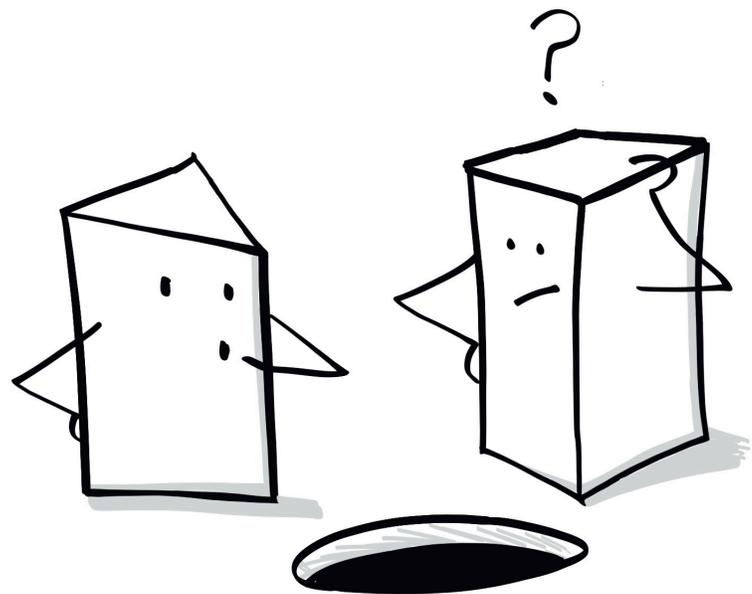
Here's how most companies are doing it wrong.

1. Trying to cram in-person session plans into virtual

Virtual is a completely different animal from in-person. People's experience is different, our attention is different, the environment is different, the context is different. It simply does not work to take a workshop, training or conference designed for in-person and apply it to a virtual setting.

We have to intentionally design for virtual. Certain activities don't work on Zoom, for example. There are other activities that I teach that actually work better on Zoom, or actually *only* work on Zoom and *don't work in-person!*

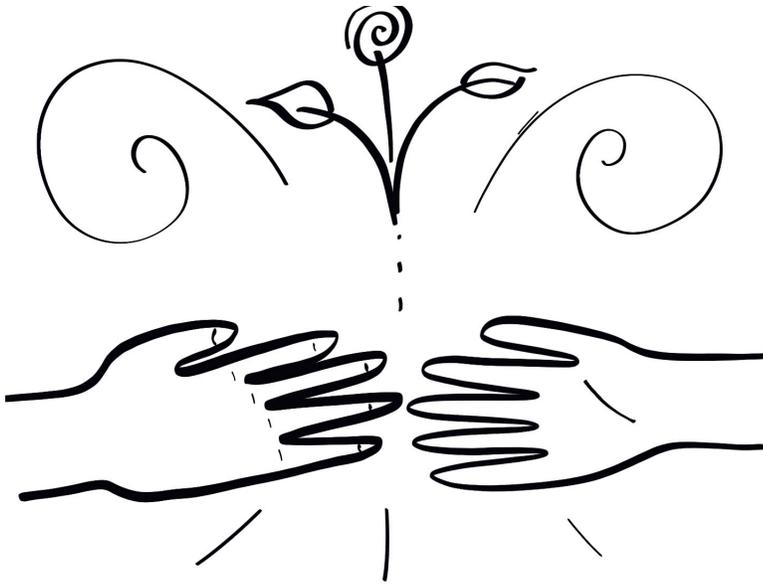
Similarly, spontaneous interactions and "hallway moments," which are something so many of us miss about gathering in-person, don't happen in the same way on virtual platforms as they do "in real life."



While it's true that you'll never get the same kind of "hallway moments" on Zoom as you do in-person, you can intentionally design and plan space into your sessions for spontaneous interactions to happen—for example, by building in time before and after the "official" event for people to chit chat and mingle. (Zoom's "let participants choose breakout rooms" feature is great for this!)

2. Prioritizing content over connection (and intimacy)

If you simply want to deliver content, record a video. You don't need a live, virtual event for that.



However, if you want to create an event that people will rave about, connection has to come first. Lead a connection exercise within the first 10 minutes of your event, and weave many additional moments of connection throughout the event.

And if you're wondering if deep connection and intimacy are possible in virtual sessions, the answer is yes! As demonstrated in a famous study by psychologist

Arthur Aron and team, it's not physical proximity that creates connection and intimacy, but sustained, escalating, reciprocal, personal self-disclosure. So one way to accelerate intimacy is to have the same pairs or small groups meet in breakout rooms periodically over the course of your event to answer increasingly probing questions. (Be sure you've established psychological safety — see #5 below.)

3. Not designing for interactivity

The lazy way to design for virtual is to lecture attendees, to treat them as if they're passively watching television. If we do that, what's the point in bringing people together for a live gathering? You might as well record a video and send the link to everyone!

Instead, ask yourself, how can you make your training or event interactive?

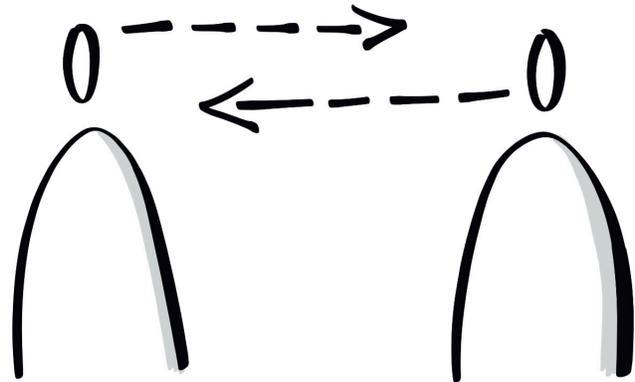
I specialize in interactive sessions, using an active-learning process I call the F.U.N. Method™, which calls on the science of play to engage and speed learning. This is the

same process I used to design my [Communicating for Influence](#) program for high-performing research teams at Facebook.

Interactivity doesn't have to be complicated. Anything that gets people engaging with you or each other, rather than passively receiving information, is great. Here are some easy examples of interactive activities:

- Using the chat
- Having a discussion
- Breakout room activities/discussion
- Polls

(I frequently share ideas for interactive activities in my newsletter, so watch your inbox, or come to my monthly [Learning Lab!](#))



4. Forgetting that people have bodies



When we interact on virtual platforms, we typically see each other as talking heads inside rectangular boxes (occasionally inside round bubbles or other shapes). It's easy to design sessions that only address our heads, so people never physically move out of their seats.

No wonder we're drained at the end of the session!

Anything that pulls people away from their screens, gets them using their bodies, gets them moving around the room, or gets them interacting with their

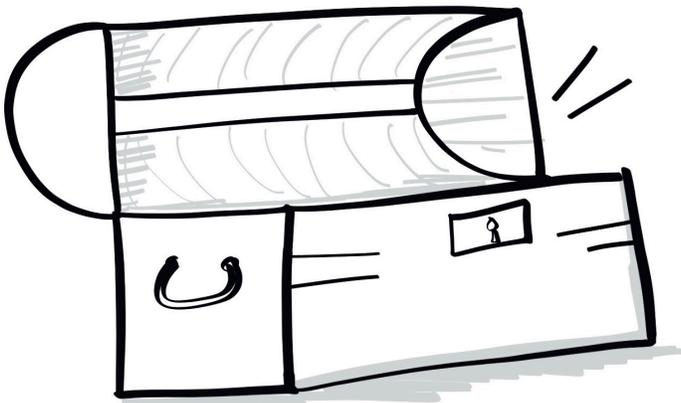
environment, is good for engagement, sparking delight, and combatting Zoom fatigue.

Examples:

- Breathing exercises
- Stretching/movement activities
- “Scavenger hunts”
- Analog reactions signs
- Getting people to write or draw on paper
- Dance breaks

5. Not setting the container for, and building the culture of the session

Setting a clear orientation before your event and right at the start is essential in order to set the energetic container and clear expectations. Otherwise the culture will be fuzzy or feel out of integrity.



Even before your event starts, it's important to set the tone and expectations. You can do this through the communications you send to your attendees, the messaging in your waiting room, and what's happening as soon as they're let in the virtual door.

Is there music playing? Is someone welcoming them as they log in? Is someone pasting messages in the chat every few seconds with any instructions for your “unofficial start”?

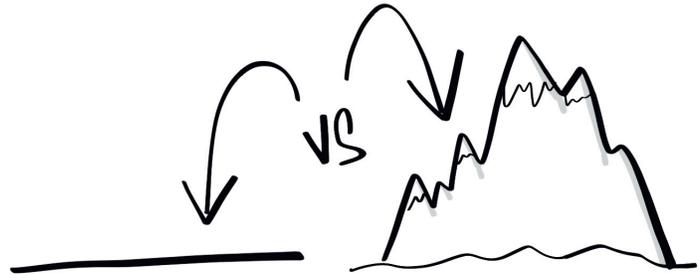
It's important to get everyone on the same page early on in order to establish a foundation for any culture shifts you want to happen over the course of the event.

For example, do you want to foster intimacy at your event? If so, you'll want to create an atmosphere of psychological safety by establishing clear guidelines up front, including a guideline of confidentiality, so attendees feel safe safe to share with one another.

6. Flatlining the design (ie, not designing toward a pinnacle)

Most conferences and trainings (virtual or not) are not memorable in part because there's no emotional peak, no experiential promise, no ultimate "a-ha" moment. If you were to chart typical conferences or trainings on a graph, they would make a flat line.

A much more compelling and effective framework is to design your event so that it leads up to a pinnacle moment, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through. This allows time for attendees to integrate their experience before you close.



7. Trying to juggle everything alone

Let's face it—virtual events are complex animals with a lot of moving parts. And the larger the event, the more people in attendance, and the more moving parts. It doesn't make any sense to do it alone.

Even when it's just me leading a small team training, I always have a technical producer to manage breakout rooms and other tech, so I can focus my attention on facilitation and content delivery.



Scale your team according to the size of the event.

When I designed a virtual instructor-led training for a well-known craft machine company—an interactive training that had to scale for several hundred participants—the team was at least five or six strong: facilitator, instructor, technical producer, and two or three (or more) chat masters to field questions in the chat.

Now what?

When you start to solve these seven mistakes, there's so much more to consider.

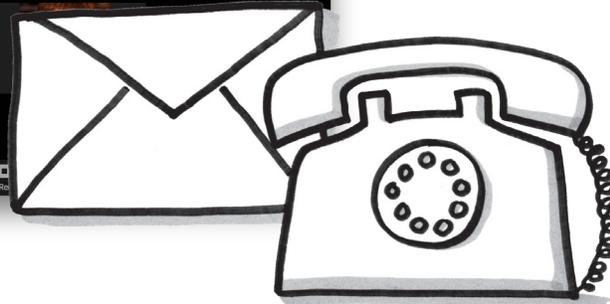
You'll want to think about:

- The most effective way to build new skills and behaviors in your cohort of attendees
- The activities you'll use to design their learning journey (while keeping them engaged)
- The communications you'll use to set the tone and build excitement
- And more!

These are the kinds of questions I help my clients answer when I work with them to design creative, interactive, playful virtual experiences that engage and delight attendees as they acquire new skills and behaviors.

If you'd like to learn more about how to solve the problem of boring virtual events and trainings...

[Click here to schedule a call](#)

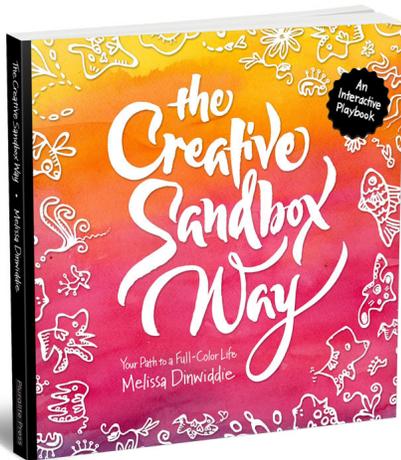


About Melissa

Nice to meet you! I'm the founder and CEO of [Creative Sandbox Solutions™](#), a Silicon Valley-based consultancy that specializes in working with innovative, people-first companies grappling with boring (or nonexistent!) virtual trainings and events.

My superpower is coming in as a strategic partner, assessing your needs, and designing programs that engage and delight attendees while helping them acquire new skills or behaviors through creative, interactive, playful training experiences.

I've worked with big companies, like Facebook (where I designed a flagship program, [Communicating for Influence](#), to help their research teams have more impact), and smaller orgs, like a well-known craft company (where I designed a virtual instructor-led training to bring new customers up to speed with software and hardware, and take them from intimidated and overwhelmed, to enthusiastic brand ambassadors).



According to research, play is our brain's favorite way to learn, so my philosophy is to use that science to make trainings be as effective (and fun) as possible!

My F.U.N. Method™ of active-learning empowers people to not just learn quickly, but equally important, to retain what they learn.

I literally wrote the book on creativity, [The Creative Sandbox Way™](#), and now I apply my creative energies to taking the “bored” out of virtual boardrooms, to help teams be more productive.

Ready to learn more about how to solve the problem of boring virtual events and trainings? [Let's Chat!](#)

Melissa



About Melissa Dinwiddie: Visual Bio

