

6 Core Principles, Virtually!

by Valerie Uccellani

Respect. Safety. Engagement. Inclusion. Relevance. Immediacy. These six core principles drive our work at GLP. The other day I admitted to my dear colleagues that these principles sometimes feel “old-fashioned” to me. Especially in a world with so much “virtual” dialogue, I wondered if these principles were still at the heart of a solid learning experience.

To help me examine my own question, I took a look at the extent to which these core principles were operating during my own experience in DynaMind’s recent e-facilitation course. I quickly discovered that, yes indeed, these core principles are as responsible for the success of a virtual learning experience in 2013 as they were for my old Peace Corp trainings in 1988. They serve us well as a checklist for designing and facilitating, whether in-person or at-a-distance.



1. Respect ~ Acknowledge and affirm who I am and what I bring.

There are endless ways to affirm participants’ uniqueness in a virtual setting.

- *Communicate clearly, up front, the frame and style of the course.* For example, in Moodle (the software used for the e-learning platform), we could see the entire course design from the start of the course.
- *Give people reasonable expectations.* For example, we were told early on that the course would require nearly daily log-ins, for up to an hour each day.
- *Explain your choices.* For example, Anouk decided not to have any “live” component in our e-learning course because of the multitude of time zones. She explained the decision and fielded questions about it as needed.
- *Show respect through your “look.”* The course site had a clean, concise, professional look. It seemed to say “I respect you and want to look good for you.” (It’s kind of like going to visit Grandma with your clothes clean and hair combed.

2. Immediacy ~ How soon will I get a chance to DO this?

For me, immediacy is all about creating opportunities for learners to DO what they are learning. Right here. Right now. And so it was in this virtual course. We were learning to be superb e-facilitators. So, the principle of immediacy demanded that we be given a chance to hone our e-facilitation skills right within

the parameters of the course. We were given a set of very realistic scenarios and were called to respond as we would in “real life” to each one. We had to stretch ourselves to do what we thought was right, and explain the rationale for our choices in our teams. That’s immediacy!

3. Relevance ~ How useful will this be for me?

Relevance is about aligning a learning experience with the needs and wants of those participating, however diverse. In a virtual setting we are often faced with quite a range of interests and realities so it becomes important to know something about the participants beforehand, and to design the course to be useful in their context. For example, in this virtual course, the readings were widely applicable: they were relevant for both asynchronous and synchronous environments; they were as relevant for those working in North America as for those working in Southern Africa; and, they were as useful for seasoned facilitators as for the less-experienced.

4. Safety ~ Will my view and experience be affirmed here?

What does safety look like in a course in which people log on when they want to, and yet depend on each other’s input regularly? What does safety look like in a course in which anyone can send a public message at any time, to anyone, on any topic?

Here are several ways to create safety:

- Set the expectation of safety by laying out clear guidelines, from the get-go, about how people are expected to communicate with each other. For example, simple reminders like “no CAPS to show emotion,” and no harsh words.
- Invite a leader for team tasks (so that they can organize, encourage and affirm comments).
- Assign small groups to exchange ideas and debate among themselves.
- As facilitator, continually assure people that “this is a safe place” by modeling safe dialogue, in writing. For example, when I went AWOL for a few days, Anouk sent me a private email, gently inquiring if all was okay, rather than posting, publicly, an inquiry about WHERE THE bleep WAS !!?

5. Engagement ~ If I’m not fully engaged, I’m not learning.

How many of us have been to e-learning opportunities that had the e- but not the learning? How can we design e-learning courses to engage everyone? Here are some ways I saw it happen:

- Communicate well in advance of the first day of the event to help everyone get ready (i.e. date in calendar, time set aside, log-in information handy);
- Create an opening exercise that is “gently” personal, and that everyone can do equally well – no matter who or where they are. (For example, we were asked to sit back and take a look out our

closest window, then describe what we see. Often people comment on how neat it is to be able to visualize from where other people in the group are writing. It makes the online environment feel much more personal, a collection of private spaces into which we're allowed entry).

- Don't oversimplify. The most engaging aspect of the course, by far, was the reality of the final team task. Even though the tasks involved an imaginary scenario, I knew that the scenario had grown out of real life experience. It wasn't artificial or "manipulated" to convince me of anything. There was lots of room for disagreement and there was not one, right answer. It was complex, just like the real world!

6. Inclusion ~ Hear my voice!

Yes, Anouk used our names to make us feel included. Yes, our photos were up on the site (if we wanted). Yes, there was sincere affirmation of our posts.

All this helped us feel included. But more than anything else what really got me – and kept me – feeling included in this e-course was freedom.

- I was free to get on the site as often as I was able.
- I was free to be a part of the dialogue in any way I chose (i.e. discussion forum, team task, e-café).
- I was free to read as much or as little as I felt inclined to.
- I was free to disagree with what others had said, and to add to it.

In other words, I felt included because, although participation was compulsory, there was room for me to participate as I felt fit. Might this explain the very high completion rates for e-workshops compared to typical e-courses?