

## CO-OPERATIVE ONLINE LEARNING – A PRIMER

This primer is written for teams or individuals tasked with organising &/or designing &/or delivery of online learning in a worker co-operative or co-operative network. It's for people new to online learning or those who wish to review their practice.

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### What do I mean by co-operative learning? How can we replicate those concepts and techniques in an online workshop?

For me, co-operative learning is constructed by everyone present in the learning event. Everyone is an expert and has something useful to contribute. There are no empty heads waiting to be filled up with the expert knowledge of an instructor. In co-operative learning the more senses that are involved the better, so learning needs to include reading, writing, listening, speaking, thinking and acting. It helps if the learning includes some kind of 'hook', to link up with participants' current knowledge, skills or experience, and that there are opportunities to practice either during or very soon after the learning event.

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Our means of communicating with each other online differ in the wealth of information and understanding that can be conveyed. For example an email is probably the poorest means of communication, especially complex ideas or feelings, because we have only the written word. Language can be a crude, broad brush means of communicating, a word will have baggage for me that it does not for you, since we have had different life experiences, as a result of different education, culture, and gender differences. Phone calls are richer in conveying emotion and complex ideas, since we have tone of voice and the opportunity to immediately ask for clarification. Video conferencing gives us facial expressions as well as tone of voice, while f2f communications are richest of all, giving us body language, facial expression, tone of voice and the opportunity to ask for clarification.

So given that while the current pandemic lasts we are unable to meet f2f, how can we replicate the concepts and techniques of co-operative learning online? Is online learning a poor substitute for f2f learning, or does it offer other benefits, so is it better regarded as complementary?

In our experience at Cooperantics, organising, designing and delivering online training uses pretty much the same approach as for f2f training, but with two key differences:

- The technology or the platform you use: everyone, including you, needs to be comfortable with it. (It's a good idea to nominate a 'tech monitor' to keep an eye out for anyone in difficulties, to minimise any interruptions to the session)
- Some topics and exercises will not easily translate from f2f to online

Nevertheless, online learning does offer some key benefits.

### **What do I mean by online learning – and what are the benefits?**

Apart from the obvious benefits of flexibility, and no travel time or cost, benefits of online learning include:

- improved focus on topics
- innovative ways to collaborate (through the use of virtual break out rooms you can have small groups working on different aspects of a problem or issue, reporting back in a plenary session)
- recorded sessions enable participants to review or revise
- opportunities for learning new skills, such as effective online communication and innovative strategies for virtual teamwork
- participants are able to take responsibility for their own learning, because they have high level of control
- participants can input into course design in terms of when and for how long they attend
- shared responsibility for direction and quality of conversations, introduction of ideas, emphasis on issues that interest the participants

In my view, online learning should be regarded as complementary to f2f learning, and I believe we can replicate co-operative learning in an online workshop. The aim of this Primer is to share useful concepts, techniques and tips to that end.

However there are several issues to consider, including:

- Are the participants member of an identifiable group or are they strangers to one another?
- Are the participants familiar with the online platform you will use?

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- Online learning requires self-organising and discipline and an element of self-motivation, and if some participants don't show up, this can be de-motivating for those who do.

### ORGANISE

I am assuming that some kind of skills audit/training needs analysis has been done, in order to identify what training is required, who for, when and how. [Appreciative Inquiry](#) (AI) offers a highly positive approach. With AI, co-op members are asked to identify what's going really well at the moment? When do they feel most productive, when are they most enjoying their work? Then the task is to agree any changes (including training) that need to be made and how to replicate that productive vibe or that joy.

It's helpful to identify learning goals as well as outline content. Who are the likely participants and what do they want to be able to do after the workshop that they are unable to do, or struggling with, at the moment?

This will lead you to a choice of technology or platform. There are a variety of ways of sharing information and supporting learning online:

- YouTube clips
- Podcasts
- Webinars
- Participative online workshops using GoToMeeting, Zoom or other platforms which facilitate interaction

Your learning goals, or how the intended participants are expected to use the learning, will indicate the appropriate technology. For example a simple guide to a practical task might be suitable for a webinar, to be watched by individuals as many times as they like. It might even be a (small) part of your induction programme for new members. However where interaction is required, to be able to see everyone's faces and to encourage peer learning, an online workshop would be preferable. It is online workshops we are referring to here.

Once you have agreed on an online workshop, install the platform and spend some time becoming familiar with it (ensure your camera and mic are working properly). Recruit a tech monitor to help participants with tech issues (via the chat screen), and possibly also to keep an eye on timing. Decide if you intend to record the session, so that participants can return to it later, or so that those unable to attend can at least catch up with the content?

As mentioned above, it is essential that participants are familiar with the technology. The platform will publish a guide which could be circulated beforehand, or you could produce your own guide.

You might consider preparing some online etiquette ground rules, (alternatively you could use making some rules a group exercise at the start of the session). Such etiquette could include:

- keeping a relaxed and friendly tone
- avoid irony, sarcasm and derogatory remarks
- mute the mic when not speaking
- avoid doing other things at the same time, e.g. checking phones, unless there's an emergency you need to attend to
- practice your listening skills
- obey the speaking protocols (e.g. there may be a hand up icon people can use, or maybe there's a go-round in alphabetical order of first names, or maybe the facilitator will name

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who's turn it is to speak next – it's a good idea to name the next two people, so that participants have a moment to prepare)

### DESIGN

Make a plan with timings, headings, detailed content and any notes (such as handouts or exercises that need to be prepared). Making a plan does not imply that everything will go 'according to plan', but it will give you a starting point and some clarity about what you initially think needs to happen to achieve the objectives you have agreed with participants. It will give you a framework from which you and other team members can see what activities and exercises are planned, what materials need to be available, and who is tasked with acquiring or producing them.

Design starts as ever with your desired learning goals. Decide if these can all be achieved in one workshop, or if there will need to be several. If more than one also discuss the ideal frequency of the workshops – one a week or one a month for example?

At this point you will start to get clear about the scope of the training – will you be running just one workshop or several? Remember the more participative the session, the more time you will need. In my experience there is always a tension between an understandable desire to deliver content as quickly as possible, reducing costs and time away from operational tasks, with delivering interactive and participative training. However we need to ask ourselves just how effective a session consisting of presentations and perhaps a short Q&A will be, compared to a truly interactive session where people are finding things out for themselves, and learning from each other's experience. In my opinion it's a no brainer, such training is an investment that will pay dividends in the long term. And of course, online learning can be done at a much reduced cost, with no venue or travel costs to cover.

Online learning, while it has benefits as discussed above, can be tiring, so I would recommend the session does not last longer than two hours, with a break. So think through what can be achieved in that time.

Some exercises you use in f2f training won't work well in an online environment, for example how will you translate f2f experiential learning to a virtual experience? So review your materials, reject those which would not work, adapt those which will and prepare new ones designed with the online medium in mind. Presentations should not last longer than 15 or 20 minutes, and should always have an opportunity for Q&A and discussion afterwards, so participants can get clarification and explore any new ideas. Build in small group exercises, using the break out rooms, encourage discussion and set small projects for group work, pairs or trios. You can use the share screen facility to introduce and explain any exercises that participants will undertake.

Consider preparing introductory reading beforehand, enabling you to hit the ground running with participants who are fully informed about the topics to be addressed

It's a good idea to have your plan reviewed and get feedback from the wider co-operative or network members.

### Roles

You'll need to agree roles – who will be the facilitator and who will be the tech monitor. The facilitator role is key, but the tech monitor role is also essential.

The facilitator's role is to:

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- maintain conditions for co-creation of learning
- enable and inspire, encourage diversity of thought and speech and encourage trust to enable free flowing conversations
- facilitate plenary sessions, Q&A sessions, check ins & check outs
- give feedback
- keep discussions on track
- contribute specialist knowledge or experience
- weave together different discussion threads and identify unifying threads
- probe for elaboration of ideas, ask is there another perspective
- summarise and reflect on discussion
- model effective learning and participation:
  - show enthusiasm for the medium and the course content
  - listen, ask questions, reflect
- facilitate and encourage participation – if someone is not contributing, speak to them outside the session, might be a tech issue
- address behaviours that are not consistent with agreed online etiquette, e.g. sarcasm, derogatory comments (*how you do this is crucial – you are not the sarcasm police! You might pin the ground rules at the top of the chat screen or perhaps gently remind the culprit outside the session that sarcasm can be wounding for the recipient*)
- the participants' role is to:
  - turn up on time
  - participate in sessions
  - read and reflect on learning materials
  - be open about doubts and problems
  - be open to change, different ways of doing things
  - be open about feedback to the trainer
  - participate in reviews
- other roles include the tech monitor, who ensures that any participant with a technical issue is supported so they are able to join in the session; a timekeeper to keep an eye on time and remind everyone how much time is left for a particular topic or exercise and if there are more than around 6 participants, an additional facilitator might be required, to follow the Chat and ensure things are running smoothly. These roles might be combined in smaller groups.

From your plan you can devise an Agenda or Programme for each workshop.

The Agenda should include:

- a link to the scheduled meeting on the platform of your choice
- the date and time of the training
- learning goals or aims
- start time, end time and breaks
- topic headings
- an introduction or check-in
- summary, feedback and check-out

This should be made available to participants in good time before the workshop date. Remember to also include a link to [Co-operantics Guide to co-operative online meetings](#)

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It might be helpful to think about the first session as a trial run – to be monitored and evaluated by yourselves and the participants, with an opportunity for feedback at the end: what worked well, what could be improved and what should be done differently next time.

You might compare this to what is called a ‘[sprint](#)’ in [Agile project management](#)

### USEFUL TOOLS

It has been said that an organisation is better described as a series of conversations, or human communications, rather than a concrete thing. We are used to thinking of an organisation as a ‘machine’ that can be controlled by ‘managers pulling levers’. This is self-evidently not the case. We know from experience that plans do not always work out, things outside our control impact on our plans and we have to change them. So are there tools which can help us promote conversations around learning and respond creatively to changes and challenges in our working environment?

**Agile techniques** use iterative small steps (sprints) the goals of which are checked against current thinking to inform the next round of sprints. They require interactive communication and encourage conversations, with results emerging from interaction. For example, training preparation work could be organised in sprints – and even the training sessions themselves, since you will not know how things will work out until you are actively engaged in the learning process.

**Appreciative inquiry (AI)** instead of asking what’s not working and looking to identify problems to solve, AI asks what’s working well, how could we build on that, looking for agreement on how things could go even better and committing to that. For example, a training needs analysis process might usefully be structured as an Appreciative Inquiry.

### DELIVERY

Like facilitating a meeting, facilitating online learning is something you learn by doing. It’s not possible to learn these skills from a book, so shadowing another facilitator is always a good idea. Experience of facilitating meetings is useful experience for the online learning facilitator. Just like facilitating a meeting, the online learning facilitator must build discussion, calling attention to different points of view, summarising and prompting people to pursue the topic further.

At least speak to someone with online learning facilitation experience first, they will be able to share with you the likely problems that will arise, and tips and techniques for supporting the participants to get the best experience possible from the training.

The facilitator has to pay attention to two processes:

- Task: advancing knowledge and understanding in accordance with group objectives
- Group function: help members to communicate, build sense of group identity and cohesiveness. Everyone needs to be aware of group process, but it is the facilitator’s responsibility to support it.

There are a variety of methods we can use to stimulate discussion and replicate the co-operative learning approach outlined above.

- open ended questions
- brainstorming
- guest lecturer

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- participant facilitators: Participants role play being the facilitator. Perhaps an opportunity for someone to talk about a piece of work they have done, introducing the new topic details and leading a Q&A and/or discussion with the other participants
- participant scribes: e.g. brainstorm ideas, using the whiteboard or screen sharing
- critical reflection and thinking: journal writing; reflective feedback
- practical exercises
- games
- small group exercises
- debates
- independent research
- small projects
- pairs/trios
- role plays
- polling
- story telling
- use a collaborative whiteboard

Offer a brief familiarisation for anyone new to the platform you will be using before the start of the session, or at the very least send round a guide to the platform. Log in to the platform some 5 minutes before the session is due to start, and when everyone has logged in, before the check-in, run through all the facilities provided and remind everyone to mute their mic when not speaking. Point out the chat facility, encouraging people to use it for any technical hitches. Your tech monitor will keep an eye on the chat screen.

At the end of the session, before the check-out, it's always useful to have a 'Next steps' session. What are the participants going to do with this learning? Is there further reading, references or websites you would recommend?

### EVALUATION THOUGHTS

Evaluation is a critical element of the plan, implement, monitor, evaluate, feedback cycle. It's how we learn from our achievements and our mistakes. But how we do it can vary from a fairly useless tick box exercise to a thought provoking and fruitful exercise providing useful input into the design and implementation of the next training. You need to be able to look back and identify what worked well and what could be improved, so that next time your training will be even more effective. If you have involved participants from an early stage, and have built monitoring opportunities into the programme this will be fairly straightforward exercise. There are various approaches and whichever one you choose will depend on your goals and your co-operative culture. Techniques range from an Agile approach involving regular mid-course discussions – what's working, what could we do differently; written questionnaires to be completed either individually or in pairs and small group discussion. The co-operative or network will want to know that their investment in training has been productive, so may hold an investigation a couple of months after the training has been delivered, to assess whether learning goals have been achieved. Such an assessment should be based on the learning goals and should involve discussions with all or most of the participants to establish whether and how the learning has impacted on the way they do their jobs.

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### APPENDIX

Tools for online learning			
Tool	Description	www	Tips, examples & info
<b>Miro</b>	online collaborative whiteboarding platform	<a href="https://miro.com">https://miro.com</a>	<b>Tutorial:</b>  <a href="https://go.miro.com/webinar-getting-started-with-miro-two">go.miro.com/webinar-getting-started-with-miro-two</a>
<b>Mentimeter</b>	Engage and interact using live polls, word clouds & multiple-choice questions; collect feedback; enable Q&A; collaboratively rank and prioritize questions and initiatives	<a href="https://www.mentimeter.com/">https://www.mentimeter.com/</a>	<b>Example:</b> how this was used by a colleague:  Prior to session 1 - send participants a link to poll that generates a word cloud to capture people's feelings or current thoughts about the topic: this is then shared at the outset of the session to help engage people more quickly and directly  Prior to session 2 - directed polls to understand what people wish to prioritise their learning around after reflecting on first session content. Results are shared at the outset of the session to help participants understand why the structure and topics are as they are
<b>Whimsical</b>	Flow charts; Mind maps; Sticky notes	<a href="https://whimsical.com/">https://whimsical.com/</a>  <a href="https://whimsical.com/sticky-notes">https://whimsical.com/sticky-notes</a>	
<b>Slido</b>	Easy audience interaction: questions; live polls; quizzes; analytics	<a href="https://www.sli.do/">https://www.sli.do/</a>	<b>Tip:</b> Better polling function than Zoom; simple app - post to chat box & share screen
<b>Jamboard</b>	whiteboard/stickers	<a href="https://gsuite.google.co.uk/intl/en_uk/products/jamboard/">https://gsuite.google.co.uk/intl/en_uk/products/jamboard/</a>	Sketch your ideas, whiteboard-style, while benefiting from the access and connectivity of an interactive canvas.

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<b>Googledocs</b>	Collaborative working	<a href="https://docs.google.com/document">https://docs.google.com/document</a>	<p><b>Example:</b> Online version of small groups/flipchart sessions, where each breakout room group gets a link to a separate googledoc so they can see what/how it's being written up between themselves in real time, and then screen shared in the plenary.</p> <p><b>Tip: works best when people have previous experience of working on collaborative documents in real time &amp; a passing familiarity with googledocs</b></p>
<b>Wooclap</b>	Learning support via smartphone	<a href="https://www.wooclap.com/">https://www.wooclap.com/</a>	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Itylad4p6XU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Itylad4p6XU</a>
<b>Google classroom</b>	Free web service for schools aiming to simplify creating, distributing, and grading assignments.	<a href="https://classroom.google.com/">https://classroom.google.com/</a>	<p>Streamlines file sharing between teachers and students. But see:</p> <p><a href="https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/21/21266004/google-classroom-joyless-adobe-designer-breakdown-slack-workplace-education-comparison">https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/21/21266004/google-classroom-joyless-adobe-designer-breakdown-slack-workplace-education-comparison</a></p>
<b>Gotowebinar</b>	Polling, surveys & screen sharing	<a href="https://www.gotomeeting.com/en-gb/webinar">https://www.gotomeeting.com/en-gb/webinar</a>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Event Management : View every webinar and easily adjust settings.</li> <li>• Flexible Scheduling: Set up a one-time live event, series or on-demand experience.</li> <li>• Webinar Templates: Skip steps by using settings from past webinars for new events.</li> </ul>

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### RESOURCES

<https://www.tonybates.ca/2008/07/06/mindweave-communication-computers-and-distance-education/>

[http://cordonline.net/mntutorial2/module\\_2/Reading%202-1%20instructor%20role.pdf](http://cordonline.net/mntutorial2/module_2/Reading%202-1%20instructor%20role.pdf)

<https://www.alt.ac.uk/about-alt>

[https://www.trainingforchange.org/public\\_workshops/online-101/](https://www.trainingforchange.org/public_workshops/online-101/)

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