

# Lessons Learned – Converting a planned in-person event into an online one

## The challenge

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The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic caused many organisations to have to reassess their programmes of activities in order to comply with various national restrictions. In this context, in 2020 the SPP had to reconsider activities planned under various projects in order to maintain its workplan as far as possible. One such activity was a planned transboundary summer school on wetland management and monitoring, raising questions about how to replicate such an event in the virtual, online environment:

### How to maintain educational outcomes?

What differences in learning processes apply in a virtual environment and how should tutors adjust their teaching methods?

### How to encourage interaction?

In moving from a 3D, in-person experience to a 2D, 'flat' environment, how can motivation and interaction be monitored and maintained so as to ensure positive outcomes?

### How to approximate field activities in the online environment?

Work in the field is an essential component of the SPP's programme, especially in the practice of applied conservation with regard to wetland vegetation management. How can the lack of field and site visits be overcome in an online environment?

## The solution

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In the case of the SPP's wetland management and monitoring summer school the key to the solution was to re-think our mindset – instead of thinking about how to 'convert' an activity from one environment to another, we took a step back and thought about how we would design this activity if we had been planning for it to be online from the beginning. This shift in thinking enabled us to re-set the event from a school, which is very much an event dependent on in-person participation, into a short online course, which is eminently suitable for the virtual environment, with many precedents on which to draw. While the core material, learning objectives and overall aim to share knowledge remained the same, the change in approach significantly helped us to answer many of the questions posed above. We made basic changes such as extending the timeframe for the event to two weeks from 5 days, we split our days into two relatively short sessions with a long break in between so as not to suffer from 'Zoom fatigue' and we researched several online courses, as well as talking to practicing online tutors, in order to understand how to maintain educational outcomes and encourage interaction. Recognising the necessary adjustments and the need to retain interaction between participants and tutors, we decided to build an online course platform, which additionally allowed the registration of participants and maintained their interest with supplementary reading material available beyond teaching times, discussion forums and online activities. Lastly, accepting that it was not possible to fully replicate field visits online, we took a hybrid approach and filmed 7 short videos for the course, in order to employ a 'show, not tell' style to presenting the area and its wetland management issues to the participants.

## Lessons learned

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- If circumstances allow, make your decision as early on as possible, don't wait for external factors to force a choice. More time to prepare is extremely valuable when setting up a new activity and more time allows for new 'how-to' attitudes to develop.
- Carry out as much research as time allows, speak to those who are already practicing the activity you want to do online to gain advice and learn lessons from them. It's also very valuable to experience your online activity as a user

in order to understand the process at a personal level. Research of this type also allows you to see what works and what doesn't, and sparks new ideas.

- When thinking about building the optimal online environment for a virtual course, it is also important to consider how the platform would work without any real-time interaction. This prompted us to include material that could be stand-alone as part of a “toolkit”, an online dissemination tool for stakeholders/teachers/students to acquire skills on wetland management planning.
- Without in-person interaction and with presentations and tutoring taking place online, be prepared and allow time to create supplementary reading material that will be available online for later review if a student needs to go over things to ensure full understanding, and also be prepared to upload tutor presentations and/or videos to cover for participants missing online real-time events.
- It's vital to have good technical support, both external and internal. For the SPP summer course we used a web design company to help us create a full web environment from scratch, a platform which contained all the course material, as well as interactive media, the application procedure and the evaluation process. If possible, have an experienced member of staff on-hand to deal with technical issues, liaise with the web design company and deal with small-scale uploads and changes to the web environment. Strong technical support carries you through what is inevitably a steep learning curve and removes concerns about technical problems during the event.
- Following your research, consider potential user difficulties in order to address such issues as online passivity (fear of participation or ‘hiding’ behind a closed camera) and full inclusivity (encouraging participation from all and not just the extroverts, accommodating different skill levels). Elements such as having a ‘camera-on’ rule for all interactive sessions and asking for specific participation from all participants in different formats, particularly in group work, as well as being clear that participation certificates are discretionary on the basis of active participation are all factors to consider, alongside general encouragement and monitoring the degree of each participant's involvement. We also included technical solutions to this issue, with daily material only being released upon completion of the previous day (with monitoring for technical problems and assistance provided as required).
- Be prepared to work harder to troubleshoot issues of participation and encouragement, without the kind of casual contact and opportunity to observe that in-person events provide naturally, opportunities for intervention, support and reassurance have to be intentionally made.
- A key factor in taking the course to the ‘next level’ was the decision to include group work with a final assignment and deadline, despite the obstacles. Ultimately the choice to put students together in smaller groups, with work schedules that required contact and effort outside of the formal course hours in addition to breakout rooms within the course, was extremely positive and significantly helped to resolve concerns about participation and inclusion.
- Allow some creativity or ‘looseness’ in participation, especially if working with tech-savvy younger generations – although our web environment provided all the necessary tools, we also encouraged the participants to meet outside of it, through WhatsApp or other groups, to raise their sense of interaction and contact with each other, as well as peer-to-peer learning.
- Include some fun ice-breaking activities, such as quizzes or presentation games, at the beginning of the course, to overcome the sensation of awkwardness and reserve that often accompanies the early part of online meetings.
- Be less time intensive in your approach to online work, short sessions and a longer timeframe are important. Likewise, schedule in regular periods for group work without formal presentations, to break up the learning rhythm and give ‘down’ time.
- Another positive factor was the inclusion of ‘discussion’ spaces in the online environment to pose questions that tested comprehension and/or instigated discussions, allowing asynchronous communication with the participants, not just about the academic issues involved but also more personal peer-to-peer interaction.
- Include an evaluation process at the end of the event in order to gather feedback and learn lessons for future improvement