



Facilitating Online Learning About Sexual Assault

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A key component of online learning is creating opportunities for interaction amongst participants. Interaction can mean everything from group discussion to completing group research projects. Interaction amongst participants achieves several things. It empowers people to co-create the learning experience. It allows people to draw on their life experiences to give the content meaning and identify how training concepts can apply in their daily work. It helps people learn to collaborate with each other, a useful skill especially for people who may later go on to co-advocate for a survivor or who may design and launch a community event together. It can decrease isolation, an important part of reducing vicarious trauma (Ya Ni, 2013; Bell, Kulkarni, and Dalton, 2003). And it supports and develops the leadership of people within the field to share their expertise. These qualities all help foster the empowerment-based approach to social change and advocacy that sexual assault programs were founded on and continue to use today (Contact North, n.d.; Clark, 2002; Stern, n.d.; Milanes and deNoyelles, 2012; Chick and Hassel, 2009; Knowles, 1996; Ya Ni, 2013; Clay, 2013; Clay, 2012).

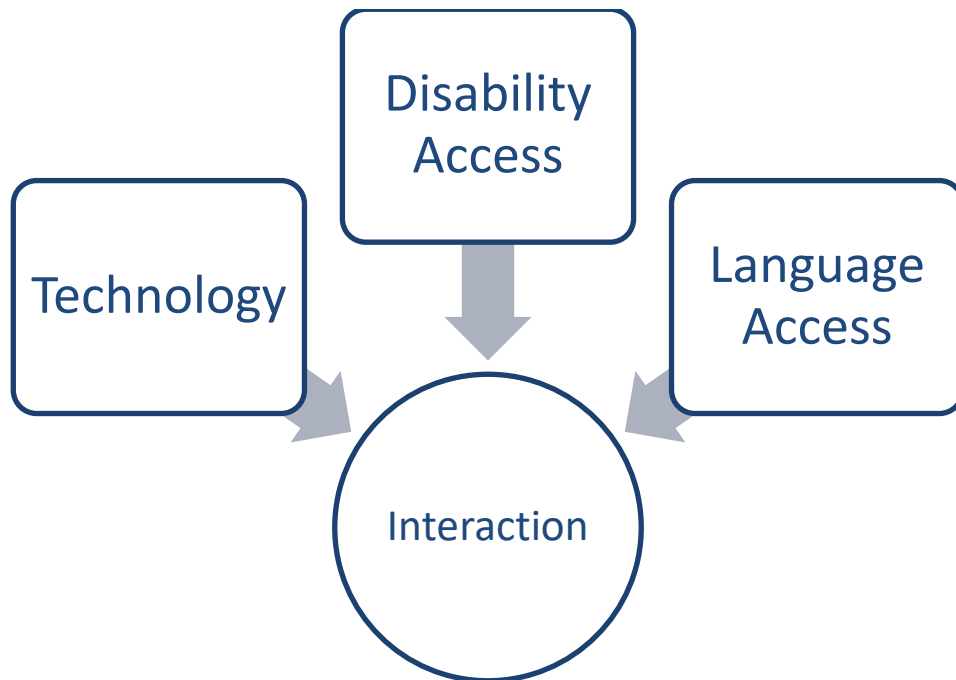
Facilitating for Access and Inclusion

[Disability access](#), [language access](#), and technology provide the foundation for all interaction online. Broadening access to sexual assault training is a fundamental

part of changing statistics about the vulnerability of marginalized communities. It's important that when local sexual assault programs are doing their part to recruit volunteer and staff advocates from diverse communities that they are able to complete all parts of the required basic training with ease. Access is also crucial to ensuring that communities with different lived experiences are able to build advocacy programs led by and for communities most impacted and least served by mainstream sexual assault programs. Accessible trainings, both online and in-person, signal that sexual assault coalitions are doing the necessary work to make collaborations and solidarity across difference possible for the long-haul.

In online trainings, disability access related to interaction often includes things such as providing video interpretation, closed captions, keyboard shortcuts to navigate different sections of the screen, the ability to control font size and color contrast for text, and quality audio. Language access that supports online interaction can include having multiple language lines for people to call when participating in a webinar and language-specific group discussions or forums. Language access and disability access can also overlap, such as when people need interpretation for ASL or other signed languages. When assessing online learning platforms, it is important to ask questions about how their interactivity tools work with their accessibility tools. Without disability access and language access people cannot interact with the material or each other.

It is also important to consider the geographic location of learners. High-speed internet access is often not available, or is very limited, in rural or territorial communities. Without high-speed internet access, many interactive tools either don't work or don't work as well. Lack of this technology access is another barrier for people in interacting with the material and each other.



When facilitating for access and inclusion, a few techniques translate from in-person trainings to online interaction. For example, speaking slowly and pausing after presenting new slides or asking questions gives interpreters time to communicate what has been spoken and gives people with slow internet connections the ability to load the information. It also gives people time to read the text on the slides without having to pay attention to both the caption box and the slide text (Vera Institute and APIGBV, 2019). The facilitator's ability to mute and unmute participant microphones is similar to calling on people with raised hands. It ensures only one person can talk at a time. Just like facilitators would meet with interpreters and translators to figure out how they'll communicate during a live in-person training, interpreters, translators, and facilitators need to meet before online trainings to discuss how they'll communicate with each other. This is particularly important when coalitions work with guest presenters such as lawyers, financial consultants, or holistic healers to host online training sessions. Even if the guest facilitators are accustomed to working with the language and disability access tools used by the coalition to facilitate learning, it is always

helpful to establish or review the coalition’s expectations for materials and presentation skills in advance.

Other facilitation techniques need to be adapted for the online learning environment. Whereas someone facilitating a training in person may be able to tell by body language, facial expression, or people’s behaviors that there is a problem with access, many of these cues are removed from the online training environment. Even when participants use video, image quality or lighting may obscure the details of their expressions. Facilitators need to let people know in advance how to communicate when language or disability access tools are not working so facilitators know to stop the training and address the access issues.

Other language access tools that may need adaptation include placement of ASL video interpreter windows. During an in-person training, the ASL interpreter can move around the room to better position themselves for the d/Deaf¹ participants to see all of the materials and the trainers. In an online learning environment, this could look like finding learning platforms that allow participants to move the ASL video interpretation window around on their screen as necessary or hiring people to provide ASL interpretation in person for the learner.

Finally, some facilitation techniques may be unique to online learning. For example, when using the chat box, it can help if the facilitator periodically reads what people are typing out loud (Vera Institute and APIGBV, 2019). This helps anyone who cannot read the chat entries fast enough to know what some of the main points being contributed are and it supports people with limited vision. This also creates a more manageable chunk of information for ASL translators or other language interpreters, as text often is added to chat boxes quicker than most people are able to translate or interpret.

¹ “We use the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of deaf people who share a language – American Sign Language (ASL) – and a culture. The members of this group have inherited their sign language, use it as a primary means of communication among themselves, and hold a set of beliefs about themselves and their connection to the larger society. We distinguish them from, for example, those who find themselves losing their hearing because of illness, trauma or age; although these people share the condition of not hearing, they do not have access to the knowledge, beliefs, and practices that make up the culture of Deaf people” (Padden and Humphries, as quoted in National Association of the Deaf [Frequently Asked Questions](#))

Using Built-in and Add-on Tools to Foster Interaction

Once coalitions have learned what disability and language access tools are available to them, online facilitators can focus on understanding the basics of the interaction tools themselves. Each online learning platform offers different interaction tools. Some tools require people to be taking the same training at the same time to work (i.e. live chat, voice-to-voice, polls). Others let people collaborate even when completing the training at different times (i.e. discussion boards, group writing pages, polls). What is available for a webinar may also be different than what is available to someone hosting a multi-part class on a learning management system (LMS) that tracks user engagement and assignment completions. In addition to the collaborative tools available on webinar and learning programs, other Internet tools such as social media sites, blogs, and any other technology people may use as part of their jobs can also offer opportunities for collaboration. For example, an online training on effective sexual violence prevention social media messaging could assign small groups to each social media platform to design, implement, evaluate, and compare the effects of a month-long campaign. When facilitating webinars, groups can encourage interaction by concurrently having a shared Google Slide or other collaborative writing/drawing platform open to allow people to interact in different combinations (Liberating Structures, 2018). Google Slides or other writing/drawing platforms work well because anyone in the training can initiate them. They do not require formal webinar administrator or moderator status to activate. This models the concept of empowerment across another level of the coalition's activities.

Examples of Tools that Support Interaction		
Chat boxes	Talking to each other on webinars	Online collaborative whiteboards
Group research projects	Phone support groups	Language-specific learning cohorts
Discussion forums	Supervision sessions	Commenting on peoples' work

Office hours

Breakout rooms

Polls

Personal web pages

In-person sessions

Program-specific cohorts

Finding ways to encourage interaction amongst participants who are not completing the learning exercises at the same time does take effort and creativity and may require online facilitators develop new skills and techniques (Chick and Hassel, 2009; Ya Ni, 2013). When encouraging interaction between people not taking the training at the same time, facilitators can use a combination of assigning interactions and working with participants to develop questions that are interesting enough to prompt responses (Stern, n.d.). The goal of these types of interactions includes building relationships, as there is some research that indicates people are more likely to finish online training courses when they have built trusted relationships with one another (Colas, Sloep, and Garreta-Domingo, 2016). People engaging in online learning in a coalition context may already have incentive to complete the courses for professional development certifications, but interaction can help coalitions and local programs assess how much people are understanding new concepts and able to apply them in different situations. Since so much of sexual assault advocacy is improvisational and responsive to each individual survivor's needs, it is important that advocates and allied professionals develop a deep understanding of the concepts presented, especially in core advocate training modules.

Though people will likely take coalition's online learning courses for professional development, building relationships to foster collaboration is also often one of the ways trainings of any kind help further coalition's missions and visions. Building networks of support helps community members and advocates be more effective in reaching their own goals too. To that end, open-ended and ungraded questions are one way to stimulate conversation (Milanes and deNoyelles, 2012). One feminist educator creates an "ask the class" forum where "anyone can post questions, answers, or comments about the courses, readings, or assignments" and a "hallway forum...where students can talk to each other about anything" (Chick and Hassel, 2009). As an example, they ask questions about "students'

favorite movie, book, concert, CD, video game, recipe, tool, gift, or outdoor activity” (Chick and Hassel, 2009). Some online training facilitators also make themselves available at a set time each week for people to call to ask questions or discuss the course content (Contact North, n.d.). Coalitions can supplement online interaction with in-person interaction as well. Trainings can be offered as hybrid options meaning part of the training is done online and part of it is done in person. Coalitions can also provide local programs with facilitator guides to help supervisors or other leaders debrief in-person with staff or volunteers who may be going through the online trainings.

Creating and Maintaining a Supportive Environment

In addition to facilitating for access and inclusion, online learning environments benefit from structures that make communication and participation guidelines explicit. Sexual assault trainings cover topics that people may have never thought about before. The training topics may trigger people or cause people to confront concepts like structural racism and intersectionality for the first time. And as members of the team at [Liberating Structures](#) learned, “when a screen is included in our interactions, we miss out on reading and picking up a significant amount of implicit information...our habitual ways of communicating and interacting fall short when we meet virtually” (Liberating Structures, 2018). All of this can create an environment where people are constantly talking over each other or falling into complete silence to avoid further levels of discomfort. To ease this dynamic, webinar facilitators can create and share participation and technology guidelines in outreach materials, on registration confirmations, and at the beginning of webinars. Liberating Structures offer an example of their own “[min specs](#)” for virtual meetings that may inspire coalitions to create their own. Liberating Structures’ min specs include (2019):

- Must...
 - Have own device (one person per device), with keyboard, video and audio access
 - Have network access and permission to use google docs
 - Call from a quiet and private environment
 - Put phone on airplane mode for the duration of the call
 - Mute microphone when not speaking

- Attend for the entirety of the call (beginning to end). No dropouts. Better to miss the call completely than come for part of it.
- Address other participants by name
- Minimize open conversations
- Have purpose and objectives clarified before each meeting

Groups offering multi-part online learning modules with person-to-person interactive elements can include discussion boards and reflection questions specific to this topic (Rhodes and Schmidt, 2018). Sexual assault coalitions offering parts of advocate core training online may even find it useful to have an online facilitated conversation about online engagement and communication agreements before launching any online trainings so any agreements and structures reflect the needs and ideas of advocates who will be participating in the online trainings.

Putting It All Together

Creating smooth systems for online interaction takes practice. Before launching any new training online, it is important to have everyone who will lead a course work together with any interpreters or translators who will also be part of the training, so everyone is comfortable using the interaction and accessibility tools (Vera Institute and APIGBV, 2019). Scheduling a practice session also helps everyone involved see if the tools function as expected and if any of the interaction tools are difficult to use at the same time as the access tools. Technology often has issues because of the way programs are written and designed. Something that works perfectly well for someone participating on one internet browser may function very differently for someone participating on a different browser, for example. Operating systems such as Macintosh and Windows also often still don't offer the same experience.

Practice sessions help people identify how they'll communicate with each other if and when interaction and access tools stutter, lag, freeze, or simply don't work. Disability and language access tools do fail. A trainer may choose to continue on with the content if the interaction tools are broken for everyone, but it is unjust to continue if it is only broken for people who use disability or language access

tools. It is best to pause the training or re-schedule for a later date. Taking the initiative to organize practice sessions reduces how often that needs to happen.

Example of Things to Check for During a Practice Run

For live trainings such as webinars:

- Does everyone know how to explain use of the access tools?
- How comfortable are presenters at explaining the various interaction and access tools?
- Do you know who people should contact if they have tech or access issues during the training?
- How are polls working?
- Are you able to conduct the polls and see results in multiple languages?
- Are captions showing up when they should be?
- How accurate are they?
- How well can the interpreter and captioner understand what people are saying?
- How well can people hear or see interpreters over the phone or video?
- What is the audio quality like overall?
- Do captions work when people are assigned to breakout rooms?
- How long does it take to sort people into caption rooms? How do interpreters get assigned or placed into small group discussions?
- Are there any terms or acronyms that need to be explained for interpreters or captioners?

For module-based learning:

- Are all the fields and warnings showing up in the correct language?
- Are there links to materials available in all languages that people registered for?

- Do all videos include accurate (not automatic) captions?
- Are subtitles available for videos in other languages?
- Is accurate and timely translation happening during live chat sessions or discussion forums?
- Are any completion badges available in all languages that people registered for?
- Is accurate alternative text available for all images?

As coalitions gain more experience using the interactivity tools available to them, they'll increasingly be able to design curriculum with both access and interaction in mind. There may be some growing pains, but it is worth it when people with different abilities communicating using different languages find commonality and offer insight into what sexual violence looks like for their communities and how advocates can better support all survivors.

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