

REACTING, ADAPTING, CREATING



Transitioning from real-world to virtual facilitation

"We live in a time of transition, an uneasy era which is likely to endure for the rest of this century.

During this period, we may be tempted to abandon some of the time-honored principles and commitments which have been proven during the difficult times of past generations.

We must never yield to this temptation. Our values are not luxuries, but necessities.

Not the salt in our bread, but the bread itself."

—JIMMY CARTER, JANUARY 1981



By Jim Cain

Transitioning from real-world facilitation to the virtual world is a daunting task.

Even before recent events, some people were working and playing in the virtual world, while others—no matter what—will never enter that realm. The best metaphor for this transitioning is popcorn. The first kernels to pop are the early adapters—facilitators who quickly make the transition and thrive in the new reality. Eventually, more kernels pop—a metaphor for the masses in the middle. Not the first to transition, not the last, but somewhere in the middle. The last kernels to pop are the final adapters—the ones who wait until the course is irrefutable and there is no other option but to adapt or perish. Finally, there are a few kernels left that never pop, no matter what happens. These are the facilitators who make a conscious choice never to transition to the virtual world. Which kernel of popcorn are you—an early adapter, a late one, or somewhere in the middle? The choice is entirely up to you. Certainly no one is going to force you to transition to a virtual format, but if you are willing, what follows might be helpful.

There are three stages in the transformation from real-world to virtual facilitation, and eventually almost everyone will pass through these stages. Sometimes just knowing that these stages exist can help pinpoint your current position, and what lies ahead.

In mathematics, the Fourier Transform converts information from one reality (the spatial domain) to another (the frequency domain). The operation is an essential component of image-processing software. In facilitation, the transformation of information from the real world to the virtual one is not a mathematical construct, but rather a personal one.

Stage One—The Reaction Stage

The first stage of transitioning is to take a current list of activities and modify those that easily adapt to a virtual presentation. Some folks call these the low-hanging fruit. Most facilitators begin with these activities because they are the simplest to convert.

As an example, one of my favorite ways to begin a program is to present participants with a magic lamp and ask them to make a wish about the content of the program for that day. Sometimes I ask, “What would make today wonderful for you?” In the real world, I pass an actual lamp around and encourage each person to make a wish for the day after rubbing the lamp. The genie, after all, only appears if you rub the lamp, thereby strengthening the metaphor.

Converting this idea to the virtual world has a few challenges. First, physically transporting an actual lamp for each participant would be a logistical nightmare, not to mention the expense. Taking a photograph of my lamp and presenting it onscreen is a possibility, but it lacks the tactile response of physically holding an object. Haptic learners (those who gather information by touch) are at a disadvantage in the virtual world, at least until we all have the haptic suits and gloves featured by the characters in Ernest Cline’s book *Ready Player One*. Until then, images alone will always be a poor substitute for the real thing, but within this reality is an opportunity.

If we had a choice, substituting a two-dimensional image for a three-dimensional object would always leave us wanting more. But therein lies the truth ... no one gave us a choice. If the option is a virtual image or nothing, then I am going to try to produce a virtual image that connects with my participants. Such an image might involve a three-dimensional image that revolves or that dynamically emits a wisp of smoke. The more interested in the image a participant is, the more realistic the metaphor. Is it as good as a real, physical object? Probably not, but it’s better than nothing at all.

In efforts to convert real-world activities and props to the virtual world, don’t (initially at least) be so concerned with the perfection of your work, but rather the utility of it. If rendering a perfect three-dimensional image, like a tennis ball, is beyond your capabilities (and the bandwidth of your internet connection), then suffice with a simple circle. Start with the good enough. The better will come later.



My first collection of virtual teambuilding images were beautifully rendered, high-resolution, animated monstrosities that few of my participants' computers had the bandwidth, internet-connection capabilities, or video-monitor resolution to truly appreciate. Karl Rohnke once suggested that "anything worth doing was worth overdoing." Apparently, such insights, which work fine in the real world, fall apart in virtual space. After witnessing a well-designed event fail, purely for technological reasons, I vowed to simplify my content and focus less on gee-whiz technology and more on the actual facilitation of the group.

Simplify the virtual representations of real-world facilitation props and activities, and focus on the actual content of the facilitation. Rather than spending excessive time on making virtual representations pretty, make sure they are useful first.

Stage Two—The Adaptation Stage

The second stage is to construct hybrid activities comprised of real-world ones that have been modified to take advantage of virtual capabilities. It's more involved than Stage One conversions, but with a significantly higher payoff.

Years ago, Chris Cavert (www.fundoing.com) introduced me to a smartphone app called Make Dice Lite. Several of my training activities and debriefing techniques involve rolling dice and interpreting the results. Make Dice Lite (and other dice apps) allowed me to roll dice of my own design, in the digital world. Suddenly, if my luggage was delayed or I forgot to pack a collection of dice in my teambuilding supplies, I had a digital back-up. In some ways, the digital dice-rolling app was superior to the original physical dice, and much more fun to use.

Stage Two conversions are more difficult than those of Stage One, and they require a working knowledge of a virtual world tool, such as the Make Dice Lite app in the illustration above. In addition to creating a pair of digital dice with the traditional markings of dots

from one to six, this app allows the user to request numbers, letters, words, phrases, images, and more to adorn each die face.

Another example of a Stage Two conversion happened for me when I discovered that, in addition to the video-conferencing software (such as Zoom, Webex, Facetime Live, GoToMeeting, What's App, WeChat, and a host of others), participants could also access web-based programs like Google Docs or Powerpoint presentations via Microsoft 360. Suddenly, in addition to having participants view still photographs or videos, I could ask them to interact with these images by drawing lines, moving objects around on a page, and other typical participatory actions.

One of the first puzzles I converted using this method was the classic Houses and Utilities puzzle, proposed by Joseph Leeming, Henry Ernest Dudeney, Charles Barry Townsend, and other puzzlers of the 19th and 20th centuries. The challenge of this puzzle is to connect each of three houses with three nearby utilities, without any of the utility lines crossing. Personally, I find this puzzle even more engaging in the virtual world than in the real world. In the real world, this puzzle is largely an individual challenge, while in virtual space the puzzle becomes a group problem-solving challenge, where ideas build upon the comments made by others in the group.





Stage Three—The Creation Stage

The third and final stage is to create new content specifically for the virtual world. This stage severs all ties to the real world. Gone are such realities as gravity, the basic laws of physics, and other physical constraints, to be replaced with possibilities that exist in virtual space, but nowhere else.

The creators of the multi-player video game Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes were Stage Three inventors. There is no real-world version of this game played on a traditional gameboard. It exists only in virtual space.

This third stage requires a significant shift in the mindset of group-activity designers. Gone are the physical parameters often associated with the development of a new activity; they are replaced by an almost endless list of possibilities in the virtual realm.

In order for a facilitator to become competent with this stage of activity, creation requires considerable knowledge and experience in the virtual world. Someday, a few of us will actually get to this level; until then, we still have stages one and two!

As a homework assignment, why not begin with a clean sheet of paper and see if you can create something specifically for the virtual world? What could you do, for example, to explore empathy with 30 participants, all virtually connected, during a 90-minute video conference? How could you create a teachable moment around the theme of building trust virtually? What object lesson could you share that focuses on creative problem-solving? What virtual activity would get participants up and out of their chairs for a few energetic moments?

Once you've completed this assignment, the really challenging part happens. Heading back to Stage One and converting as many of your real-world activities to virtual activities as you can. Get started now. **CB**

Jim Cain of Teamwork & Teamplay is the author of nearly two dozen books filled with team- and community-building activities from around the world. While not generally a futurist, Cain does have an opinion or two about the path forward into the virtual world. For more information, visit www.teamworkandteamplay.com.

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This article, and many more, are part of the book *The Learning Curve—The Transition from Facilitating in the Real World to Facilitating in a Virtual One*, from the American Camping Association bookstore.

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