The eLearning Coach Podcast #6
Creating Virtual Classrooms and Webinars
with Karen Hyder

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Connie Malamed: Welcome to The eLearning Coach podcast online at theelearningcoach.com. I'm Connie Malamed, bringing you ideas and tips for success with creating online and mobile learning experiences.

Hi everyone. Welcome to episode six, creating virtual classrooms and webinars. We spend a lot of time thinking about techniques to improve non-synchronous learning experiences, but what does it take to transform in person training to a synchronous virtual event?

This interview with expert online event producer and speaker coach, Karen Hyder, will answer that question. Karen is one of the top online training experts around; she produces and hosts many of the eLearning Guild online forums as well as having her own consultancy. She actually produced several of my first webinars and was enormously helpful, professional, and really a solid presence throughout.

Here's the interview.

Hi Karen, thanks for being on the podcast.

Karen Hyder: Hi Connie, thanks for inviting me.

Connie: We've worked together before on several webinars, you've produced them for me. I'm always wondering, how many webinars and virtual classroom events have you produced? It seems like you've been doing this forever.

Karen: I did get an early start in 1999, so it's been fourteen years almost. I would say for the eLearning guild alone, I've produced several hundred online events; that's the online forums, the thought leader webinars, and the best of webinars. In my other business, in my consulting business, I've done a couple of hundred more; probably well over a thousand at this point.

Connie: Wow. I don't think there are too many people in the planet who have done over a thousand virtual classroom events and webinars.

Karen: I know a couple.

Connie: When an organization decides to go from in person classroom events to virtual classroom training that's synchronous, what are the typical things that move them to make that decision?

Karen: Money; budgets are cut so they can't afford to meet in typical classrooms or it becomes impractical to use physical classrooms. In many cases the learners are geographically dispersed; sometimes it's just a convenience thing. It's not convenient to get together physically; they need the information they need right now.

Connie: Right. In your experience, within an organization, has there been resistance? If somebody wants to start doing this, should someone expect that they might get some kind of resistance from the organization and what type of resistance are they getting?

Karen: Yeah, you might be surprised where the resistance comes from. Sometimes it's the trainers that are resistant because they can't imagine themselves delivering training to an audience they can't see. Sometimes it's managers because they have this preconceived notion of what learning modalities work; they really like the idea of a captive audience sort of locked in a classroom. Sometimes it's the learners themselves that are resistant because they are frustrated with what they've seen in webinars and they feel like they can't learn that way.

I think all of these people believe that the technology is difficult to manage and is prone to failure; they believe that learners will multi-task.

Connie: Someone might be getting resistance from all different groups within an organization; that just seems hard. Do you have any advice on ways to deal with this resistance?

Karen: Yeah, I think that it's worthwhile to know what the objections are and to recognize that those objections are really based in reality. These people aren't concerned about these things because they're not true; they're concerned because they are true. Technology can fail and participants do multi-task. Knowing those issues is really half the battle; if you go in with open eyes and you can create plans and have systems in place to overcome the issues, you'll have a much better chance of being successful.

I would even recommend that you start with a small pilot program, with a group of willing volunteers, just to get your feet wet before you decide to convert the entire organization's programs over to virtual classrooms.

Connie: Right. That's good advice, starting with a pilot program. When learners finally do take their first virtual training event, how do they tend to respond to it?

Karen: If it's done well and they get to stay engaged and it's compelling for them, they tend to really love it. If the technology bogs them down, or the session is boring or a waste of their time, then they don't love it. They chalk it up to just one more webinar; the perfect thing to listen to while I'm cleaning out my inbox, or shopping on eBay, or something like that.

Connie: Essentially, their response is the same that would be to any type of training. If it's engaging…

Karen: I think so.

Connie: For someone who is new at it, or even someone who is experienced but perhaps they don't feel like they're doing their best, can you give us two best practices for how we can adapt classroom content for the virtual classroom?

Karen: Absolutely. I would say the number one thing to do is add more questions. If you're asking questions that the participants then need to respond to, then that interaction, that back and forth, that engagement, is built right into the program. If you're waiting for people to ask questions, those questions are bound to be kind of random and out of left field and really maybe not all that appropriate to the objectives that you're trying to cover.

I would say ask more questions and be sure to teach the participants how you want them to respond. In a face-to-face format, people blurt out their answers or raise their hand but online, these virtual classroom tools have elements like polling, chat, green check mark, and things like that. You need to tell them which of these tools are you going to use to respond. That way people have a much clearer understanding of what you're expecting them to do during the session.

Connie: That's really good advice because you might not think of that. You're so used to people knowing how to respond; you might not think that the technology needs to be explained to them first so they do know how to respond.

Karen: Mm-hm.

Connie: We're so used to the classroom.

Karen: The second best practice is to add more slides to your PowerPoint deck. You might need as many as fifty percent more slides than what you thought you needed in the physical classroom. You need instruction slides, question prompt slides, and maybe backup screenshots of your demo slides. Remember that you yourself aren't a visual aid anymore; you need visuals on screen to really illustrate what it is that you're talking about.

I encourage people to account for everything they're going to do with a slide so that they don't forget to cover that detail after that question, or show that poll. Don't include the entire script on a slide; keep your script hidden from the participants. You don't need to read to them; they can read. You might include a bold graphic, a single word, or a single phrase that you can talk over while you're showing that slide.

Connie: I think that's really true; you really do need more slides. Usually my presentations have a slide per minute, if not more.

Karen: Yeah and I think your slides are a really good example of that. Sometimes all you have is a graphic and you might talk for a whole paragraph, but we're looking at that one graphic the whole time. Then your other slides will have something comparing two things, or we look at the first thing and then the animation happens, then we're looking at the second thing.

We don't need words; we just need the visuals that you're talking about.

Connie: Of course that means you have to really prepare; that's the theme of this whole interview.

Karen: Exactly.

Connie: What would you recommend as the number of people that are needed to produce a virtual classroom experience?

Karen: I would say, minimally, two. I've certainly done it myself with one person, just me, and that can be really difficult. That's coming from fourteen years of experience. I think that if you're starting out, you might want to have you as the presenter and then somebody who plays the role of producer. I sometimes often have a technical support person behind the scenes, if there are really a lot of participants, or I'm anticipating people having technical issues.

Beyond that, you might need a good instructional designer or a good graphic designer, people to pull together the content and the slides. If your program is very large and you have a lot of participants, you might need a registrar, or a marketing person; somebody who's handling some of the elements that are outside the virtual classroom, but still critical to the success of the program.

Connie: That is a lot more people than you might think you would need. What you're saying is you could get by with two.

Karen: Yeah, I think two is really an ideal situation, just for the production of the actual session itself. If you're asking an individual person, one trainer, to take on the role of being subject matter expert, technical expert, the person who can read the

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messages and chat, the person who can troubleshoot technical problems, the person who can queue up the poll while clearly stating their content information; it just doesn't happen. It's just really difficult to keep all those balls in the air.

Connie: There's so much more involved than I had initially thought when I gave my first webinar. All of those tasks you were just mentioning, getting the polls ready to show, following up on messages, or queuing them up; are these all the roll of the producer?

Karen: It can be; I think when you work with a producer, one of the key things to your preparation is to determine who is going to do which task, because you can really get in each other's way if you're both trying to do the same thing. You might sit down with the producer and say, "I need you to open the polls and show the polls for me; while you're doing that, I'll be instructing the participants how to respond to the polls. I'll be commenting on the polling data as it's coming in." Or I might ask that you handle the technical questions that are showing up in chat but I'll handle the content related questions. We're sure of what our roles are and we don't get in each other's way.

Connie: Good advice. Would you say that the producer is pretty much the person behind the curtain?

Karen: Yeah, absolutely. I always think of *The Wizard of Oz*, actually.

Connie: I thought you were kind of wizard-like. Let's say someone is going to be a producer for the first time; what piece of advice would you give them for their first online session?

Karen: I think it's important to realize that it's not just experience, or wishful thinking, that makes for a successful online session; it's practice. Even if you did a session last week, or last month, that does not mean that tomorrow's session will run smoothly. You must test and you must rehearse.

Connie: In terms of the audio, I know that's really a big issue, do you recommend people starting with their telephone, a cell phone, or with voiceover Internet?

Karen: I think it really depends on your audience, your infrastructure, and your lesson plan. If it's really important that participants all verbally contribute to the conversation - so you're going to do some kind of scenario-based interaction where participants are communicating with each other. Sometimes it's easiest just to use telephony; have everyone dial into the system, everybody knows how to use the phone. Phone connections tend to be fairly consistent and that works out very well.

Whether it's your landline, your desk phone, or a cellular phone, you know what the quality differences are there. It's really – it might not make a huge difference to the

outcome of the program because somebody's cell phone is a little static-y, or something like that. If you think that telephony is going to be expensive, which it can be, especially if you're dealing with some place between five and thirty-five cents per minute, per user; you're going to have a hundred, or two hundred, or a thousand people logged in, it's ridiculous to think you would have everybody on the phone. It is just too cost prohibited. I'm seeing people fall into this trap and end up with a huge telephone bill for something that was essentially a lecture that they could've recorded and played back anytime.

I would say, in those situations, voiceover I.T. is a really excellent solution. If the participants really don't need to verbally contribute, they're just listening; they might as well be using voiceover I.T. audio. That way, you're saving the cost and the quality of the user's microphone is less of an issue. What matters then is the quality of the presenter's audio.

In the sessions that I do, I obsess about the speaker's microphone. I test it and re-test it and I nag them about using good quality headsets, with good quality microphones. I nag them about using wired Internet connections because that voiceover I.T. audio needs a lot of bandwidth to work well. If you're on a wireless connection, or you're in a car or something, it's a ridiculous situation; it's not going to work very well. If you're on a wired connection, and you're using a decent microphone, voiceover I.T. audio is a reasonable solution.

Connie: Those are good points to keep in mind and I do know about your nagging about the microphone.

Karen: Connie's been on the receiving end of it.

Connie: You had mentioned that people are worried that the learners are going to be multi-tasking and the learners are thinking, "A webinar, that's a good time to work on my email." What are some ways that the instructors can get learners actively involved during a virtual event? They can't see them, so they can't see what they're doing; it's kind of tricky, isn't it?

Karen: I would say use your good instructional design methods. Anytime you want participants to engage with the presenter, you put together some activities, or ask some questions, or create some assignments; you do things that have the participants actually acting rather than just listening.

With the virtual tools that are available, there are some really neat features that you can use. You can have them drawing on the whiteboard or pointing with arrows; you can have them taking controls over your shared demonstration and driving the demonstration for you. Even more simply than that, you can have people responding to polls, or typing in chat, or even showing green check mark or red x, which is kind

of low-tech, but it's the same level of interaction that you might've had that felt natural in the classroom.

People nodding their heads, people smiling, people blurting out answers; those are the kinds of things that you're trying to cultivate in the online event that wont' happen naturally. You need to really plan for them and script them into your presentation.

Connie: I think that's something that people may not do. They think that – I can imagine experienced trainers just trying to wing it. In this case, when it's virtual, you really do have to plan every single interaction.

Karen: Connie, I want to say too, if you think you're a professional body language reader, I would say that you're probably mistaken. If you're trying to read an entire audience of people and understand that they're learning and they're actually with you, you don't have enough information from body language. What you can get good information from is a clear poll that says which of these is the correct answer: a, b, c, or d?

When they all answer c and that's the correct answer, that's information that I can use. When I ask them, how will you apply this, please type in chat and their responses in chat actually make sense, that's information that I can use. Way more relevant than smiling, or shrugging, or whatever.

Connie: That's interesting, I never thought of that. What you're saying is that, through the virtual experience, you can actually get more solid information from people.

Karen: I'm glad you said that because that's true.

Connie: I was just repeating what you said. What do you think about using social media in a virtual classroom?

Karen: The virtual classroom is intended to be a social experience; we're all logging in at the same date and the same time to be part of a live program. The social aspect of it is already there. If you can get people to use the tools of the interface, that's cool, but once the virtual classroom session is over, then there go the connections. You don't have that easy access to the other users that were in the session room.

If you build in the connections through Yammer, or Twitter, or Facebook, or any of the other social tools that are out there, then the connections continue beyond the virtual classroom. Isn't that what we've been wishing for in the physical classroom? We wished we could keep the participants together as sort of a cohesive network of people, but they would all go back to their jobs and we'd never see them again. I love to use Twitter as a back channel. In fact, we did a session last week about using

Twitter as a back channel. It was really great because some of the participants were engaging through that Twitter back channel. We saw how people were connecting with each other and what their comments were.

Of course, then those relationships can continue beyond the training program.

Connie: That could actually be a way to follow-up with learners after an event; if you set up some kind of social media channel to answer questions, make sure that they understand things. I can imagine a lot of ways that it can help them improve retention.

Karen: I would say before, during, and after; get them sort of primed prior to the session, keep them talking during the session, and then find out how they're applying things when they get back to work. Where the rubber really meets the road.

Connie: That's a great idea to do it ahead of time too and pump it up a little bit before the session.

It's about time to wrap it up; let me just ask you one last question, if you are willing.

Karen: Mm-hm.

Connie: What is one common mistake that people make when they're first trying out a virtual classroom experience, so that we can avoid doing that?

Karen: I would say it goes back to what we were talking about before, not planning and preparing properly and not getting help. In the physical classroom, a good trainer, with an outgoing personality, could talk about anything off the cuff; online, off the cuff looks like a blank screen and sounds like a lecture. When you're communicating with and preparing learner's technically, a relationship with the content really helps. Participants then know what to expect and they can take responsibility for their own hardware and software setups; that reduces technical issues.

Pre-session assignments can get participants geared up for what they're going to learn; it puts them in the right frame of mind for learning. Then rehearsals can be really eye opening when the presenter can see and feel what the experience is going to be like; they're ready for it when the time comes. That's where a good coach, or producer, can make a big difference. They can tell them exactly what to do, or what to say to the audience members in a particular situation.

For most people, managing the technology and engaging the learners, and showing polls, and all that kind of stuff, can be really overwhelming. Why wouldn't it be? There's a lot going on. For me, even after as many years as I've been doing it, I'm still

challenged by all those elements. Unfortunately, I think that not preparing, not planning, and not having help means that your outcome is just going to be back to lecturing over a PowerPoint because that's the only thing you can manage. That's a big mistake.

Connie: I think that a lot of people may not realize just how much planning is needed when you're doing a virtual learning experience. I think you've made that really clear, in this interview, just how important it is.

Thank you so much for all that you've offered us, Karen.

Karen: You're very welcome.

Connie: I hope this interview with the wizard behind the curtain of so many webinars was helpful to you. You couldn't come away from this conversation without realizing that preparation and lots of interactions are keys to making your synchronous events successful.

Thanks for listening; I hope to see you around theelearningcoach.com site. If you're enjoying the podcast, please rate it in iTunes. Talk to you next time.