GOING VIRTUAL: THE CASE OF CONTINUING EDUCATION - OPEN DOORS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA.

Ahidoba DE FRANCHI MANDSCHEFF and Brigitte PERRIN, Centre for Continuing and Distance Education, University of Geneva, Switzerland

INTRODUCTION

Re-inventing the way we communicate at the dawn of the COVID-19 crisis was the only way for continuing education programmes at the University of Geneva to keep some visibility during the peak of the recruitment period (March-May). It was also the only way to live up to a key dimension of our quality assurance system, namely informing future candidates and participants in a timely and accurate way of our course offering while answering their questions. When all the professionals around the world started working from home, and our teaching staff and programme managers got locked down, the need to reach out to our audience became crucial. At the end of February, public events started to be cancelled at the University of Geneva. We, at the Centre for Continuing and Distance Education, took the decision to transform our physical Open Doors scheduled on 31 March into a virtual event. We had three weeks. A real challenge: 350 programmes were counting on this event to recruit for the coming academic year and future candidates and participants, as well as HR and L&D officers, were counting on the event to finalize training decisions.

On March 31, visitors logged into a virtual platform and entered a virtual hall of the University of Geneva. Altogether, we built 3 different virtual spaces corresponding to those of the actual University Mall building: a main hall, an auditorium and a booth space. Moving from one space to the other, visitors could follow a 5-hour live programme with 12 video live sessions conducted by faculty and teaching staff and a keynote conference. People could also draw their ideal continuing education programme on a dedicated platform, get their LinkedIn profile analysed, or take a survey on how they were engaged at work before and during the lockdown. They were invited to get in touch with over 70 staff members who were "standing" behind 16 virtual booths organised by domain. Visitors could enter a Zoom room to have a conversation with them or just chat from their keyboard. On the booths, visitors could also watch videos, download flyers and drop their business card for further contact.

FIVE CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME

As the world was about to shut down, we were still preparing for an "in-person" event. Several scenarios were envisioned: hold a much smaller event that could be attended by fewer people, live stream all the sessions or transfer the entire event online. We were then still thinking about sitting together with at least the teaching staff and programme managers. We imagined a kind of TV studio where all of us could gather, without any audience in the room. We had already done such live-streamed events in the past, it didn't seem so a big challenge to us.

Challenge #1 – Adapting to the ever more severe lockdown conditions

Day after day, the implications of an almost total lockdown became more obvious. At some point, it was not even imaginable to bring the teaching staff together in a room. And

soon, our team wasn't even allowed on campus anymore. Looking for a virtual platform that could host our event just like in real life became the only relevant option at some point. It required a lot of abstraction to imagine our visitors walking into the hall of the main building, trying to find their way through the booths, while having some fun and recreative activities to visit.

The experience had to be suitable not only for the public, but also for our staff: programme managers, professors, assistants, everyone had to be trained on the platform before the event. Their technical skills were very diverse. We also had to consider the language to be spoken on the platform: most of our staff and visitors are French-speaking. Because of the very short timeframe, we finally had to train all the programme staff to handle and set up their booth and run their live session in less than 3 days.

Challenge #2 – Keeping an emotional connection

The main challenge was not to find a virtual fair platform, there are plenty of companies that provide these kind of tools. It was to find the right people (reactive enough) to adapt a business-focused solution to an academic context, and of course to develop it in only 3 weeks. In addition to this, we needed to build a virtual space in which people could feel emotionally involved. We wanted visitors to feel as if they were on campus. A large part of our audience is local, and many continuing education participants have studied at the university years before. We wanted them to feel at home and to be entertained. We wanted them to remember that day.

"Transferring a physical space into a virtual space is hard if you don't have an emotional connection with it"

> Bjorn Lustic, former computer engineering student, Blockeley University, CA

Challenge #3 – Communicating in a communication dead zone

Our first objective, as a public institution, was to show that we were still at our community's disposal despite troubled times, and able to apply our motto: *Professionals need to adapt to a changing world, explore it and embrace change*. This crisis has been a great opportunity to lead the way in that regard and to live up to our key message.

This key message of ours was indeed timely. But it still needed to be spread and heard. Usually, we start our Open doors communication campaign about two weeks ahead of the event. Which meant we needed to start it on … 17 March (!). Exactly the day the lockdown was pronounced in Switzerland and neighbouring France. We had printed flyers and prepared poster campaigns in our area. Those remained in the boxes.

The problem was not only *how* to communicate, considering that no one would put a single foot out of their home in the following two weeks, but even more *what* to communicate. The COVID-19 pandemic was catching all attention, in traditional media as much as on social media and all over the internet. But those media were our only remaining communication means. After talking with our media partners, we decided to re-focus completely our sessions and conference on the impact of the pandemic on the numerous sectors in which our audience was working. A winning bet: we gathered altogether no less than 600 people in the content-related sessions.

Challenge #4 – Focusing on quality content

"Who the hell do you think will want to attend a virtual event during those dark times?" - this was the kind of encouraging messages we received from some colleagues during the first phase of the project. Of course, they were right, no one would spend time just to

come to visit an exhibition hall, albeit a virtual one, enter a booth and ask questions on continuing education which they may not be able to attend. We needed to attract them with rich and engaging content.

Thanks to a highly talented and engaged group of faculty and teaching staff, we managed to propose no fewer than 14 different talks, all focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 on professionals from diverse fields.

We prepared a live stream, a continuous thread of activities that lasted for 5 hours. Faculty and teaching staff had to be trained to properly use Zoom and its features, as well as to deliver sessions online from home, with a professional setting (light, background, sound, etc.). During the first four hours, people could choose between two different programmes broadcasted simultaneously. The last hour of the event was devoted to a keynote conference hosting a panel discussion amongst three experts, broadcast live on Youtube in addition to our virtual platform. Competencies such as cast direction, production, journalism and technical skills in live streaming have been crucial to succeed.

Challenge #5 – Getting visitors on the virtual campus!

Despite the lockdown, the fear of COVID, the monopolized media and the general distraction, over 1,000 people attended the event (the previous face-to-face event gathered about 400 people). Throughout this five-hour live event, the sessions reached a peak attendance of about 200 participants, and the final live conference about 250. Our virtual event was the first of its kind in an academic context in Switzerland. Therefore, it caught a lot of attention from the media and the local networks who promoted it massively. Shifting the focus of the academic talks onto dealing with the COVID pandemic helped a lot to gain attention, but also the look-and-feel of a first virtual experience tempted visitors. Visitors admitted in a survey that the entertaining format had attracted them as much as the topics covered.

According to that same survey which we conducted, both the audience and the staff involved expressed their wish to see such an online event take place again next year, in parallel to a face-to-face event, even if sanitary conditions would allow us to all meet without restrictions.

5 LESSONS TO REMEMBER

This original and innovative experience was, of course, full of lessons to be learned. Here we share some of the main lessons learnt:

Lesson #1 The programme must fit the audience's needs

The most important lesson learned is that the virtual format of the event is a necessary but not a sufficient feature to attract participants. Without a programme that fits the actual needs of our audience, it would have been very hard to engage with media and people, especially in a crisis context.

Assessing our target audiences' needs was hardly less difficult than moving to a virtual format! We reached out to key stakeholders, members of strategic board and alumni networks to explore expectations. We chose to answer some immediate questions related to the COVID situation, while at the same time tackling the broader challenges facing professionals today, namely digitalization and the pressure to re-skill or up-skill. Harnessing the power of systematic analysis and critical thinking to the immediate situation provided a strong red line for the entire event.

Lesson #2 Human beings are hard to see on a virtual platform

Another important lesson is that on a virtual platform, human beings are hard to see, even if they are available and connected. Most of the interactions happened in the session rooms where indeed seeing the number of participants increasing was a source of enthusiasm both for speakers and participants. But beside these sessions, a small number of live interactions took place between the public and the course managers waiting in the booths. It was very difficult to figure out how many people were visiting simultaneously. As there was no count display (except in the Zoom rooms), visitors didn't know if they were alone on campus or with 1,000 other people. UNIGE staff didn't know either how many people were visiting their booth, and they were altogether surprised to see the big figures after the event, as they didn't get a lot of chat / zoom interactions during the afternoon. Numerous people just downloaded brochures, watched videos or read information. This situation created some frustrations among the staff. The platform builder has now enhanced visibility of "real" people available on the booths. In comparison to a regular exhibition hall, the thing we missed most that day was finally the murmur of the crowd!

Lesson #3 Drill the speakers and booth staff

Quality content can be lost through a poor presentation or ignorance of certain rules concerning the use of digital technology. How to behave in front of the camera, how to address the audience - even if you only see your computer in front of you, how to encourage participants to ask questions, how to practice using a survey or sharing a document, which rules of conduct (netiquette) are fundamental to avoid slippage. Those were amongst the crucial issues to be addressed before the event. It was not new to our Centre but this time, speakers and staff had to be trained and had to learn fast! These issues were all the more crucial since each speaker spoke from home, sometimes from their bedroom. Remote support was available during the event but some precious minutes could be lost together with the audience's attention.

Lesson #4 You can never be too careful

"You can never be too careful", this is another important lesson learnt. Set up back-ups and back-up of back-ups, rehearse, organise dress rehearsals and prepare Plan Bs have prevented our event from failing dramatically, especially in the live parts of the event. At first, we wondered if all these "emergency procedures" weren't a bit of paranoia. In the end, none of them proved useless and we saved our live-streamed keynote conference with a plan B that was activated in less than 5 minutes. Staff and contractors with sound technical skills and almost unlimited dedication proved to be a must to run such a live virtual event.

Lesson #5 A virtual setting won't make the buzz by itself anymore

This is a lesson learnt directed to the future. We were lucky enough to be the first university in the country and probably on a larger scale to organize a virtual Open Door event in an academic context. Now it's over. And the company who built the platform has received no less than 500 requests from clients with similar needs to ours in the past three months, including a range of universities. Soon, it won't be a novelty anymore to hold a virtual event, and we will need to reinvent the use we made of this platform to host our next virtual events. Focusing on humans behind the machine will probably be our focus. We will have to be creative again. The sky is the limit.

PAVING THE WAY FOR A VIRTUAL FUTURE AT UNIVERSITY OF GENEVA

Since 31 March, our team has received over 15 requests from other departments at the university or directly from other universities in Europe to share our experience, with the ambition to replicate it for their own events. An interdepartmental group has since then been created to reflect on virtual events at the university level and to guide staff in making the right decisions when turning a face-to-face event into a virtual event. The aim is to think beyond the immediate crisis and leverage the experience to live up to a variety of objectives, including some sustainable development objectives the university has set itself to reach by 2030.

Our Centre for Continuing and Distance Education is now planning to make the virtual platform a key component of our communication strategic tools. Our objective: reaching out to our audiences, wherever they may be, while offering the emotional look-and-feel of being on campus in Geneva.

CONCLUSION

Virtual worlds are swarming these days. Even well before March 2020, universities have used virtual worlds to promote their curriculums or campuses. In California, some universities are using virtual platforms on a daily basis to deliver continuing education courses, Stanford University for example is using Virbela. However, the technical requirements at the user's level are a major limitation to a wide and efficient use of these kind of virtual reality spaces. Other universities have experimented with *ad hoc* solutions, such as the Blockeley student-run initiative of a Minecraft world to host a graduation ceremony. Our ambition this spring though was not to impress visitors with visuals or to replicate video games environments, but instead to put forward the excellence and relevance of our faculty research and teaching in a simple but emotional way. We are proud to have met our objective in that regard.

Will virtual campuses and events really become so crucial for continuing education in the future? Yes, we do believe so, because lifelong learning is where experience and innovation can meet. If we are adding to the recipe flexibility and connectedness, the setting will enable professionals to successfully invent tomorrow's world. However, we shouldn't forget that learning is facilitated by emotions and the latter are better experienced in person. Also, professional networks are most often built on the basis of informal face-to-face meetings. Hybrid formats have therefore never been so attractive, and it is the path we have chosen to follow for the coming years.