**The Evolution of ToP Virtual Facilitation: Training and Transformation in the ToP Network**

**Training in New Ways**

In the beginning, as virtual platforms were found and explored, 2-3 people would meet in a platform and mess around, learning by doing. Then came larger group play. Thursday mornings, from 6:00 a.m. in San Francisco to 9:00 p.m. in Taipei, Network members got online to learn, engage, and play together within a virtual setting. Rather than formal training at that point, these were known as JAMs, a term borrowed from jazz musicians. Like them, we were in improv mode, making things up as we went along. We had a rolling agenda of things we wanted to learn to do and would take up new things each Thursday.  
  
Eventually, some became bold enough to work with clients. An early training program was built for a client who had acquired Adobe Connect to fill an urgent need for meetings without travel, yet with no clue how to use it. Interestingly enough, this particular training had to include some content on basic facilitation because most trainees were administrative assistants to executives who, with little experience of facilitation themselves, would be leading the meetings.  
  
When ICA International needed virtual support for their Global Forum meeting in which 2/3rds of their members could not be physically present, seven ToP Network members stepped up. It was a learning experience in how to explain and manage audio and connections across multiple (17) time zones with mixed levels of technical equipment, internet speed, and general tech savvy. Training was built on the fly as needs arose and was written up and shared via JAMs later on. In any JAM, things one person had learned, often by accident, were shared with everyone else. Much of this knowledge is still available for self-training. (See: [Virtual Global Conference Learning](https://top.memberclicks.net/virtual-global-conference-learning)  for a retrospective discussion of what was learned and  [Virtual Huddle Archives](https://top.memberclicks.net/virtual-huddle-archives) to review the history as it was being written.)  
  
Others learned as they helped run internal Network meetings. Most action teams asked for help to meet between Network gatherings. Every one of these virtual meetings, along with client work, became learning opportunities and expertise has flourished, most without formal training.  
  
Nonetheless, several forward-thinking colleagues (Sheila (LeGeros) Cooke, Cheryl Kartes, Ester Mae Cox, Eunice Shankland, and Cheryl Hiltibran) created a ToP Virtual Facilitation Methods course. That course was piloted in Minneapolis in December 2010 and rolled-out in Rome Italy with United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in January 2011. Since then it’s been continuously tweaked. The workbook they designed is still a marvel of beauty and information. During 2011 and 2012, the course was taught face-to-face in mostly 3-day courses in Sacramento, Seattle, Minneapolis, Ames IA, and Topeka KS and repeated in Rome and Minneapolis.   
  
However, given the nature of virtual work, of course this face-to-face training had to go virtual. Voila! The Boot Camp was born. And the ToP Virtual Facilitation Boot Camp course was created by Sheila Cooke and Ester Mae Cox. During 2012 and 2013, the course has been offered in 8 online sessions over 8 weeks to FAO in-house courses and globally to individuals and businesses.    
  
And, simultaneously, as JAMs continued, a Monday evening JAM was set up for “newbies.”  These are on hold this year without a virtual volunteer, with the exception of October 2013 when Thursday JAMs have been back in business.  
  
The latest training has come full circle from the original expressed desire for an online training to use ToP face-to-face. Canadian colleagues Jo and Wayne Nelson (Canada) now teach people to lead the Focused Conversation and the Consensus Workshop in an online setting. Click [here](https://top.memberclicks.net/gfm-course-development) for more on the development of that course.  For more on the history of the Top Network‘s amazing adventures and love affair with virtual facilitation, keep reading and do find time to peruse offered links and the articles contributed by ToP practitioners about their work with virtual facilitation.

**Pioneers and the Dream: a Brief Glimpse of the History of Virtual Facilitation within the ToP Network**

Early Network adopters Wayne Nelson and Gordon Harper and others experimented with online and virtual ways to do facilitation – They might be considered the “founders” of the ToP Network’s love affair with virtual facilitation – dating back to the 1990’s. They envisioned ways and experimented with tools that could be facilitator tools. And they were a bit frustrated that their thinking and ideas didn’t “catch fire” with the facilitator masses. Those ideas laid alive and dormant in the Top Network until 2009.   
  
Then on a cold and very snowy day in Denver, at the 2009 January Network gathering, when our brave and fearless leader, Sheila (LeGeros) Cooke introduced the idea of virtual work in a plenary session where we hooked in live with other facilitators who weren’t there and tried something new., the flames were ignited again. At that same meeting, the first session to discuss virtual training was held. Many were intrigued. A dream was born, “got legs”, and began some real changes in the way the ToP Network does its work.  
  
Then fear set in. If we were to train people virtually, we had to learn how to work virtually first. Those early teams were bold. They worked on pattern recognition within the ToP methods, to begin to determine what would need to be done virtually. Others interviewed people who had been facilitating virtually for years, some with only a telephone connection. Every new exploration opened the door wider on a whole new world. One team looked at asynchronous technology – how could a team do work individually, as convenient for each person, and still share the work and the workload? Another team asked the question of how to evaluate what was going on and launched the evaluation piece now tacked onto the end of every virtual session. Feedback? Yes! We’ve got it. With nearly two years of solid JAMs and internal Network meetings, we have gathered a lot of information.  
  
We also had a team on Partnering Opportunities who went in search of places to practice. Another looked at how this new venture could be marketed. There were 5-7 large teams functioning around some aspect of virtual work for nearly two years.   
  
Then, as with all things, growth happened and changes were afoot. The JAMs morphed into field work with real clients. Basic exploration was over and diving deep was the new mode. So get your diving gear and come aboard!  
  
As facilitators learned in JAM sessions and experimented and practiced, they began to run internal Network meetings. Most action teams asked for help to meet between Network gatherings. Every one of these virtual meetings, along with client work, became learning opportunities and expertise has flourished, most without formal training.

The ToP Network work has changed as a result of facilitators learning how to conduct business in virtual meetings – The Board and Executive Team have done their work online starting in 2010 – Task teams including Certification, Public Health in Top (PHiT), and Membership routinely conduct their monthly meetings virtually. More work gets done with these regular virtual meetings.  
  
Since 2011, there has been an annual Virtual Certification Cohort Group meeting monthly - working with Mentor ToP Trainers to learn about the CTF (Certified ToP Facilitator) journey.  
  
Virtual facilitation has benefitted greatly from a focus on collaborative virtual learning. This has transformed not only the ToP Network, but ToP work around the world as Network members committed to building virtual capacity within the larger network of global ToP colleagues.

* Sunny Walker, SunWalker Enterprises, Aurora CO