

LOLAs: Why, What, and How?

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An increasing number of clients hire me to conduct training webinars instead of face-to-face workshops. The same thing is happening with my colleagues around the world. Replacing classroom sessions with webinars is a definite trend in the training industry.

Many trainers don't like to conduct webinars and a few refuse to train in this fashion. Their basic complaint is that webinars deprive them of immediate facial feedback and prevent them from conducting experiential activities. I don't feel this is a valid complaint.

I am publishing a book about techniques for increasing and improving interactivity in webinars. The book explores different types of LOLAs: live online learning activities. This article is an overview of 10 of my favorites.

Before getting into details of designing and conducting LOLAs, let's explore the *why*, *what*, and *how* of interactive training webinars.

Why?

The major attraction of training webinars is related to the economics of training. Webinars are more cost-effective (which is a polite way of saying *cheap*) than face-to-face sessions because they save on the travel costs, especially if the employees are located in different parts of the country or different parts of the world. Webinars are also fairly easy to set up without the need for new hardware. Once a webinar is set up, there is no major additional cost for additional participants.

Here are some other advantages of using webinars for training:

- ❖ Most trainers and participants are familiar with the functions of computers that are incorporated in webinars. Training webinars can also be conducted on smart phones and hand-held tablets.
- ❖ Facilitators can easily upload Powerpoint slides to structure their webinars.
- ❖ The training webinar can be recorded and archived for use by people who missed the original session.
- ❖ The software technology behind the webinar platforms is becoming more reliable, flexible, and user friendly.

Training webinars are not without their limitations and disadvantages. Here are some of them:

- ❖ Webinars expand the reach of dull and mechanical death-by-powerpoint data dumps. Trainers and subject-matter experts are encouraged to indulge in one-way communication.
- ❖ People who lack computer literacy have difficulty figuring out how to participate in a webinar.
- ❖ In spite of their increasing reliability, webinar platforms present some technical problems. They may not work with different browsers and different types of computers. They may be stopped by business firewalls. The local bandwidth and the Internet speed may not be sufficient for the needs of the platform.

A major disadvantage of a webinar is the lack of interactivity between the participants and the content and among the participants. I have been specializing in designing and delivering interactive experiential activities in training classrooms and I have spent the last decade exploring how to adapt these activities to the webinar environment. It is true that not all face-to-face activities can be ported to a webinar session. However, there are many creative techniques for adapting classroom activities to a webinar. And there are some training techniques (example: *instant polling*) that could be conducted more effectively in a virtual classroom than in an actual classroom.

Increasing and improving interactivity in training webinars is the main justification for using LOLAs.

What?

A *webinar* is a presentation or a seminar that is conducted on the Internet. *LOLAs* are different types of live online learning activities that are incorporated in a webinar. Most LOLAs share a set of slides and require the participants to respond to questions, polls, and discussions related to the content.

A training webinar may incorporate different LOLAs. For example, the session may begin with a structured sharing activity followed by the presentation of a case study in the form of an interactive story. It may incorporate a brief thought experiment to reinforce an important principle and end with a closer that includes an instructional puzzle.

Ten Types of LOLAs

The book will explore 10 different types of LOLAs. Each type is covered in a separate section with an introductory discussion and detailed instructions for conducting the activities.

The 10 types of LOLAs are briefly described below and illustrated with examples.

Structured Sharing

These LOLAs help the participants to learn from each other and learn with each other. Structured sharing activities typically create a format for sharing, organizing, and evaluating the participants' experiences, best practices, knowledge, and opinions.

Asterisks is an example of a structured sharing LOLA. In this activity, one group of participants type short answers to an open-ended question in the chat area. Later, another group retypes the better answers with an asterisk in front of them. Still later, all participants select the best one among the asterisked answers.

Interactive Lectures

These LOLAs transform passive presentations into active exercises. Before, during, and after a lecture presentation, the facilitator conducts quizzes, challenges, projects, and discussions in this type of LOLAs.

Distributed Reviews is a sample interactive lecture. Different groups of participants are asked to pay particular attention to different parts of the lecture. At the conclusion of the entire lecture, individual participants from each group type sentences that summarize the key points from the part of the lecture assigned to them.

Textra

These LOLAs combine the effective organization of text materials with the motivational impact of games. The participants read some documents and play a game that uses peer pressure and peer support to encourage the recall and application of what they read.

Essence is a sample textra LOLA. In this activity, participants read an online article and type a summary of the key points in exactly 16 words. Later, the participants summarize these summaries in exactly 8 words and 4 words.

Interactive Stories

These LOLAs incorporate different fictional narratives in a training webinar. In this approach, participants may listen to stories and modify, expand, shrink, analyze, deconstruct, and role-play the stories. They may also create and share their own stories.

Co-Constructed Stories is a sample story LOLA in which the facilitator types the first sentence of a story related to the training topic. The participants build the story by supplying one sentence at a time.

Thought Experiments

These LOLAs require the participants to mentally rehearse new patterns of behavior or hold imaginary dialogues. Combined with self-reflection, these activities produce increased self-awareness and mastery of new knowledge and insights.

Losses is an example of a thought experiment LOLA that explore feelings and emotions of downsized employees. The participants begin by making a list of items (activities, colleagues, and products) they enjoy in the workplace. The facilitator takes them through a guided visualization exercise during which the participant loses the items from the list. At the end of the exercise, the participant imagines how it feels to be finally fired.

Magical Effects

These LOLAs incorporate relevant conjuring tricks as a part of a training webinar. The tricks may be used as processes to be analyzed, reconstructed, learned, performed, or coached. The tricks also provide memorable metaphors for key elements of the training topic.

Memory Test is an example of a magic LOLA from a training webinar on critical thinking. The participants watch a video recording of a trick in which two cards transpose themselves. Later, the participants type a list of events they observed and reconcile contradictions among different people's recall. Later, they validate the final list by checking it against the replay of the video segment.

Puzzles

These LOLAs challenge the participants' problem solving abilities. The puzzles incorporate training topics to be previewed, reviewed, tested, or enriched.

One Word is an example of a puzzle LOLA that stresses the importance of flexible thinking. The participants are asked to rearrange letters from pairs of words to spell one word. Early examples include NEW SOAP (weapons),

*NEW DEER (renewed), and NEW RODS (wonders). To solve the final puzzle, NEW DOOR, the participants have to think laterally and come up with **one word** as the answer.*

Assessment-Based Learning Activities (ABLA)

These LOLAs require the participants to complete a test, a rating scale, or a questionnaire and receive feedback about their personal competencies, attitudes, or personality traits.

***Test and Teach** is an example of an ABLA LOLA. The participants begin by answering a question. The facilitator quickly analyzes the responses to the question, diagnoses the participants' misconceptions and, if necessary, provides just-in-time explanations and examples. The activity continues with a series of questions that cover all aspects of the training topic.*

Graphics

These LOLAs are designed around images such as photographs, paintings, drawings, icons, illustrations, cartoons, sketches, and doodles. They require the participants to study, analyze, understand, verbalize, summarize, and caption the images in order to master skills and knowledge associated with specific training topics.

***Organizational Design** is an example of a graphic LOLA. From a set of six pictures displayed on the screen, the participants select the one that best depicts what they want the organization's future to look like. Based on the selection, the participants type the desirable aspects of their future. Later, they select another picture from another set to reflect the current state of the organization. Finally, the participants brainstorm strategies for moving their organization from the current state to the desirable future state.*

Closers

These LOLAs are conducted at the end of a training webinar for reviewing the main points, tying up loose ends, planning for future action, celebrating successful completion, and organizing networking activities.

***Practical Advice** is an example of a closer LOLA. At the end of a training webinar, each participant types a piece of advice to the others on how best to apply their new skills and knowledge. The participant sends the suggestion as a private message to the facilitator. The facilitator reads aloud five pieces of advice that includes four from the participants and one from him or her. The participants attempt to guess which one is from the facilitator.*

A Minimalist Approach

Call me a Luddite. I take a minimalist approach to designing and conducting LOLAs. I try not to get distracted by the bells and whistles offered by the latest webinar platform and stick to the basic functions available in most webinar platforms: the ability to share a set of slides, a chat area, and a polling function.

As we shall see in the next chapter, modern webinar platforms feature several other functions. I have no objection to your using whiteboards, breakout rooms, and web links, if these functions are available in your platform and you have the competence to use them. Feel free to incorporate them in your training design. But remember that true interactivity is in the participants' mind, not in their mouse.

How?

My upcoming book deals in detail with the *how* of designing and conducting LOLAs. Different sections of the book explore 10 types of LOLAs and provide detailed instructions for four specific applications of each type. Here are some general suggestions to get you started:

Prepare Yourself

Become proficient with the webinar platform. I don't have any recommendations for a specific webinar platform. However, I do strongly recommend that you become thoroughly familiar with the platform that you will be using. The next chapter describes the generic features of webinar platforms and invites you to discover the answers to more than 50 specific questions. You can do this by uploading a webinar and delivering it to your friends. You can also learn basic techniques by using help screens and user manuals. You can watch video demonstrations and attend tutorial webinars. You can observe someone else conducting a webinar.

Work with a team. There are three aspects to conducting a webinar: providing training content, handling the technical elements, and facilitating the interaction between the participants and the content. You may be confident about your ability to assume multiple roles and to multitask, but I advise you not to do so. Even after conducting a webinar a week for several years, I always work with a producer to handle the technical aspects and frequently with a subject-matter expert to present accurate content and to evaluate the participants' responses. This type of outsourcing permits me to effectively fulfill my primary responsibility as a facilitator of learning.

Work with a suitable audience size. I have conducted webinars with as few as three participants and as many as 500 participants. My preferred number is between 10 and 30. This is the group size that I recommend.

Schedule for a suitable time period. My training webinars have lasted from 99 seconds to 6 hours (of course, with breaks). I recommend scheduling your session between 20 minutes to an hour.

Prepare Your Participants

At the beginning of each webinar, train your participants to handle the chat and polling functions. Here are some specific objectives that you want to achieve in this orientation module:

- ❖ **Type messages in the chat area.** Explain that you will conduct the webinar by *talking* to the participants. The participants will respond by *typing* in the chat area. Reassure the participants that they need not worry about typos and spelling mistakes.
- ❖ **Send private and public messages.** Demonstrate how to set the chat area to display the messages only to you (the facilitator) or to the entire group. Let the participants practice switching from one mode to another until they become fluent in selecting who should receive their messages.
- ❖ **Monitor the messages in the chat area.** Warn the participants that some messages may disappear beyond the top of the chat box. Demonstrate how to move the scroll bar to review previous messages in the chat area.
- ❖ **Participate in a poll.** Ask the participants to indicate their choice among the alternatives by clicking the letters A, B, C, ... instead of typing the letters in the chat area.

You should be able to conduct this introductory module in about 15 minutes. During your practice session, ask interesting questions (such as *Where are you located right now* and *What are you worried about this webinar?*) and conduct polls that ask for personal opinions.