# Capturing and Captivating a Mostly Distance Learning (Or "Hybrid") Audience: Thirteen Ideas and Interventions - Part I

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This series was sparked by two recent distance-learning programs, first for the US Dept. of Health and Human Series and then a regional program for a wide variety of Federal Agencies. The distance-learning setting was a mix - a handful of people in the room, large numbers listening in electronically, e.g. with Adobe Connect or through phone lines. The question I will attempt to answer is this: what made the programs so successful? The tangible evidence: almost immediately, the two programs spun off six new speaking and workshop gigs! How did the two different audience settings, especially presenting to an unseen audience, as well as the compressed time frames, impact my presentational skills and strategy? Let me itemize "Top Thirteen Tips for Capturing and Captivating a Mostly Distance Learning (or "Hybrid") Audience.

**Recognize the nature, necessity, and challenge of presenting to a hybrid audience:** With numbers of employees teleworking, with organization employees based across the country, if not stationed across the globe, with today's time-challenged work day, the demand for distance meetings and learnings is irresistible. A major challenge, of course, is that you must both relate and connect with two audiences - one literally in the room, the other in the electronic ether, i.e. folks that can be heard but often not seen. One manager recently shared that he prefers engaging with one or the other, that is, either an in-person or an online audience. For him, the hybrid situation is more difficult to make work. Yet, with busy schedules and sometimes a desire to multi-task, or to take a breather, a mostly distance audience is becoming a major default format for spreading and sharing the words.

**Need for different communication modes and absence of nonverbal cues:** For maximal effectiveness, a presenter must ebb and flow with different modes of communication - substance and style. For example, with a small audience in the room, if you become too "larger than life" you overwhelm the audience, literally intruding on their space. (For example, I prefer to sit when doing a hybrid program, especially if there are less than about a dozen folks in the room. Also, if wandering about, you may lose contact with the mics on the table). Conversely, with your distance audience, if you are not sufficiently dramatic, even a touch theatrical, you risk coming across as merely methodical or, worse, in a boring monotone.

Of course, there's the problem of a limited number of long-distance nonverbal cues. Not being able to read the audience, you need to check in more frequently with the distance learners. For example, the lack of long-distance response to a question posed may well be a clue. Of course, it might also indicate people forgot to unmute their phone lines.

**Grasp McLuhan's medium and message:** In a mostly distance-learning program, especially when a large percentage of your audience is unseen, the goal is to make a purposeful and passionate connection with both the in-room folks and those in the electronic ether. To do this, you'll want to have some understanding of the groundbreaking work of mid-20th c. media theory pioneer, Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan's revolutionary insight was that any medium "amplifies or accelerates existing (human or group) processes", introduces a "change of scale or pace or shape or pattern into human association, affairs, and action", resulting in "psychic and social consequences". This is the real "meaning or message" brought by the medium, regardless of the "content" emitted by it. His famous mantra: *The medium*

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*is the message.* For example, the light bulb, despite emitting no content, is a powerful medium; it vastly expanded the range of nighttime human activities. Just as distance learning expands the opportunity in real-time for far-flung audiences to get on a common "page" (so 20th c.; better, a common screen) of information and understanding.

In addition, McLuhan famously distinguished between "hot and cold media: *Hot media* mostly engages one sense completely. It demands little interaction because it 'spoon feeds' the content; without active participation, there's little opportunity to personally engage with, shape, and/or influence the message. Alas, a talking head lecture, relentlessly monotone, factual, or logical, devoid of emotion, let alone passion, is "hot", more in the sense of inducing lethargy and passivity than excitement and passion.

In contrast, *cool* or low definition media generally engages several senses less completely in that it demands a great deal of interaction on the part of the audience. Audiences then participate more because, by their own efforts, they are required to perceive, speculate, (or inquire about) the gaps in the content (*Quora.com*).

### Illustrative point: What not to do!

Here's a "heated" example. I recall being on a four-person phone conference - a senior member of an HR Consulting firm, two consultants with the firm, and an HR Director. All were in separate locations. I was the soft-skills/stress expert. The hi-tech consultant was explaining in detail the intricacies of the new software package he hoped the client (a major university) would eventually purchase and install. And Mr. Hi-Tech went on and on, never pausing to check in with the client representative, to ask if she had any questions, ideas, concerns, etc. (Perhaps he believed she needed to grasp the entire forest before she could ask questions about individual trees). To be fair, he wasn't just droning on, but even with some energy, on a phone line, enough is enough. Alas, one challenge for a phone conference presenter, alone in a room, is the lack of opportunity to receive visual cues. Such cues may provide a warning signal of fading audience engagement.

After about five minutes (which is definitely a long time for participants to be listening to an uninterrupted monologue, especially of a technical nature), I finally cut in. While myself getting antsy, I was particularly anxious for the Director. I now asked the potential client if she had any questions. It took her awhile to respond. Frankly, the client already seemed to have detached. (We didn't get the contract). And, not surprisingly, the other consultant later expressed anger toward me for "showing him up". This consultant was surely lacking in "Emotional Intelligence"; he was clearly clueless about the communication requisites for such a media platform, when all are on separate lines. (Okay, maybe I'm being too critical; perhaps he just needs to brush up on Dr. McLuhan).

Then, of course, there's the problem of a limited number of long-distance nonverbal cues. Not being able to read the audience, you need to check in more frequently with the distance learners. For example, the lack of long-distance response to a question posed may well be a clue. Of course, it might also indicate people forgot to unmute their phone lines.

**Value the small numbers in the room:** Actually, there is one partial remedy for the issue of long-distance "cuelessness" with a "hybrid" audience. This remedy relates to a communication advantage when there are small numbers in the conference room. Being up close and personal with folks in the room, I can get a pretty good read on their facial expressions, body language, level of attentiveness and engagement, etc. These individuals help me at least surmise what may be the posture of a good number of electronic ether bodies and minds. As a friend noted, they are *the canaries in the coal mine.*

Of course, this means a speaker needs to be sufficiently familiar with her material and flexible with her focus; she is not just reading and relating to the slides. She's also reading and relating to the folks in the room. So, don't just concentrate on delivering the content; also pay attention to the mind-body signals of your in-person attendees. In addition, ask the in-person handful evocative individual and group questions. For example, in a stress and burnout program, after talking about my academic burnout experience - *When academic flash dancing whirled to a burnout tango* - I'll follow with a personal and provocative inquiry: "Am I the only one who has experienced burnout?" Sometimes you have a bold soul willing to share their burnout story.

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For a hybrid audience, what's the engagement and educational value? First, initiating contact has the potential to wake up the tuned-out or semi-comatose. Such questions may also generate in-room ideas and insights reflecting issues and concerns that speak to both audiences. I can more confidently address the unseen and, often, unheard.

**Glitch happens:** My experience is that while instructional bells and whistles can be effective, if not powerful additions to a presentation, there also may be a price to pay - technological/equipment breakdowns! For example, in a recent webinar/teleconference on "Employee Engagement", trying to show a video suddenly triggered unwanted twilight zone-like music/static from the in-room sound system. This happened several times before the problem was corrected. In between the frantic attempts at repair and the hybrid audience dead space, my absurdist nature went to work. After reproducing the twilight zone theme music, I called out: "You will be engaged, you will be engaged". The guy two seats away turned and said he started seeing, "one of those hypnotic-inducing spinning wheels". At least he was engaged, imaginatively jazz riffing off my aural replication and darkly humorous suggestion. So, while many a technical lemon can be turned into lemonade, you may have to have some absurdist alchemical proclivities.

### Rules of thumb (and beware of numb)

The take home point is that Instructional Design technology should be used judiciously; spread more like caviar than a condiment. And the technology should be more than "blow em up" dramatic visuals, akin to when movie special effects eclipse story line, dialogue, and character development. For me, the bread and butter of workplace presentation and training (especially the non-technical, hybrid variety) is still the capacity for vibrant engagement between a speaker and a listening audience, particularly when there are constraints to group interaction. My bias: *Hi-Tech should be in the service of Human Touch*. Amen and women, to that!

**The reality of time:** Distance-learning programs tend to be time-sensitive, whether because of overextended openings and introductions and standard closing questions. Actually, I don't like going over sixty minutes. This makes sense when you are primarily a talking head; when interactive exercises are constrained by the nature of the learning-sharing platform. In my estimation, you'll definitely need a tangible break during a two-hour program. Not just for the "call of nature", but also for sustaining attention span. A two-hour program is definitely testing concentration capacity. Remember, most folks in the electronic ether are listening alone. In general, this will provide a complex challenge: providing an audience with practical and relevant problem-solving ideas and tools while communicating in an extraordinary manner.

In conclusion, a mostly distance-learning program needs to be effective and efficient. A presenter must deliver and display concrete, concise, and clear information in an energizing, entertaining, and engaging manner. And the fundamental challenge is generating this head- and heart-connection quickly... and sustaining it for a time period that is not insubstantial for those in the electronic ether. When used purposefully and artfully, the typically circumscribed time frame becomes an animating and focus-sharpening dynamic for both speaker and audience.

**Learning warning:** The unexpected can also occur when the program coordinator and her extended announcements cut into your allotted time; suddenly you have twenty minutes instead of the anticipated forty. Now, on the spot improvisation and streamlining become your ace card. Don't panic; if you've done sufficient preparation, just trust your gut instinct regarding what's most important to share. Believe me, people remember passion (your ability to inspire ideas and actions or how you make them feel) at least as much as polish (how poised or smooth you come across).

**Start where the client or customer is: Case illustration engaging with more immediate reality over planned expectations:** Months before the Jan 2019 Federal Government shutdown, I had been scheduled for a hybrid-distance learning "lunch and learn" with employees of the US Dept. of Health and Human Services. And, naturally, the program fell right in the middle of the contentious partial closure. The scheduled topic was "Cross-Cultural Diversity". It was pretty obvious there was an educational content/program context disconnect. Having had previous experience with major federal government reorganizing and downsizing (it's less often "rightsizing",

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more like *frightsizing*), clearly, the state of stress and frustration needed to be addressed. Through empathetically framed questions and personal sharing/stories, I began to emotionally connect with all attendees. I was establishing my "street cred". Practical and potent tools for grappling with individual uncertainty had to initially leapfrog my talk on cultural diversity! A combination of brief spontaneous stories and Power Point Slides were outlined. Folks left with some immediate, "hands on" diagnostic, prevention, and intervention concepts and tips for managing stress, preventing burnout, and developing "psychological hardiness" in these "t 'n t" - *turbulent and trying* - times.

I even managed to divide or structure the presentation into two twenty-minute streamlined components - "Stress Resilience" followed by "Cross-Cultural Diversity". In fact, during the closing Q and A, I recall one teleconference participant sharing (through the phone line) that a key takeaway was "key cross-cultural diversity ideas and structures that could be applied" in her workplace setting.

So, immediately the message was clear: this presentation was not going to be "lunch and learn" business as usual. We would be engaging the government gorilla in the room. Content would be shaped by "on the ground" circumstances. At the same time, improvisation could coexist with an established agenda, perhaps to synergistic effect. That is, the unexpected subject pairing had revealed the tangible conceptual and practical interplay between "Stress Resilience and Cross-Cultural Diversity". When examined/presented in tandem, each concept seemed to expand and enlighten the value of the other. In the future, I will be more consciously planning a "Diversity/Resilience" presentation for hybrid audiences.

**Select and work with a few key concepts:** A distance-learning presenter must be conscious of a workable number of concepts in an often-limited time frame. He or she must sort the conceptual wheat from the chaff by providing no more than a handful of practical and useful problem-solving information and ideas, illustrations, and insights. Flesh out a few concepts and tools in depth and vivid color, perhaps also posing provocative questions. Much better than attempting an unmanageable number of concepts and tools (or slides) in a quick or superficial manner. View each slide as potentially a rich tapestry of text and/or images that is fully brought to life by your words, examples, stories, and stimulating questions. When indicated, elicit brief discussion and distance/text or voice feedback among those in the room. So, don't just deliver good information; learn to ask head- and heart-engaging and provoking questions that enable participants to:

a) In turn ask for further clarification or seek divergence of viewpoint or opinion,

b) Contemplate and/or share hard-earned experience and perspective; (remember, as mid-20th c. philosopher, Ernest Becker noted, The most important human desire is the desire to feel important!), and

c) More purposefully relate to and passionately connect with - objectively and subjectively - the content. To borrow from Martin Luther King's immortal "I Have a Dream Speech", help folks see how your content may well go beyond knowledge and impact their character!

**Differentiate and interrelate key items:** Your handful of select ideas should become matrix-like, woven into a strategic problem-solving, distance-learning package. Let me try a trees-forest analogy. Tangibly illustrate strategic ideas and skills (trees), then relate and holistically integrate into a conceptual model (or forest). For example, when doing resilience programs, the interrelation of stress, change (and loss), along with conflict is foundational. Clearly, these interacting, psycho-social variables - stress, change, and conflict - powerfully impact human and organizational performance. Also, each conceptual tree possesses its own problem-solving skills, structures, and strategies. Such an effective and efficient ecological engagement opens up creative and collaborative possibilities. Learners grasp and grapple with how stress, change, and conflict impact one another in the human, interpersonal, and organizational arenas: a) how change *upsets rules, behavior and communication patterns*, while generating feelings of loss, especially loss of control or future plans, etc.; b) how conflict and stress, if optimal or excessive, can *heighten or disrupt focus and creative performance*; and c) how *can heighten or disrupt focus and creative performance; and c) how each require grief space-time for productive problem-solving,* etc. The interaction of this conceptual "tree-nity" becomes the foundational forest for sustaining individual and group resilience and resourcefulness in a variety of psycho-social, work-life contexts. Consider this one to three-hour, full menu (or "forest") of itemized program objectives (the trees). Depending on time

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allotted for the program, it may well be edited and trimmed.

### Stress, change, and conflict resilience: key learning objectives

1. Natural SPEED (Sleep-Priorities-Passion-Empathy-Exercise-Diet) Quiz and rapidly identify stress smoke signals and "The Four Stages of Burnout".

2. Discover burnout prevention/recovery concepts of "Psychological Hardiness" and "The Stress Doc's Six 'R's of Burnout Recovery".

3. Exercise and tools for managing loss and harnessing change; why is it often difficult to "let go?".

4. Learn to disarm critical aggressors and power struggles while building trust; set limits and boundaries on time and energy-wasting, confidence-draining people and situations.

5. Discover structures, tools, and techniques for developing more open and resilient, creative and collaborative teams.

6. Learn to quickly build a sense of trust and camaraderie while breaking down status and cultural diversity barriers through a risk-taking, humor, and story-sharing exercise.

**Cultivate trees-forest synergy:** Each environment (in-room and electronic ether) has different vantage points; each affords unique challenges and opportunities. With both, a presenter attempts to plant and cultivate ideational and tactical seeds. Through information delivery as well as purposeful, provocative, and passionate expression, Johnny or Jeannie Appleseed may bring to life vibrant individual trees. An experienced and imaginative presenter may even envision a conceptual and practical, an analytic and emotional forest. Such diversity and synthesis yield a synergistic mindscape: a diverse group of hybrid learners - thinking and working both individually and in teams - are engaged, energized, and, maybe even, beginning to feel enlightened: the whole (the forest or hybrid educational ecology) is greater than the sum of its parts (the trees - individual learners relating to standalone concepts). However, the real dreamlike synergy is when, for a magical moment in time, despite distance in space, *presenter and audience are not just parts but become experiential partners sharing that kindred, medium/mind-expanding wavelength*.

**Bring a surprising mix of words, images, and vocals:** Over the years, I have performed in a variety of program and audience settings having diverse performance and outcome demands. One obvious conclusion: successful presentations are not just content and context-driven. As a presenter, the breadth and depth of personality, not just your expertise, is on stage! Ironically, this may be especially salient when most folks are listening through a computer screen or telephone line. Why do I say this? Simple: when folks can't process both visual and verbal data (for example, besides Power Point Slides), then words and vocals become your one-person band. (Think of Bob Dylan with both his range of "voice that came from you and me" to his "Lay Lady Lay" sound, along with multiple instruments, e.g., guitar and harmonica). You need vocals that can generate tempos and tones from the soft, slow, and subtle to the buoyant, bold, and brassy.

### Variety is the spice...

So, one way of getting people more engaged is by varying "what" is presented and "how" it is delivered or shared: for example, information and ideas as bullet points, graphs, charts, cartoons, stories, etc. In addition to the verbal (the presenter's words) and text and pictorial (e.g., the presenter's slides, typically), variation also occurs through the nonverbal components of speech. When people can't see your body posture, arm movements, or facial expressions, then your voice itself must be a multifaceted tool of engagement. Especially with a distance-learning audience, employing tone, intonation, emphasis, energy, volume, pacing, rhythm, pitch, etc.... all are critical.

Variety doesn't just add spice to life, but often injects surprise... whether surprising yourself with a new learning curve or action (like when I figure out how to use a digital application, e.g., my smartphone calendar) or by breaking out of the behavior patterns others are expecting. You want people on the edge of their seats, excitedly thinking, what's coming next? Remember, words, while they may wound

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or wear you out, are potentially magical tools for wonder, wit, and wisdom. As acclaimed author and humorist, Mark Twain, observed: *Wit is the sudden marriage of ideas which before their union were not perceived to have any relation!*

**Be larger than Life (but not too large):** As a distance presenter, I may have an advantage. Stress Doc presentation topics are naturally passionate components of my professional and personal life: stress, burnout, loss, grief, change, conflict, anger, passion, communication, resilience, cultural diversity, creativity, leadership, team building, etc. I'm not alone: these subjects speak to and often powerfully touch most participants. And as I'm discovering, awareness of both the small in-room numbers and the larger, mystery electronic audience, along with the shorter/higher pressure time frame, impacts my method, motivation, and mojo!

One challenge is to be somewhat intimate with the folks in the room while also being slightly larger than life for those in the ether. (The test: *being my fullest self without being full of myself*). And as I recently discovered, with a hybrid audience, when tapping into purpose and passion my stage/screen personae may not just be larger... but also louder and more animated. It can be a challenge finding the sweet spot range.

### Illustrative point

Approaching the end of a mostly distance learning program, I was going for a strong close. Guess I didn't quite realize the degree or intensity of my passion. My voice and pounding on the conference room table for emphasis certainly woke up at least one individual: a federal employee working in an adjacent room, not part of the program, walked in and asked me to tone it down. I'm sure she had good reason, yet in looking back, I did not detect an atmosphere of discomfort with my passion, even with the pounding. I sensed the in-room folks were energized, if not inspired, by this spontaneous and out-sized display of energy and enthusiasm. I may well have been touching some of their own deeper purpose and passion. P.S. The coordinators of the program have invited me back as a speaker

**Generate questions and conflict while modeling concentrated-creative-comedic expression:** Another critical communicational quality is the ability to ask mind-challenging, even upsetting yet breadth and depth expanding, questions. (As pragmatic American education pioneer and philosopher, John Dewey, noted: *Conflict is the gadfly of thought. It stirs us to observation and memory. It shocks us out of sheep-like passivity. It instigates to invention and sets us to noting and contriving. Conflict is the sine qua non of reflection and ingenuity*).

In addition to evocative (heart-stirring) and provocative (mind-stimulating) questions, to capture and captivate, I would add the use of poetic-like language and imagery, aphorisms, alliterations, (e.g., the above paragraph opens with the repetitive sound of "critical communicational quality") along with acronyms. (You know what stress-induced TMJ really stands for: *Too Many Jerks!* Okay, some edgy yet appropriate humor. Hey, my goal in life... *to be a wise man and a wise guy!*) Might we call this an imaginative and memorable manner of expression that may surprise, perhaps tickle, and even inspire? In other words, the "purposeful" needs to be examined and embellished through a "passionate, provocative, playful and, perhaps, a philosophical" expressive frame. "Passion Power"™ anyone?

The more that I highlight my manner and method of delivery, we are circling in on the interplay of "Substance and Style". And Part II will more specifically examine this dance by defining the "S and S" terms while analyzing the interplay through the newly expanded "Passion Power" lens.

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