

Learning Uncut Disruption Series
Jo Cook – Producing Live Online Learning Sessions
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to this special learning uncut disruption series episode. We've got Jo Cook returning to supplement our last session, which was about live online sessions. Jo is going to talk to us more about the producer's role, which was mentioned very briefly. So what is the producer's role? How do you go about the function of producing a live online session? So Jo, we will put a link to your LinkedIn profile in the show notes for people to learn more about you. Would you like to again briefly introduce yourself and then talk to us about what is the producer role and what is production of a live online session?

Jo Cook:

Well, hello everybody. Really glad to be on. This is a great idea, this disruption series. My name's Jo Cook. I run Lightbulb Moment and what my company does is help people design and deliver really great webinars and virtual classrooms, which as you say, can include the producer role. There's different names you can use for different roles, but basically the producer role is somebody who's not the main person presenting or facilitating. They're there behind the scenes if you like, to offer technical support and production support in the running of that event.

Michelle Ockers:

And when should you be using a producer if you're a facilitator of a session? And when do you not need to use a producer?

Jo Cook:

I'd say generally, all the time you should use a producer. There's going to be the reality of, well that means to people on a session and obviously that's a more of a cost and a resource from people. Also, if you are really experienced in your software and what you're delivering and you've got a comfortable number of participants, whether that's 10 or a hundred that's up to you. Maybe you don't need a producer. The first, I don't know, five years that I was delivering virtual classrooms, I didn't have a producer. I had to do it all myself, which actually meant I got really good at it, so it wasn't a bad thing in that sense. But what we're looking at now is we're looking at a very disruptive way of working. So actually probably most people have either never done this before, certainly not very much, probably very nervous, not very confident. And there's a lot of spinning plates in any kind of live on my session. So having someone in that producer role, even if they're learning with you too, you're dividing and conquering.

Michelle Ockers:

So if you can find an experienced producer, fantastic. This particular episode of the series is aimed at people who are having to do the producer role, who are not well experienced. So talk us through some of the basics and essentials for getting started in the role of producer.

Jo Cook:

So whatever your session is going to be that you're delivering and whoever you're delivering it with. The first thing is to decide who does what. What are the expectations that you both have? Because there's all sorts of sliding scale of producer from somebody who does almost literally everything of clicking on the next slide, unmuting this speaker and meeting them again and the person just talks through to a facilitate who's pretty much on it. And as a

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producer it's your job just to keep an eye on chat if your attendees have got any particular problems and help them with stuff like that. There's a whole load of different stuff in the middle, so it's just deciding who's doing which bit. Who's introducing the tools? Is the producer there to read out questions from the chat panel if it's really busy? Are they there to help you if you have something go wrong? Can they carry on with the session without you if your computer crashes? It's that kind of thing you just need to define up front.

Michelle Ockers:

So really just walking through the session from front to beginning and having a look at everything that needs to be done and deciding what the producer is going to do and what the facilitator is going to do?

Jo Cook:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Are there some things that are always the role of the producer should you have one?

Jo Cook:

I would say definitely helping attendees. So if somebody types in the chat window, "I've lost sound", "I can't see the slides" and that kind of stuff. That is the role of the producer to help them to the best of their ability. There is an element of at some point it could be the attendee's computer, you're not standing there being able to plug and unplug a microphone in for them and set it up for them on their version of Windows. But you can help them as much as you possibly can.

Michelle Ockers:

And are there any common errors or traps that new producers may fall into?

Jo Cook:

Ooh, that's a good question. So, not knowing your software is one of them. But we're in a time where actually you might be doing this for the first or second time, so it's going to be a learning curve. What I would say is get a document where you make notes of everything. So a producer document is great when you've got something you can quickly copy and paste about. Try this with your microphone, try this with the telephone line, reset this, log out, log in again, whatever it might be, that will save you tons and tons of time. And then you can share that amongst your team or department as well and help everybody learn and be a better producer.

Michelle Ockers:

And so, that list of things to do that is standard practice. But if things are going well, here's the things that we would normally do with the technology and during the session. I assume that a trouble shooting list of some sort could be really helpful too. Right?

Jo Cook:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

So if someone's having a problem, here's a step to talk them through.

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Jo Cook:

Exactly. So I used to have just a notepad document. It could be a word document, whatever you want to use. And I'd have variations of, "Huh, you can't find this. Try clicking on unmute and retry again. Try plugging in your USB microphone again, try rebooting your computer if you're on Windows, try and look at this. If you're on Mac, look at this. Here's a hyperlink to how it works on Mac OSX." So I just had those ready to go and find copy and paste.

Jo Cook:

So I'm not an expert in using Mac OS, but I can tell you, you need to go and click here, click here, click here and after that I can't really help you very much anymore. So having that list there so you can copy and paste. Just saves you typing it all of the time. And it means if somebody else has done three or four production sessions already and got loads of those things and learnt the hard way. Maybe I can use that document and not have to learn the hard way and go, "Oh, there's three levels of support here for the microphone won't work." There's three suggestions already, and probably one of those will help the attendee.

Michelle Ockers:

So obviously apart from being familiar with the technology that's going to be used to facilitate the session to the extent you can as a producer, you should have some understanding of what types of technology the participants are going to be using so you can help them if need be too, right?

Jo Cook:

Yeah. As much as possible and as much as realistic in the current situation that we're in.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep. I think you mentioned sometimes the producer will help the facilitator with running some activities or something else I have seen them do is to help to manage the chat and highlight things, help manage the Q and A. What tips do you have for... Let's start with the chat. What tips do you have for a producer in monitoring and managing the chat and working with facilitator around chat?

Jo Cook:

Okay. So first of all, the producer needs to pay attention to the session. Which if you're not interested in the subject or if the subject is above whatever you understand, are the subjects that can be challenging. But you can look out for questions and you can decide is this a question about whatever the topic is that I need to fill to the facilitator. Or is this actually something that I can deal with in chat and just say, "Hey look here, or three slides ago there was this." Maybe you've got a copy of the facilitator's notes on lesson plan, if that's as organized as you're being. You might have something in there, you can copy and paste.

Jo Cook:

So it depends a lot on how well planned and prepared and how much the facilitator has shared with you. Also what you can do with the chat, if you're monitoring that, if you've got a really busy kind of webinar type session, you've got 50 or a hundred people, maybe you've got no question panel and it's all coming through in chat. Maybe copy those questions out into, for example, a word document so that when your facilitator pauses and says, "Are there any questions?" You have them all handy, you don't have to scroll back through the chat and try and find them or you've missed them.

Michelle Ockers:

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That's a great tip and that's a very hard thing to do if you don't have a producer and you're facilitating on your own.

Jo Cook:

Yes, it is.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Some people who are new to producing may not be aware that most platforms you would be using allow you to communicate specifically in the chat just with a specific person. So you do have an option to use that to communicate with someone who may be having some issues, without it filling up everybody else's chat and distracting everyone. What do you recommend in terms of letting participants know either ahead of time, start of the session, how to contact the producer or how to ask for help if they need it?

Jo Cook:

Really good question. It would depend a little bit on your software. So first of all in your organization, check that your organization has got private chat switched on. Not all organizations will. I'm working with an educational institution in Europe at the moment and they've got that switched off just in terms of, I think it's GDPR, but certainly they've got that switched off for a particular reason. So do check that that's switched on first of all.

Jo Cook:

If you do have that option, I would say at the very beginning, if it's very new, that I would just keep it super basic and just use the one chat panel if I'm honest. And if somebody's got a problem, fine, everybody's going to see that Bob can't hear and also got audio issues. That's okay. We're in a certain situation and that's fine. Maybe towards the end of this week, if you start to get a little bit more comfortable with these sessions, what you can do is as a producer you can put instructions in your chat panel. To say, in whatever software, if you want to send to me a private chat message.

Jo Cook:

If you've got a technical problem, you could click XYZ, whatever it might be. Some people will do that. Some people just never will, even if you tell them right at the beginning and if you tell them that's a procedure, they won't be able to manage it because it is a technological barrier to people. So just tell them they've got the option if they want it. But it also helped people to know how to get back to whatever the main chat is or to change the settings back to everyone so that they can contribute to the wider group as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Is there anything I haven't asked about the producer role or being the production process, which you think should be highlighted, Jo? That you'd like to add.

Jo Cook:

I think if you can, it depends a lot on your organization and how quickly you're moving. If you can do any kind of conversation or practice run or get any documentation from whoever your trainer or facilitator is beforehand, that will help you. Even if it's just a slide deck with their notes in it, it will help you understand what the sessions about, where you might need to jump in, where you might need to support them. So that's the best practice you can get, but it's a very volatile situation that we're in. Anything you can get beforehand is good. If not,

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you've just got to roll with it and learn on the job and it might be challenging, but that's what life is all about is overcoming those challenges and doing it with grace and aplomb.

Michelle Ockers:

And I think to hark back to something that Donald Taylor mentioned in the first episode of the disruption series of previous session, you're in a situation right now where a lot of people are doing new things. If there was ever a time to have the courage to lean in and try it. And don't be too concerned if you get something wrong and feel confident that people are going to be a little accepting of that and as long as you're learning quickly, now is the time to do that.

Jo Cook:

Absolutely. And I wouldn't ever dare to disagree with Don Taylor.

Michelle Ockers:

Well, who would really, all right, any final words of advice to learning professionals who are having to figure out how to produce live online sessions at the moment?

Jo Cook:

I think it's practice, play, buddy up with people. If you're in an organization where there's more than one of you, what can you learn from each other? Support each other. If you've got a free hour and somebody's running a session, go jump in and be their producer or shadow a producer. If you've got that time and this is your focus, go do as much as you possibly can. You'll be amazed how much you learn and when the problems come along, that's when you learn the most, so just enjoy them.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, we will put a transcript of this episode. There was a lot of great tips. There'll be a transcript in the show notes, and if I can find any other good resources, Jo I'm not sure if you have any to share with tips for producers. But I'll have a look if I can come one or two really good punchy resources to add as well. Thank you very much for your time and sharing your expertise, Jo, much appreciated.

Jo Cook:

Oh, well thank you. And it's a great series, so listen up everybody loads more to share on other episodes, I'm sure. Thank you.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you.

About Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers works with business and learning leaders to realise the untapped potential of learning in organisations. She is an organisational learning strategist and modern workplace learning practitioner. Michelle works with organisations to develop and implement transformative organisational learning strategy, and to build the capability of their learning team. She delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events. Michelle also mentors learning professionals at all career stages on career planning and professional development.



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Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

- *Australian Institute of Training and Development Dr Alastair Rylatt Award for L&D Professional of the Year – for outstanding contribution to the practice of Learning and Development*
- *Internet Time Alliance Jay Cross Memorial Award – for outstanding contribution to the field of informal learning*

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