

Make Virtual Spaces Come Alive:

Episode 287

Elena: If you've ever wondered how to make your virtual PD sessions more energizing, more human, and more engaging, this episode is for you. Hello friends and welcome to the Bright Morning Podcast. I'm your host Elena Aguilar, and in each episode you will learn how to lead conversations and experiences that build connection and spark real change.

So today we're talking about something we have become known for at Bright Morning, which is virtual facilitation that people are excited to attend and come back for again and again. So let's get into it. I wanna start with a story from one of our art of virtual facilitation workshops. A participant named Erica joined and told us straight up, I am here because I've been dreading every Zoom meeting I run, and I want to stop that cycle.

She said that she had been trying all the tricks, the polls, the fancy slides, the fun backgrounds, but still felt like no one was really engaging. Half the time people had their cameras off and they looked exhausted. The other half, they just seemed checked out. So if you have led or attended PD via Zoom, I'm guessing you might know exactly what Erica is talking about.

The thing is, Erica wasn't doing anything wrong. She just hadn't been given the tools to design a virtual space that prioritized connection and authentic engagement because when it comes to online facilitation, the problem isn't Zoom. It's what we do or don't do with it. So at Bright Morning, we have spent years perfecting how to create virtual spaces where people feel seen, challenged, and joyful.

And in this episode, I wanna share three strategies that we use in every session, strategies that are easy to try and that make a big difference. So here's the first strategy. Begin with presence. So this is about intentionally welcoming people, not just jumping into the agenda. And you might use a grounding question in the chat, or a short piece of music, or a moment to check in with for the breath or the body.

And you can say, before we dive in, I invite you to land here. Take a breath, look around your space. Let yourself arrive. Or you could also say, as we get started, drop a word in the chat that captures how you're feeling right now. Or

another option, I know everyone is coming from different spaces, and your mind might be buzzing in many different directions.

So take a minute. Feel free to hop off camera and let your thoughts settle. And maybe that means taking a big stretch and a deep breath. Maybe it means jotting down some final thoughts you don't wanna lose from the last meeting. So let's take an individual moment and then we'll come back into our collective learning space.

So these kinds of openings and invitations aren't fluff. This is facilitation. You signal that people matter more than your slides, and that this space will feel different than the other ones that they've been in that day. Here's the second strategy. Reset the energy intentionally. Zoom Fatigue is real and it is preventable.

So in our workshops, we intentionally build in quick energy resets every 25 to 30 minutes. These are not long breaks. They are short, purposeful moments to re-energize the body and the brain. Here are some of the ways that we do that. We say Stand up. And stretch your arms if you're able, and take a deep breath.

Another option, turn away from your screen for 30 seconds and let your eyes rest. And here's another option. Wiggle your fingers and toes. Shake out your shoulders and just notice how your body feels. So these little resets are game changers. They keep people feeling alert and engaged and feeling taken care of.

And here's the third strategy. Make instructions, visual and verbal. So in a virtual space, attention is fragile. Distractions are everywhere. And not everyone processes information in the same way. So when you give instructions, especially for breakout rooms or group tasks, say them aloud and also show them clearly on screen or in the chat.

Here's an example. You'll head into breakout groups for six minutes. Your prompt is on the slide. What's one idea that resonated and how might you apply it? Each person should take about two minutes. If you finish early, reflect on what surprised you while you're speaking. Those directions should also be on a slide or copied into the chat, and this helps ensure that no one's confused or anxious or left behind.

It builds trust and it allows for different learning needs. All right. If you're ready for bonus moves, then here are a few more bright warning strategies. Open your zoom room early with music and a welcome slide. Let people ease in. Invite

them to contribute to the chat so they are immediately seen and engaged in the space.

Use a countdown timer during breaks. That gives structure and increases on time. Return rates, keep your visuals clean and consistent. Use common colors, readable fonts, and simple layouts. These might seem small and they are, but they make a big difference. They're ways that we create virtual spaces that feel warm, grounded, and alive.

Okay, let's go back to Erica, who I mentioned at the beginning of this episode. So after that workshop, she emailed us a few weeks later and she said, I tried your opening presence practice, and I could feel the shift immediately. People looked up, smiled. A few more people turned their cameras on. It felt like we were actually in it together for the first time in months.

I have some hope, and I'm not dreading our next meeting since I have even more new strategies to try. So that's what this is about. You don't need to be flashy. You don't need a new platform or a gimmick. You just need to show up with intention and design with care. So here is your challenge for this week.

Try one of these strategies in your next virtual session. Maybe a one minute pause to arrive or a body-based reset halfway through, or maybe writing out your breakout instructions and dropping them into the chat. Whatever you choose. Just notice what changes. Not in your participants, but in you. Okay. If you want to keep growing in this area, then we would love to have you in our workshop called The Art of Virtual Facilitation, and this is a hands-on workshop where we teach the strategies and many more, and you get to practice them with live feedback.

In the show notes, you will find a link to that along with links to our upcoming free community webinars. Thank you for being here with me today, and if this episode helped you feel more hopeful or more equipped to lead powerful virtual learning, then please share it with a colleague. And if you're listening via podcast, then leaving a five star rating and review on Apple Podcasts helps others to discover this show.

And if you're watching on YouTube and this sparked something for you, then hit that like button and share it with someone in your network. And if you're not watching on YouTube, come and join us. Links are in the show notes. All right. LesLee Bickford is the podcast producer and Stacey Goodman, does the sound engineering be well everyone?

