



WHSC VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS DELIVER **QUALITY TRAINING** AND **ASSURED LEARNING.**

► **SPECIAL REPORT**



THEY SAY NECESSITY IS THE MOTHER OF INVENTION. As the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic hit Ontario, like most organizations, the Workers Health & Safety Centre (WHSC) was forced to take a hard look at how we operated. The situation presented both a challenge and an opportunity for ingenuity.

Our challenge however was particularly urgent. Yes, the province confronted an unprecedented public health crisis, but this same crisis was also a monumental occupational health and safety crisis—one from which WHSC, as Ontario’s designated health and safety training centre, could hardly step back. **Workers and workplace representatives would need access to potentially life-saving training as never before.** Many did not have the privilege of working from home, including the most vulnerable and those employed in the most hazardous jobs.

FIRST PRINCIPLES

Before the COVID crisis, our labour constituents and employer clients long preferred and requested face-to-face, in-person learning because among many reasons it:

- makes it easier to demonstrate and observe attained learning, especially critical with hands-on learning and hazard concerns which, if left unchecked, can have tragic consequences
- allows instructors to pick up and better respond to learners’ social cues and body language
- affords the opportunity for conversations and connections outside formal classroom sessions
- eliminates barriers that can arise with online technology (e.g., affordability and access to technology and reliable internet, digital literacy, validation of participants’ identity).

While these observations were all valid, in March of 2020 provincial directives and necessary precautions to reduce the risk of COVID transmission rendered in-person training impossible. Canceling health and safety training altogether though was not an option. But what were our options?

For some time WHSC has offered [supervisor health and safety training online](#). Most of the program is delivered in self-paced, asynchronous sessions, where the participant learns on their own (without the benefit of interacting with an instructor or other participants) at whatever time they choose. This training however includes remote, real-time segments with a WHSC-qualified instructor and other participants. Our aim is to allow participants an opportunity to fully explore their health and safety concerns and program learning objectives. Just as important, like in-person training, the live online segments provide participants an opportunity to demonstrate their learning and the instructor to observe it. In such a way adult education principles and training integrity, [fundamental to all WHSC programs](#), are embedded into the supervisor program.



BUILDING DIGITAL CAPACITY

Program development necessary for asynchronous e-learning however takes time. We and those we serve needed an immediate solution. Moreover, we knew we could do better. If the best of our supervisor online training was the live sessions, why not adopt this model for other programs?

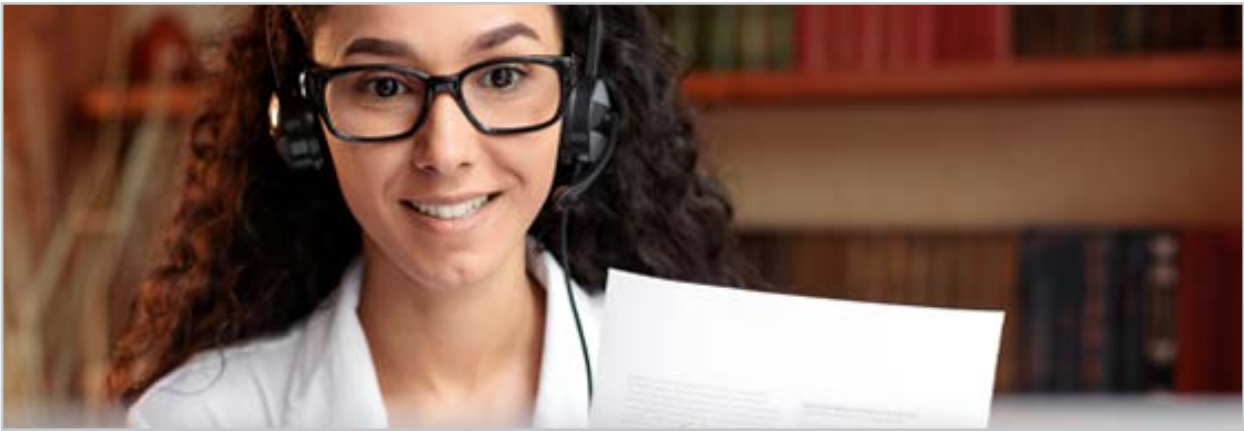
The rapid search for a suitable program platform began. “We needed a digital platform where participants and instructors could see and hear each other. Tools for sharing documents and ideas were essential. Small group breakout sessions to support interactive learning activities were necessary too. We were looking to build virtual classrooms in every way possible,” says Dave Killham, recently retired, WHSC executive director.

WHSC would ultimately settle on Zoom as our digital training platform. To participate, online learners would need a computer with an operating camera, speakers and microphone and

access to high-speed internet. Next steps involved training WHSC staff and instructors on the platform and tools to support virtual classrooms; redesigning training session plans to incorporate and take fullest advantage of these options; reprogramming our online course catalogue and scheduled training registration system to add these new offerings; and finally, communicating the availability, requirements and benefits of these offerings.

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— Dave Killham, WHSC



LAUNCHING VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS

By mid-April, we launched our virtual classroom beginning with a revised introduction to GHS-WHMIS. Given the increased uptake in cleaning chemicals to confront COVID-19, the need for quality WHMIS training was tremendous. (Back then public health was telling us contaminated surfaces were a major source of transmission.) At the same time, we also launched the first in a series of timely webinars on COVID-19 to explore its routes of transmission and necessary measures to prevent its spread in workplaces. In the beginning we were hosting two webinars per week. By late-August, we had reached a total 27,200 participants in 19 different webinars. Each session generated hundreds of questions, some of which we answered during the webinar, but most often we answered them offline after the fact.

People were hungry for trusted COVID-19 information. WHSC created and populated a dedicated COVID-19 web page. WHSC social media posts focused on promoting our resources and other timely and accurate sources too. Engagement with these digital platforms exploded. Traffic to our website doubled. Followers on our social media platforms tripled. In the first three months of the pandemic our Facebook posts were seen 2.5 million times. Engagement with our Twitter posts increased by 85 per cent. As valuable as these resources were though it is never enough to simply push out information, even trusted information and especially during a crisis like COVID. If workers



and workplace representatives were to ensure every reasonable precaution was being taken to prevent transmission of this dreaded disease, then they would need specific training. In order to understand, retain and apply COVID lessons in the workplace, workers and their representatives first need to discuss and apply them in the classroom. To fill this gap, WHSC also raced to develop a comprehensive training program on COVID-19 and its prevention in the workplace. Our first course ran in virtual classrooms May 11, 2020.

Over the course of the pandemic, as information about COVID-19 has evolved, so has our training program.

Mid-May also saw the launch of our joint health and safety committee (JHSC) Certification Part I training courses in virtual classrooms. We would soon follow with a newly developed general stream for Certification Part II and Certification Refresher training. Certification training has always been a priority for WHSC as we know how important properly trained JHSCs can be in the pursuit of safer, healthier work. They would surely be an asset in developing effective COVID-19 safety plans. To this end, we included our COVID-19 training program in our Certification Part II program.

Ontario’s Chief Prevention Officer at the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD), Ron Kelusky confirms the importance of JHSC participation, and the important role quality training can play in their preparation. He observes though, some employers, particularly those in smaller workplaces with limited resources, were ill-equipped to do the work necessary to safeguard workers from COVID. Part of the answer he says, “We need to put more rigour around health and safety training. ...What COVID taught us is that the minimum doesn’t work. There are certain things we need to incorporate into our training that go beyond the minimum, because when faced with a complex situation having a minimum isn’t where you want to be.”

The Prevention Office is currently exploring a fund to help defray costs for the training of required worker health and safety representatives (HSRs) in workplaces that employ more than five and fewer than 20 workers. WHSC is ready with a newly updated, two-day training program for HSRs,

originally developed some 10 years ago. Of WHSC efforts in general, Kelusky says he knows the organization “goes the extra step to get the learner needed information and training.” He adds, “There are over 800 different entities providing health and safety training in the province and it is critically important that high quality content and delivery is available to workers in Ontario and why health and safety training standards are so important.”



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UNMITIGATED SUCCESS

Later in the year we would offer scheduled training in virtual classrooms for federal JHSCs. This began as a special project for the Teamsters Canada Rail Conference to train their health and safety representatives across Ontario. Russ Archibald, Chairperson, Provincial Legislative Board of Ontario, Teamsters Canada Rail Conference says the WHSC training met essential needs, “It helped us support our members in building their competence and confidence. They are now better equipped to hold employers to account and to develop a more cooperative relationship to get health and safety results our members need.”

Other in-demand training courses aimed at the prevention of workplace violence and harassment, mental health injuries and musculoskeletal disorders were later added to scheduled virtual classrooms.

Given the pressing training needs of our constituents and clients though, we ultimately retooled several of our courses to be delivered in virtual classrooms. Constituents and clients can sponsor any of these options for their members and employees. Many have, including: the Aboriginal Apprenticeship Board of Ontario; Canadian Association of University Teachers; offices and locals of the Canadian Union of Public Employees; Directors Guild of Canada, Ontario region; Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario; International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), Local 873; International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Local 353; Ontario Nurses’ Association, Local 68; Ontario Public Service Employees Union, Region 5; Power Workers’ Union; Unifor Mine Mill, Local 598; NABET 700-M Unifor; United Steelworkers Union, Local 1998; Brantford, Niagara, Oakville and Windsor Labour Councils; Bombardier Transportation Canada; Bruce Power; Canadian Mental Health Association; Coca Cola Refreshments Canada; Futurecom Systems Group, ULC; Metro Grocers; and Bluewater, Grand Erie, Hamilton-Wentworth and Toronto District School Boards.

While these training options proved very popular, JHSC Certification training was by far our greatest success in virtual classrooms in 2020/2021 (April to March) having trained 13,647 participants in

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— Candis MacDonald, Bruce Power

68,799 person hours of Certification training. In fact, these numbers exceed those achieved for Certification in recent past years.

As with all WHSC courses, we also administered participant exit evaluations for virtual classroom training. These results too were very positive. The vast majority rated the virtual classroom experience and quality of instruction as excellent and confirmed the program’s learning and action objectives were also met.

While Bruce Power registered their Certified representatives for WHSC Certification Refresher training in scheduled virtual classrooms, they chose to sponsor a five-day, custom Certification Part II course in a virtual classroom of their own. Candis MacDonald, a training officer with Bruce Power reports of the participant experience, “The technology worked well and was user friendly. Having the ability to conduct breakout sessions within the training really helped to make it feel like you were more engaged with the other participants and prompted some good discussions.”



MacDonald adds, “We’ve heard the term pivot a lot, but to take training, make it thrive on a virtual platform and show learners they’re getting the knowledge they need, that’s a huge thing.”

Steve Devereux, Health and Safety Manager at Metro Ontario Inc. (Grocers) head office, reports a similar experience. Metro is a long-time client of WHSC. They too sponsored WHSC Certification training customized for their workforce in virtual classrooms. “The convenience and safety of virtual classrooms has been spectacular for us and our staff,” says Devereux. “When the pandemic hit, we had to address the training needs of our 275 locations across the province, each of which has a full JHSC. For them to function and meet legal obligations, we needed to keep training going. There was no other way we could have achieved this.”



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LEARNING METHODS MATTER

The COVID crisis has forced the issue of distance learning to the forefront for learners of all ages. Much of the literature studying the issue has focused on secondary and post-secondary students, but partly due to the pandemic, more educators and researchers are considering the impacts and best uses of e-learning technology for adult education.

Findings have been mixed. As one researcher observes, “A great deal of variability is evident in the research. eLearning often produces better results than classroom instruction, often produces worse results, often similar results.”¹

Take a step back though, and we find not all distance learning is created equal, just as not all in-person learning is created equal. The same researcher explains, “What matters, in terms of learning effectiveness, is NOT the learning modality (eLearning vs. classroom); it’s the learning methods that

matter, including such factors as realistic practice, spaced repetitions, real-world contexts, and feedback.”² Or as WHSC would say, learning methods must take into account adult centred learning principles, how adults best learn.

Learning methods, or the lack of proper methods, certainly explain why outcomes for the eLearning course developed by the Ministry of Labour for new worker awareness are disappointing. In its evaluation, the Institute for Work & Health (IWH) concluded this training was “not effective in increasing awareness and empowerment.” [remove extra space] Moreover, IWH observed, “Mode of training matters. Passive training (completing OHS awareness training on-line or through a workbook) is less effective than active (instructor led) training on both awareness and empowerment.” For those who offer online training options they also advised, “Future programs utilising on-line training need to examine ways to make this type of training more effective (e.g., interactive training modules).”³

SUPERIORITY OF REAL-TIME, INTERACTIVE E-LEARNING

Before COVID, the health care sector was already using distance learning to deliver some in-service job training, some of which has been the focus of research. One study observed, “Few e-learning approaches meet the need for high levels of interactivity, reflection, practice and application to practice for health professionals...”⁴. Another study conducted during the pandemic identified the current challenges head-on, “Unfortunately, many medical educators have been forced to quickly create distance-learning options for trainees with little prior experience.” They concluded: “Though using distance learning may be new for some programs, educators should apply familiar best practices for adult learning to any new platform. In particular, in transitioning to a distance-learning curriculum, educators should focus on active-learning techniques rather than passive methods and should foster interaction as much as possible when synchronous techniques are used.”⁵

Similar insights are found in a [report](#) by the U.S. [Center for Construction Research and Training](#) (known as CPWR). Through two studies they evaluated their virtual health and safety training experience during the pandemic. Like WHSC, CPWR chose Zoom as their learning platform. The first study sought learner feedback comparing live, real-time training (synchronous) with face-to-face training. They found, although face-to-face training was preferred and rated more highly, high levels of learning occurred with either format. The second study surveyed participants in a new synchronous training program three to six months after it was taken. Respondents reported high levels of safety-related knowledge and skill, improved safety preparedness and many reported they had used the training on the job. From what they learned, CPWR has developed [best practices for distance learning](#).

For Killham, our constituents, clients and many researchers, the merits of WHSC virtual classrooms are clear. The downside of asynchronous online training is equally clear Killham observes, “With asynchronous e-learning, workers are left to their own devices. Interaction and support are limited. Exercises often require little or no critical thinking. This does little to foster problem-solving skills in adult learners who have to return to their workplaces looking to resolve very real and very serious health and safety issues.”

With the asynchronous format, it’s also difficult to validate learner identity and learning. “Anyone can take the training for you. And if you get the wrong answer, often you can peck away at the keyboard until you get the right one,” says Killham. “This inferior training fails workers and may well put them in jeopardy, but it also fails employers and regulators who may rely upon it to fulfill legal requirements.”

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— Brady & Pradhan
Researchers



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— Ron Kelusky, CPO MLTSD

MOVING FORWARD. LEARNING TOGETHER.

While WHSC’s first venture into virtual classrooms has more than exceeded our expectations, we don’t intend to rest on our laurels. We are actively seeking ways to improve the virtual classroom experience. We recently participated in a conference of international labour educators to broaden our understanding of virtual classroom training. There we discovered new tips and tools which we intend on building into future versions of our programs. This summer we have planned special instructor upgrading sessions where we’ll explore these new resources and train more instructors in the existing digital platform.

Going forward, where appropriate, new courses will be developed for delivery in traditional classrooms and virtual classrooms. Many are eager to return to traditional face-to-face training, but we understand some have discovered the convenience of learning in virtual classrooms. For them, WHSC will continue to offer this option.

Karen Granados-Mitchell, a training coordinator with IATSE Local 873, confirms her union’s interest in using virtual classrooms long after the pandemic is over. She says, “Our members were really happy with the training and thankful for the opportunity to continue training during the pandemic.” Future virtual classrooms though will allow them to expand training capacity beyond the limits of their physical training facilities.

Ultimately, WHSC welcomes all learners. Regardless of which classroom you choose, we will deliver quality training and assured learning—training and learning aimed at saving worker lives and well-being. CPO, Ron Kelusky agrees. “I know the product that comes out of the Workers Health & Safety Centre has always been and continues to be excellent. ... I remember phoning Dave Killham well before the pandemic to convey I had been in Southwestern Ontario talking to a construction association and everyone in the room said the quality of training received from Workers Health & Safety Centre was incredible, the best they have seen.”

“I think it is a demonstration of the organization’s commitment, they were able to move so quickly on alternative training methodologies like virtual classrooms,” adds Kelusky. “I commend Workers Health & Safety Centre for being early adopters. They were first in line. They were there for the innovation and they were there for the quality and outcomes of their programs.”

CONTACT US

Visit us at www.whsc.on.ca.

Reach out to a [WHSC Training Services Representative](#) directly, contact us at contactus@whsc.on.ca or dial 1-888-869-7950.

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¹ Thalheimer, W. (2017). Does eLearning work? What the scientific research says! Available at <https://www.worklearning.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Does-eLearning-Work-Full-Research-Report-FINAL2.pdf>.

² Ibid

³ Konign, Astrid M, Lay, A. Morgan, Boot, Cécile R.L., Smith, Peter M. The effect of active and passive occupational health and safety (OHS) training on OHS awareness and empowerment to participate in injury prevention among workers in Ontario and British Columbia (Canada), Safety Science, Volume 108, 2018, Pages 286-291, ISSN 0925-7535, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2017.12.026>.

⁴ Lawn, S., Zhi, X. & Morello, A. An integrative review of e-learning in the delivery of self-management support training for health professionals. *BMC Med Educ* 17, 183 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-017-1022-0>.

⁵ Brady, Anna K. Pradhan, Deepak. Learning without Borders: Asynchronous and Distance Learning in the Age of COVID-19 and Beyond 2020 *ATS Scholar*, Vol. 1, Issue 3, 233-242, doi: 10.34197/ats-scholar.2020-0046PS. <https://www.atsjournals.org/doi/full/10.34197/ats-scholar.2020-0046PS>.

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