

## **Brave new world - Covid-19 impact on training**

by Sally Cant CEO of The Celebrants Training College.

Well not sure what happened to the world we live in, but a very small particle has created a massive impact – and a world-wide pandemic. Could anyone have imagined this happening? What would it mean for the general public, what would it mean for businesses, what would it mean for celebrants and what would it mean for my College?

Each country, each state, each region would work out what was best for them in relation to lockdown and social distancing rules. Which in itself has caused utter confusion in some countries. New Zealand took quick action and the outcome has been impressive.

Initially it was quite surreal and I did not realise the extent of closures – and who'd ever heard of Social Distancing? What did this mean for our College? As regulations started to unfold it was fairly clear that if the College was to continue to train, our classes would have to be converted to online. I have had numerous occasions where I've used Zoom or Skype for meetings and I'm certainly comfortable with technology. However our courses have only ever been available face to face. What would the process be to convert the entire College to online learning? And how would students manage to interact for 14 hours watching their screens?

I started researching a few online platforms like Zoom and Go To Meetings. Then I started to look at our course materials and tried to work out if they could be adapted to being delivered online. Not distance courses – but face to face courses run on an online platform. I particularly wanted to ensure it would be interactive, but how would the trainers manage to do this when they are all used to a room of excited students eager to learn? Avoid the confrontation of anxious students trying to handle very new technology – as well as the real possibility that they would not be able to connect with other students, which can be so important within a class.

After a staff meeting one of our trainers Jane Godfrey offered to modify the outline of our next course to see if we could adapt it to suit – this was then sent to all trainers for feedback. It appeared that we could do this without too much change – and we all thought about how we would achieve the same outcome from the course, just delivered in a different way. One of the primary differences was ensuring we allocated plenty of break times during the day so no one was sitting on their computer for too long in one stretch. And looking at how we would use virtual break out rooms to handle things like small discussions, workshops and role-play etc.

The next step was purchasing a business licence for Zoom – the platform that seemed to be the best option for the College. Zoom can be downloaded for free – but there are limitations on the length of meetings and numbers who can attend, and number of admins etc. So a business licence was necessary. Setting up Zoom was relatively easy – but the training of teachers took time and lots of practice. The College has 16 trainers throughout New Zealand and Australia and our training took a few weeks.

When I realised that people were going to be in lockdown for some time I thought there was another opportunity for those at home who might want short training sessions to 'upskill and connect' with each other. So I started to look at how our professional development activities that I had been training to celebrants for nearly 20 years could be adapted to 2 hour sessions over Zoom and offered to celebrants and students at a very low cost. This became another product that would be developed quickly and offered over Zoom in conjunction with the 2 day courses.

The planning, organising, and marketing took quite a lot of time and thought. Our website had to be changed to accommodate the new online courses and a newsletter was emailed out to every celebrant. The response to this newsletter was way beyond our expectations.

Our phones started ringing and the online bookings were overwhelming. We had not expected the response to be quite so instant nor did we anticipate the increase in numbers wanting to do our Certificate in Celebrancy and Diploma courses. We came to realise that this occurred primarily because: a) people were looking for something to do – and they suddenly had the time to do it and; b) people in remote areas suddenly has access to courses that in the past were simply out of reach – due to restricted budget, or the distance and time they would need to travel to face to face courses.

The first weekend of offering the Marriage Celebrancy and Law course we had to cap the numbers at 30 people – and we had a waiting list! Who could have seen that coming? It was uncharted water for us – and although I had consulted with the 2 trainers we had allocated for that session about numbers, we didn't realise the impact of having 30 eager students online all trying to ask questions of the trainers.

The course taught us a few important things to think about. What to do when a student has technology issues – they cannot login to Zoom – or they lose the Zoom screen – or get kicked off half way through the first session. How people interact on this platform? How a teacher manages questions? How to ensure everyone is involved? Even with 2 teachers this proved to be a challenge. As a result of this first weekend we reduced maximum numbers to 16 and this has made a huge difference to the experience of the student and the teacher. Even with 30 students the feedback was really positive and so many people said they were so thrilled to have the opportunity, that they found the day went so quickly, and foremost they learned so much.

We started to put together a huge array of 2 hour Zoom sessions to 'upskill and connect' people. The topics ranged from Weddings, Funerals, Business and Social Media. These 2 hr session continue to be a huge hit. With many people booking into multiple sessions.

Overall it's been a huge undertaking, in a very short time frame, but it has proven to be a huge success. Our student numbers have increased dramatically, many people who booked the online training would not have attended our regular face to face for a number of reasons so we've been able to spread our wings to all corners of NZ.



We will continue to offer Zoom training alongside our regular face to face sessions and our 2 hr Zoom 'upskill and connect' training is here to stay. As we transition to post Covid times we will assess your interest and needs so we can tailor our modes of delivery. This will offer flexibility to those who may wish to learn from home.

I am very grateful that our trainers, after the initial sessions, have adapted to the new platform. They have embraced this new learning platform with enthusiasm and have done a fantastic job.

On another note we are thrilled to welcome a new team member – Karin de la Rey as our new Admin person. We look forward to having Karin assist our team in ensuring students are looked after the very best way possible.