

29 Oct 2024

## **The Promised Handout**

As promised, here are some of the things I shared during **Arvon Tutor Session Four**.

### **The Survey I About What Works / Doesn't**

I told you in the session that I had prepared myself for it by sending a survey to people over the last week.

Most were people who have attended Arvon courses with me, both in person and online.

I also sent it to a few people I know who run educational programmes elsewhere, to get a variety of responses.

There were two questions:

**Q1. Please tell me anything you have witnessed in online learning that does not work well for you.**

**Q2. What can you remember being especially effective – what did the teacher do well?**

I'm attaching the raw responses to the end of this document.

## Create A Sense Of Community In Advance

If you teach or speak in public - not just with Arvon - the conversation with your audience begins well *before* you actually stand in front of them.

You can create a sense of community before the session begins, by sending something that starts a conversation, creating a warm sense of friendship (or at least acquaintance) before you start working together.

The first time I did this was in 2016, with a simple Facebook post tagging my co-tutor, [Alice Jolly](#). (Link to Alice on the Arvon website.)



Arvon shared this with people who had signed up, so that (on a separate page on my website) they could describe what they are writing and what they were looking forward to on the course. Alice and I were able to engage directly with those comments and questions.

Subsequently I've done this many times, most recently with collaborative posts and reels on Instagram, such as [this with Elise Valmorbida](#) and [this with Kamin Mohammadi](#). (Links to the Instagram posts.)

## **The Very Beginning Of Arvon At Home (As I Remember It, Anyway)**

During **Arvon Tutor Session Four** I attempted to show you a video but something went wrong.

(Tech failure, as I've seen many times, does not equal the end of the world.)

All the same, you might like to see the video.

I made it with Helen Meller during lockdown. Helen went into the building with her partner, who filmed her talking to camera about how we planned to replicate the best of the in-person experience online.

You can [watch the video here](#) (<3 mins):



I also mentioned in the session how, before launching Arvon At Home, we practiced using the tech with Viv Bennett.

You may recall that Viv told us she had got used to not hearing things and rarely bothered to make a fuss.

I hope it came through, during the session, how much we all truly wanted to make use of Arvon At Home to increase access - to people who are too far away ever to attend an in-person course, people who have commitments that won't allow them to get away for a whole week, and people with eg hearing impairments.

I hope you'll [watch the video in which Viv tested the Zoom](#) with us. It's here:



Viv was a huge asset to that group, not least because she's just a VERY funny writer, and I can still remember clearly what she wrote about her stinky goats. You may be able to identify Viv (and Helen) in this screenshot:



## Running a Masterclass Is Different

Speaking for myself, I like to see a screenful of participants, even if they aren't (yet) all smiling and waving. When you can see everyone like that, it means you're in a Zoom meeting.

Zoom also has the webinar option, which is what we used for **Arvon Tutor Session Four**. In a webinar, viewers aren't visible, except by name in the "participants" list and in the chat (if anyone does actually chat).

Whether I'm in a Zoom meeting or a webinar, I try to make it easy for people to participate in any way to begin (type hello in the chat, give a thumbs up).

This helps to make it possible for them to take slightly bigger risks later, sharing information or questions that may feel risky.

Obviously, you're an expert at Your Thing (whatever Your Thing is). You have a lot to teach people about poetry or memoir or fiction etc. And people want to know all about it.

But my experience suggests that a large part of being a tutor is just encouraging people to open up, and get out of their own way.

If you are in a Zoom meeting, you can assign attendees to breakout rooms, to speak to each other in pairs or in threes (or any number, frankly).

This may not lead them to develop anything particularly earth-shattering, but it gives everyone a chance to speak, be heard, and listen. It creates a network of mini alliances.

## Five-Week Arvon At Home

With Mel McGrath, I was lucky enough to be a tutor on the first ever five-week Arvon At Home (online) course. This was a great opportunity to work with people who, over the five week period, had a real chance to produce a LOT of writing.

One of the things that came up quite often was a worry about how to write about family, in a memoir, without upsetting everyone.

Mel and I decided to [get together on Zoom](#) to talk over between us some ways people might overcome that anxiety. This wouldn't have happened in a more intensive week-long course, but we felt that it would be helpful, given the wider intervals between sessions.

After recording the conversation, we sent it to participants at once.

Obviously, you may not have time to do this. But it's a good example of something that was pointed out to me in the feedback to my survey (see below).

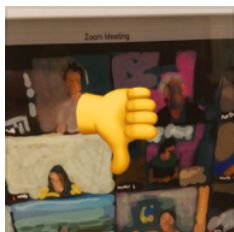
Participants on courses really like to feel that the tutors are working together, not just doing their own thing, regardless of each other.

I hope this is helpful.



**John-Paul**

## Online teaching: attendees DON'T like



**Please tell me anything you have witnessed in online teaching that does not work well for you**

<p>Online teaching - I may be the wrong person to ask, as I <b>avoid it all costs</b>. On the whole, I don't like it. Sometimes, it <b>depends on what platform is used</b>. Teams has given me so much grief over the years. Zoom is OK. <b>What I like about Arvon courses - new friends, shared experiences, chit-chat, shared jokes, a bit of showing off, a heap of embarrassment, looking into the tutor's eyes to see what they really mean - is lost online.</b></p>
<p>There needs to be a <b>clear strategy for people who wish to contribute</b> so that people aren't talking over each other.</p>
<p><b>People keep their camera off</b> (In smaller group work).  <b>Clear info about when breaks are and sticking to time.</b>  <b>No opportunities to speak in a small group</b> at least sometimes.                  Letting some participants dominate.</p>
<p>Watching the online <b>teacher reading directly from a textbook rather than engaging or paying attention to people</b> in the 'virtual' room.</p>
<p>Someone sitting behind a presentation, and a <b>disembodied voice</b>.  <b>Being talked at. A lot of information.</b> Sitting amongst a group of people and <b>having no sense of them as being on the same journey</b> as me, and feeling a bit overwhelmed and intimidated by this.</p>
<p><b>When I feel just an observer rather than being involved</b> in some way.</p>
<p>1) Insisting (rather than inviting) participants to have their cameras on.                  2) Not learning how host can mute zoom room. 'Politeness' by host can lead to <b>massive distraction level if a participant forgets to mute</b>.  <b>Host's responsibility is everyone's comfort</b> so taking control of sound, either verbally by asking them to mute or doing it themselves and explaining it is an easy, helpful thing that improves everyone's experience.</p>



When the **instructor talks nonstop and too fast**, doesn't know how to read the vibe of the group and is just **cramming content in you without a document to refer to** or a recording is not good for retention, especially if doesn't allow for adequate breaks and tries to push through. Or because they are at home their kids show up on camera wanting to know when the class is over because they didn't make arrangements for a child minder. **Or spending too much time on getting to know the other participants that cuts into class content** too much, there is a fine balancing act to achieve. **Most classes do not provide enough written materials to refer to during or after** the course, nor a recording so it all becomes just a blur and what little you grab in note taking and memory become more like a puzzle with missing pieces. **Not keeping in touch with students between sessions** to do practice, provide feedback, and integrate the learning.

references to works but **not including full references in chat box** for ppl to follow up on

When the **leader talks at us without engaging discussion**, or providing space for students to get to know each other.

Tutors having to teach **too much information in too short a time**. It might be they were given too broad a remit by the promoters; it might just be they struggled to slim down their teaching agenda. **If there's meant to be Q&A time, crashing through that in an effort to jam in yet more brain-dump information**, that's likely to be perceived by students as a disappointment. There's an unrelated gripe that likely wouldn't affect you (!), but it's "**workshops**" that **turn out to be nothing but a pitch to buy the trainer's own (pricey, additional) services**. I've seen it multiple times recently in events run by agents and self-publishing houses, and it always makes me cross that I spent 10 of 50 minutes listening to promotional pitches!

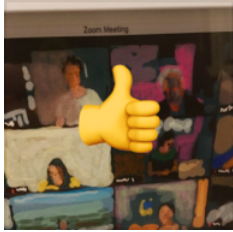
- 1 droning on monotonously
- 2 reading out what is on the slide
- 3 not asking people to engage regularly eg to use emoticons to reply to polls, to enter thoughts into the chat panel etc
- 4 running over 60 mins w/o a break
- 5 not telling people how long you'll be or keeping them updated on progress throughout
- 6 dull slides - the eyes need to be entertained
- 7 slides with too little on - a photo of a field is fine but does not justify being on screen for 10 mins
- 8 not having an obvious clear structure/through-line
- 9 not having a strong finish
- 10 not taking/encouraging questions



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## Teach Online: attendees DO like



### What can you remember being especially effective – what did the teacher do well?

I haven't done an online Arvon course. I've done French classes, I've done a City Lit course - at least we didn't have to **go into groups and work on an issue - which is normally something I dislike**, but I did it on the last Arvon (residential) course I was on, and it was useful. So much depends on the teacher. Friendliness, supportiveness, inclusiveness (by which I mean **making sure everyone gets a chance to answer, or share an idea**, not always the Big Mouths - of which I am occasionally one). **Knowing people's names**, calling them by name, **encouraging people to write in the chat box, and then referring to that**. Making sure people get what they want - as far as possible. That may require some **preparation/information seeking beforehand** - not unlike what you are doing right at this moment JP!

The teacher was **well prepared and made objectives clear at the start** of the session.

He/she involves each participant and sets out expectations with regard to oral contributions.

A **good pace** for presentations.

**Variety of teaching methods, exercises** etc.

Allow time to work in small groups.

Be genuine, authentic and relatable.

**Welcoming all contributions.**

Funnily enough, I had to do a speed awareness course recently and it was the best online learning experience I can remember having. The **teacher was engaged, enthusiastic, genuinely interested** in the information he was presenting and made it fun. **He was paying attention to everyone and noticed if our attention slipped and he gently brought it back** in a non patronising, kind way. I could tell he was enjoying the teaching and that was infectious. **I felt 'seen'** and that created a memorable experience.

**At the start they asked participants to put two things in the chat,** such as what they were good at and not so good at/ looking forward to and nervous about. We then had a few minutes to read these. The comments weren't addressed directly, but it gave us a chance to connect with others in the training, and might be revisited at end if needs be. The training being both of discrete parts, but **following naturally from one part/idea to the next, creating a kind of narrative.** I know this sounds obvious, but an awful lot of presentations don't have a strong narrative thread. For someone like me who is neurodiverse this helps avoid overwhelm, and supports sense making and retention of information. It depends how many people and how much time you have, but **short break outs into pairs can help participants raise/share questions/ideas without having to raise/share them in front of everyone.** It helps mix up the energy as well. You do this in your sessions for patrons and I really appreciate those one to one moments with people who are on the same journey. K.

It's been really good when there has been the opportunity to go into small breakout rooms. **Short writing exercises have also been good.** And really precisely defined themes eg Cathy Rentzenbrink runs really good ones (not Arvon) on themes like Fathers, seasons etc.

Maintaining focus on their material and momentum: **engaging with questions but still owning the overall experience.**

The course I took with you and M. was the only Arvon online that was really effective out of the four or five I've taken in the last five years. You **both brought your unique skills and it was clear had planned beforehand** how to present those. some I have been in were so disparate it was like being in two different classes depending on who was leading that day and it seemed like they had not prepared together. **Keeping it light hearted and encouraging, especially in memoir when the project may trigger trauma,** there is no time in class to accommodate for that and it is not appropriate to spend time on it but recognising it is a possibility and **offering a resource or homework assignment** for some to do so. **starting on time at the beginning and after breaks** is respectful to the ones who showed up on time rather than making everyone wait on the one's who are late to begin, giving exercises/homework and **giving feedback on anything posted between classes was very helpful** to integrate the learning rather than just lecturing. Lastly, having instructors who have a basic understanding of different learning styles and being able to accommodate learners with neurodivergence or disability. I hope this is helpful, typed in my phone so apologies it is brief and happy to provide additional details if want.

They **outlined at the start what the shape of the session would be** ie said quite clearly, this is what the session is about, I am going to talk about these (specify) topics and allow (how many minutes) for discussion.

Break out rooms for discussion. Leaders engaging discussions and encouraging comments. Making it fun and casual. In writing workshops, I **always enjoy the opportunity to read, and to hear what others are working on**, since we can't go to the pub afterwards to hear about each other's work.

Offering **examples that the students really are likely to encounter in the real world, after the training session ends**. In such a diverse setting as this Arvon session, that might be hard to do, but rather than address examples from specific types of courses, **offer examples that all online tutors might encounter: unanswerable questions, students who are too shy to contribute or pests who always have to say something** ahead of everyone else. (For which sin I can only hope I've rarely committed!)

Interactivity throughout is key! As is story telling - as in any training session but particularly so to keep the interest online.

Variety is good!

Big group, small group, one to one. Talkative, quiet. Screen-time, away-time. Body movement. Different moods. Different channels (chat, emoticons, faces, screen-share).

1. Ice breakers is a must!
2. Brain breaks if there's a lot of content
3. Keeping a steady and punchy pace
4. An opportunity for people to speak or share highlights at the end.
5. A valuable give away or read list to building on learnings post workshop.

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