

**W**ITHOUT SURPRISE, our activities in 2020 were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, with its social distancing and its travel bans. Over the years, we built a reputation for being close to our audiences, both physically and emotionally—we believe the two go hand in hand. As of March 2020, however, physical closeness was no longer allowed. Together with our clients, we explored the options: we thus adapted some sessions to a remote format, postponed others, and even developed new themes. As always, our guiding principle was to deliver value in the form of rich, meaningful learning experiences, not to ensure short-term profit or merely allow clients to check a box on their list of training requirements.

**Our workshops and training programs** are highly interactive and customized with sample material provided ahead of time by participants; when time and budget permit, they include homework or other practice, with extensive (peer) feedback. Interaction anchors the learning, helps overcome resistance to change, and makes for an engaging, pleasant experience. Customization ensures a focused, highly relevant discussion. Practice sharpens skills and gives concepts a new dimension.

Interaction does not just happen—certainly not in all cultures: it requires a constructive atmosphere, in which participants feel it is safe to express themselves, in which they welcome the feedback of others on their sample material or practice. This atmosphere of group learning, in turn, requires a group, not a collection of perfect strangers meeting for the first time through video conference. It requires physical togetherness, group-building activities, and attention to nonverbal signals.



With entire conferences moving online because of the pandemic, we soon realized the need to help researchers (and others) deliver engaging remote/recorded talks. Our corresponding new lecture offers readily applicable guidance, such as optimizing one's setup to remove distractions. It soon became our most popular lecture of 2020 (and of early 2021, too).

Interaction is a challenge for remote sessions, at least if it is to be a rich, meaningful group discussion or peer feedback facilitated by an instructor, not just an anecdotal online poll. Accordingly, and in consultation with our clients, we opted to postpone sessions that relied critically on group learning and to reformat those that could not wait as remote lectures (no longer as group discussion but still highly customized) with extensive Q&A and with increased individual attention in one-on-one (remote) tutorials and practice presentations.

Our adaptations were successful. Objectively, participants reached a comparable level of mastery in writing abstracts, graphing data, or creating and delivering oral presentations. Subjectively, they gave our sessions very positive evaluations, agreeing that the format made the best of the circumstances, even if they understandably missed the usual social contacts with the instructors and with the other training participants.

**Our lectures**, which limit interaction to questions and answers, were easier to move to a remote format. Still, the conversion meant much more than 'doing the same in front of a camera.' To truly engage remote audiences, we felt we had to script our lectures in more detail and push technologies beyond the disconnected-slide-and-speaker view. As always, though, we did what we had to do to deliver an optimal experience.

**On the bright side**, and while they are still not our preference, our remote sessions allowed us to reach broader audiences. Whereas our yearly open lecture in Belgium traditionally fills a 400-seat auditorium to capacity (or even slightly beyond), our remote edition in December 2020 allowed us to address 2669 attendees in 73 countries. Although we could not greet the many old friends in this remote audience with handshakes, hugs, or kisses, the lecture was still a heartwarming event that helped put pandemic-related hardships in perspective. ☺

## We love to hear from you

We are always happy to hear about your successes, failures, or frustrations with what you have learned in our sessions. Those many e-mails out of the blue that go “hey, you don’t know me, but I attended a lecture you gave and tried hard to do everything you recommended, and now I won an award for it” are perhaps the most heartwarming part of our job, besides helping us convince the skeptics out there that our approach is effective—and well received. By all means, keep these stories (and others) coming.

Also, if you’d like us to lecture or run workshops at your organization, it is never too early to write to us and explore options or make tentative plans. Never hesitate to let us know what’s on your mind.

In general, e-mail is the best channel to get in touch with us (plain old e-mail—not LinkedIn messages or other social media). Once in our e-mail pipeline, your note will not easily be overlooked or forgotten. (Should we seem slow to reply, send us a reminder: your initial mail might not have reached our inbox.)

On the other hand, if you have a follow-up question about a lecture or a workshop, or more generally if you are seeking advice on a specific challenge, a better forum to post your request is our LinkedIn discussion group named *Trees, maps, and theorems*. In this way, our answers benefit a larger number; moreover, other members of the group may have valuable suggestions to offer about your question.



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Structuring thoughts