

Lessons learned from the Sphere in Practice 2-week pilot MOOC in November 2020

Introduction

This document is written for anyone planning to run a Sphere in Practice MOOC.

This version (version 1.2) is written after the 2-week pilot MOOC in November 2020. This document should be updated following each MOOC to capture new learning and challenge any incorrect assumptions.

This document should be read in parallel with the Terms of Reference (ToR) document which is written for identifying training managers to run the Sphere in Practice MOOC. While the ToR sets out *requirements* and forms the basis of legal contracts or cooperation agreements, this document presents *advice* and *suggestions*.

The *advice* is based on things that went well or less well during the pilot MOOC and may include remedies for the things that went less well. The suggestions are based on ideas that arose during the pilot MOOC but were not tested so are not as strong as the advice. Suggestions may be more or less relevant depending on specific contextual factors of each course.

Not everyone in the training and administrative teams will read this document in its entirety, so it is up to the course manager(s) to disseminate the information it contains as required, which may include reusing some elements as activities, deliverables, and requirements in sub-contractor agreements.

Sources of information for this document

- End-of-course survey results (Appendix 1 of the event report)
- Messages and conversations in Slack
- Notes taken by the training team during the open feedback conferences
- Written feedback provided by the two guest speakers
- The direct experiences of the training team (who are also the authors/editors of this document)

Author's note

Feedback from the pilot MOOC was on the whole positive. Self-selection bias aside (discussed in the [Surveys](#) section), 100% of survey respondents said their overall experience was good (41%) or very good (59%), which were the top two options. At the same time, the length of this document is evidence of the pilot participants' preparedness to give candid and constructive feedback.

As an inevitable result of inviting opinions from several people, there are conflicting points of view. Some participants suggested longer webinars, while others suggested shorter ones. One participant even suggested webinars of no more than 30 minute because the is the "maximum time someone can sit in front of a computer".

A couple of suggestions conflict with fundamental decisions made at the start of the course design process:

- A few participants suggested longer e-learning modules with deeper content. The outgoing **Sphere Handbook in Action (SHIA)** takes an estimated 21 hours to complete¹, not allowing for further reading or deeper reflection. The overwhelming feedback from the SHIA course is that it is good but way too long. There is also evidence from the Learning Management System (LMS) that many learners "click-thru" the course in just a few hours, presumably just to get the certificate. With **Sphere in Practice (SIP)**, the self-paced e-learning course material is reduced to 7 hours, but there is a brand-new option to take the course as a massive online open course (MOOC) which should take around 21 hours including the e-learning modules, webinars, assignments, and forums. Both study routes require the user to carry out further reading (notably the foundation chapters of the Sphere Handbook) to get the most out of the course. Based on extensive feedback on the SHIA course, the choice of two SIP study routes should be well-received.
- One participant noted that Module 2 does not cover all the technical chapters. Each of the five modules represents just 90 minutes of learning materials (see footnote) so it is not possible to cover every technical area – or every theme – in detail in every module. The full 5-week course has been planned to holistically cover all the technical chapters, but this would not have been apparent from the 2-week pilot course.

Feedback is often expressed as the gap between experience and expectation. For the pilot MOOC, there was not much done in terms of setting expectations; participants entered the course either not knowing what to expect or having their own expectations. Not setting expectations was potentially advantageous for the pilot MOOC because it broadened the range of feedback, but in general **it is important to set expectations** (see the [Pre-course information, participant registration and onboarding](#) section).

The word "MOOC" is a broad term; MOOCs range from self-paced e-learning courses to series of highly interactive workshops and can even include in-person elements, i.e., not *fully* online. Sphere in Practice has been designed as a "self-paced e-learning PLUS" MOOC: the course relies on the e-learning modules to deliver the content, with everything else in place mostly **to check that participants have understood the e-learning content**.

Several pilot participants, having *not* been presented with this expectation, suggested more interactivity, e.g., smaller group sessions where everyone gets a chance to speak. These suggestions are captured in the [Interactive workshops](#) section below. They are useful because it is possible that the SIP MOOC could be run in this way, though the cost would be greater. A participant fee could be levied to cover the additional costs.

Some suggestions related the things that are already underway, which is reassuring, e.g., provide the course in different languages (translations into French, Spanish and Arabic are underway); and allow people to work through the e-learning modules at their own pace (the self-paced version will be launched before the next MOOC).

¹ This is based on an estimate used by several e-learning developers that 7,000 to 8,000 words of text in an e-learning storyboard translates to around 1 hour of self-paced e-learning.

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Reinforce the basics and tackle the Big Misunderstanding

"In face-to-face training, people often miss the basics. And the same was evident here with those shocking poll results during the Module 1 webinar. This was covered well in M1 e-learning, but..."

The poll in question demonstrated the general lack of ability among participants (who are perhaps indicative of Sphere Handbook users) to distinguish between **standards** (qualitative expressions of human rights) and the **targets** associated with some indicators (quantitative values which signal that whether further investigation, interpretation and explanation are required). To make and perpetuate this "Big Misunderstanding" is to dangerously misinterpret what the Sphere Handbook is all about. Sphere does not and has never (not even in the 1998 pilot edition) attempted to quantify humanitarian needs. Sphere takes a rights-based approach, recognising that all humans are born equal in terms of *rights* – but highly unequal in terms of *needs*.

The Big Misunderstanding must be addressed frequently throughout the course by every means possible. Some participants will need to **unlearn** this. (Even more importantly, the Big Misunderstanding must be tackled beyond this MOOC, including among learners that take the self-paced study route and among people that do not interact with Sphere or other Humanitarian Standards Partnership training products and services. This has been noted elsewhere as a point for deeper discussion beyond the boundaries of this course.)

Advice: Use a poll during the first webinar to ask this question. Repeat the poll in every webinar until everyone gets it right.

Advice: Use the webinars and forums to frequently demonstrate the difference between **standards** and **targets** using different case studies and examples. Refer to the example of queuing times at water sources in the module 1 e-learning which provides a model for explaining this difference. Do not attempt to explain the difference between progress, target and process indicators as it is not that important, especially to beginners; focus on standards vs. targets.

Advice: Do not forget that Sphere in Practice is designed as an introductory level course. Reinforce the basics in preference to deep diving into technical areas. Use the assignment/quiz results to detect common misunderstandings that people have after studying the e-learning modules and address them in the webinars.

Suggestion: Create and distribute a "flash sheet" (e.g., another infographic) to serve as a memory aid regarding the Big Misunderstanding. (You may contact the Sphere office to ask if we have a flash sheet already, but please try to create your own first. There can never be too many of these flash sheets!)

Refer to the [Interactive workshops](#) section below for other ideas how to cement the standards vs. targets learning.

Accessibility

Strive to make the whole course as accessible as possible, including each platform used. Zoom scores well among online meeting and webinar platforms for accessibility². However, this does not mean it is automatically accessible, but rather that it offers good accessibility features. The accessibility of Gnosis and Slack is not known to Sphere.

The short videos embedded in the e-learning modules include captions (and a separate transcript in case of technical issues). For the next revision, it could be nice to add signing too.

Advice: Test the accessibility of all platforms and processes in collaboration with differently abled people before the course starts.

² **Accessibility of Video Conferencing Apps and Services**, CBM

(https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_h1K3BwwXcBIZVuNHs_EqOLmg5OUjGQ/view?usp=sharing)

Advice: Offer live captions in the main webinar language as a minimum. This service has wide appeal even among people with no sensory limitations. It can be done cheaply using machine transcription, but you should check the quality first – with the actual webinar speakers – before accepting this method. Speaking slowly with good articulation will improve the quality of both machine and human transcription.

Advice: Determine what other accessibility features are required based on the pre-learning survey. (There are costs involved in offering sign-language and/or interpretation into other languages, so these services should only be offered if there is at least one person that requires them.)

Technical support

Well-tested, bug-free, intuitive platforms, with clear user guidance and documentation will minimise support queries from course participants. Nonetheless, there will always be participants that require assistance or advice, mostly of a technical nature.

Advice: Arrange a technical support service for participants. Offer a round-the-clock service or define fixed support hours. Decide what channel(s) participants should use to ask for help. Clearly communicate the support channels, hours, and expectations for how quickly people should expect a response. Most technical support will be required during onboarding, week 1, and the time allowed after week 5 for catchup.

Advice: Arrange training for LMS admin users before the course starts. If you are using Gnosis, the Sphere office can provide documentation.

Advice: Do not use Slack for technical support. For the pilot, we had a Slack channel called *administration* which was used for this purpose. However, it is not optimal for each support issue to be visible to everyone else, and it is not easy to track whether issues are new, in-progress or resolved using Slack. In the absence of a dedicated call-handling system, email is probably better than Slack.

Suggestion: If you are using Gnosis or another 3rd party LMS, there will be two support teams/persons. Establish a triage system and agree how the teams will work together.

Pre-course information, participant registration and onboarding

For the pilot, it made sense to preregister participants using an external system (e.g., Kobo or SurveyMonkey) rather than directly onto the Learning Management System (LMS). Select the approach that works best for you based on timings and system setup/constraints. If there are limited participant spaces available (e.g., due to LMS licenses), or there is a selection process (other than first come first served) for any other reason, then preregistration will be necessary.

Advice: Send an automated confirmation e-mail following initial (pre)registration to confirm that the request has been received, and what the next steps are on what dates. If acceptance of participation is automatic, then this should include an agenda for the course. If acceptance is conditional, then this should include the date of the acceptance decision. In any case, set clear expectations for the next things the participant has to do and/or the next day they can expect to receive further information.

Advice: Communicate with participants regularly in the run up to the official start date. The objective is to reduce dropout rates before the course even starts, which were high for the pilot. Send a reminder 2 weeks before the course starts (to motivate and build enthusiasm); then 1 week before (when the course platforms are available so people can log in and start using them); then 2 days before the start date (with details for the introduction/demonstration webinar – see [MOOC structure](#)); then on start date; then after 2 days chase those who have not yet logged into the learning platform, including a link to the recording of the demonstration video.

Advice: Set clear expectations. If your live webinars will be attended by 500 to 1,000 participants then you cannot have the same level of interactivity as is possible with an online workshop for 25 to 30 people. Similarly, it is not possible for 500 people to introduce themselves or all have a chance to speak. Webinars should be **highly engaging** rather than **highly interactive**, though some interaction (e.g., polls and chatroom) will be appreciated. The important thing is to set the right expectation so that people know what format to expect.

Advice: Clearly communicate any constraints, limitations, or known technical issues/challenges – along with workarounds where available. Hopefully, this should not be necessary for a full MOOC if everything is completed and fully tested. As recorded in the [Technical issues](#) section, a few things, e.g., embedded videos, were not working for the pilot version of the course. Although attempts were made to communicate this, they were not good enough because many people still raised this issue.

Advice: Share the full agenda through several communication channels, noting when and where (i.e., which platforms) things are due to happen. The primary place for this information should be the main learning journey screen on the LMS, but it is probably worth sharing a 1-page PDF agenda and encouraging participants to print this to put by their workspace.

Advice: Ensure clarity around the **soft** deadline for assignments which is a set time around 12 to 24 hours before the corresponding webinar(s). It is soft because participants can still complete the assignments *after* this deadline (right up to the end of the catching up period at the end of the course), but their answer will clearly not be integrated into the webinar unless received before the deadline. Participants should be motivated to complete the assignments before the soft deadlines because this rapid feedback loop is very important: If a significant proportion of participants are answering a question incorrectly then this must be addressed as quickly as possible.

Advice: Ensure gender balance among participants. Monitor gender balance during the registration period and increase publicity in women's forums if required.

Advice: Measure knowledge gained during the course using a before and after knowledge check, e.g., 10 to 12 multiple-choice questions.

Suggestion: Ask for phone numbers at initial (pre)registration and ask participants to confirm that they accept to be contacted via SMS. Use this channel sparingly and only for targeted communications, i.e., only use it to communicate with people who have still not logged into the course platforms despite several e-mail reminders to do so.

Ongoing communications with participants, monitoring, and evaluation

Strive to not leave anyone behind (except those who have decided to drop out and have communicated this decision with you). This requires proactive monitoring of participants. As with humanitarian programmes, this monitoring must start at the same time as the course, as it is particularly important in the first weeks of the course. The LMS should be the main source of data on individual participant progress, but importantly, this will not include people who have not yet logged into it.

Advice: Maintain a workbook of participants. Cross-reference LMS data with pre-registration lists; data from the webinar and forum platforms; and e-mail records to monitor which platform which participants have successfully engaged with, and to mark any people who have chosen to leave the course and do not wish to be contacted further.

Advice: Use the information in your workbook to send targeted communications to specific groups of participants.

Advice: Run one or more live feedback sessions. This/ese should take place during the week following the final webinar (i.e., the catching up period). We recommend that the training team **remains silent** during these 30-

to 45-minute online meetings; after a brief introduction to the session, **just listen** and **do not defend** any constructive feedback (as this might dissuade others from talking); just capture the feedback (and say thanks).

MOOC platform

The amount of time required for MOOC platform configuration, testing and training depends on which platform you are using and how familiar you are with it.

Advice: *Before the course starts:* Set the MOOC platform up at least **one month before onboarding starts** (which should be one or two weeks before the first activity). Use this time to test the course, including end-user and admin workflows, and to train admin users. Practise exporting answers to assignments and using this data to create charts in the webinar slides. Get familiar with usage dashboards, and exporting lists of e-mail addresses (e.g., started vs. non-started users) if you intend to use these for sending reminders.

Advice: *Following the final webinar:* Make sure that the course on the MOOC platform is available until the end of the grace period for people to complete the course and that it does not immediately vanish or become unavailable following the final webinar. At the end of the grace period, the platform should be kept running for at least one more week **for admin users only** to export all required data/information from the platform before it is finally turned off.

Suggestion: Reduce the number of platforms required. For example, find an LMS platform which also supports webinars and forums, and perhaps even registration, application screening, e-mail distribution, and surveys. There are many learning platforms that claim to be able to reduce the number of platforms required for online learning, but these claims need to be tested. It seems unlikely that any current LMS would have an integrated webinar function as good as the dedicated webinar platforms, so some compromises will be necessary if streamlining platforms.

MOOC structure

Advice: Keep the suggested pace of one workshop per week for a course lasting around 7 weeks (including a week at the start for onboarding and a week at the end for catching up). Four pilot participants requested more time/more spacing between activities. For what it is worth, Sphere recently ran a 5-week online course which included one interactive online workshop per week and some other activities between workshops, (i.e., the same pace as the pilot Sphere in Practice MOOC and what we suggest for full Sphere in Practice MOOCs). Participants in this course were surveyed on whether they would prefer a more intense pace, the same pace, or a less intense pace. The result was overwhelmingly to keep the same pace. It will never be possible to find a pace that suits everyone, but the suggested one is sensible.

Because the pilot MOOC lasted only 2 weeks and we did not allow a full week for onboarding before week 1, the course did appear to be rushed. Doing all 5 modules and allowing proper time for onboarding will help.

Advice: Think carefully about when to set your registration deadline. The e-learning developer suggests allowing people to join at any time during the course right up until the last webinar (but do not let people join during the catching up period *following* the last webinar). There is no interaction during the catching up period, so someone joining at this stage should instead opt for the self-paced route or wait for the next MOOC.

Advice: Run an additional (short) introductory webinar at the start of week 1, i.e., around 1 week before the webinar that accompanies Module 1. Record it and add to the learning journey on Gnosis ahead of week 1. This should last between 30 and 45 minutes only. Introduce the core training team, then take 15 to 20 minutes to **demonstrate** the learning management system (e.g., Gnosis) and the forum platform (e.g., Slack). This session can easily be made interactive even with many people: After demonstrating, ask people to log into the LMS and launch the first e-learning module. Similarly, ask people to launch the forum platform and say “hi” in

the general/welcome channel. Use the Q&A time (another 15 to 20 minutes) to respond to any general issues/queries. It may not be possible to resolve every individual issue during the webinar, so ensure the admin/support person/team has a couple of hours free following the webinar to troubleshoot individual connection problems. Use polling to measure connectivity success rates. You could also use a poll to collect the names of individuals who need individual support following the webinar. Technical issues (whether due to bugs, lack of instructions, or unintuitive interfaces) can cause great frustration and cause participants to drop out of the course. This webinar is very important in reducing dropout rates.

Suggestion: Organise a follow-up event 3 to 6 months later.

Technical issues

Most of the technical issues raised by participants during the pilot were things that were already known ahead of the pilot, and which are due to be fixed before the product is live. These all relate to the e-learning modules and are as follows:

- The Alpha and Beta versions of the e-learning modules (used in the pilot) are provided in “test mode” which means all screens are available immediately. This is good for testing purposes, but it can make it difficult to complete the e-learning modules. This is because every qualifying control (i.e., effectively everything which is clickable apart from hyperlinks) needs to be clicked to complete the course. In “live mode”, you cannot progress to the next screen until all qualifying controls have been clicked on the current one, so it is not possible to accidentally miss some (with no indication provided on which ones were missed) as happens in test mode.
- End of module quizzes were not scored in an optimal way (i.e., only selected answers were marked as correctly or incorrectly selected while unselected answers were not marked as correctly or incorrectly *not* selected), and it was not possible to retake the quiz. Despite some technical limitations of Adapt (the e-learning content development platform used), the marking process is now acceptable (i.e., the correct selection of answers is shown after clicking Submit next to each question), if not ideal.
- The embedded videos and audio snippets did not play because development of these items had not been completed in time for the pilot. This was communicated several times to participants, but the issue continued to be raised via various channels.
- The responsive design for one of the two e-learning modules – and the LMS platform itself – had not been completed, so the mobile experience was somewhere between poor and completely unusable.

The technical issue which is less easily solved is the problem of poor Internet connectivity. This can be experienced as consistently low bandwidth or an unpredictable connection. Such problems are not easily solved, but there are various backup options and mitigating actions available.

Poor Internet is generally not a problem for e-mails or forums, which are text-based (so data packages are small), and where latency (a delay between a message being sent and it being received) does not cause major problems. Poor Internet can be problematic for webinars and e-learning modules which are media rich, containing images, video, and audio.

The impact of poor internet on e-learning

Doing e-learning on a poor connection is not necessarily a major problem. It will take longer for the screens to load, but as long as information can be loaded quicker than the user can read it, the experience should not be too bad. All videos in Sphere e-learning courses have a transcript, and completion of a screen/module is never dependent on playing the video; reading the transcript always suffices.

A slightly more annoying problem, but one which is rare in practice, is that if the Internet connection is down at the moment when the user closes the e-learning browser window, their progress will not be recorded on the server.

Advice: Train the admin/support team to be able to mark topics/modules as complete for when a participant reports that their progress was lost due to an Internet problem.

Suggestion: Provide an e-learning platform backup. There are ways of studying e-learning courses without an Internet connection, all of which involve installing the e-learning course (provided as SCORM files) on a device which is in the same building (i.e., on the same network) as the learner.

1. Kaya offline³ is by far the easiest backup system to implement. This allows individual learners to run the e-learning course from their own computer, though this must be a PC, not a mobile device. This route will be available once Sphere in Practice has been uploaded to Kaya.
2. The course can be installed on an institutional learning management system (LMS). This is generally only possible for larger NGOs and universities.
3. The course could theoretically be installed and run on a Raspberry Pi⁴, though this has not been tested. Any device which is then connected (by cable, Bluetooth, or Wi-Fi) to the Raspberry Pi (which has been configured as an LMS) could then be used to take the course.

In each of these three scenarios, the progress of learners on these remote platforms will not be stored on the central LMS, so extra admin/support team effort would be required to keep the central system up to date.

The impact of poor internet on webinars

Advice: Some webinar platforms require more bandwidth than others, so select a platform which works okay with lower resources.

Suggestion: Deactivate the video feeds of anyone who is not currently talking.

Suggestion: Export the webinar recordings twice: once at high quality and once at lower quality.

Internet censorship

It appears that Slack (or at least the Slack workspace that we set up for the pilot MOOC) was "embargoed" (i.e., not accessible) in Iran, and perhaps other countries too. It may be difficult or impossible to find a single messaging platform that works for everyone, but we should aspire to this.

Advice: Where possible, select platforms that are accessible in the countries where the majority of your participants will join from. The best platforms for an English course may not be the same for an Arabic or Chinese course, so local knowledge is required here.

Advice: Be aware that some people may not be able to connect to certain platforms. This applies not only to the LMS, the forum platform, and the webinar platform, but also to the Interactive Handbook (which is referenced frequently in the e-learning modules), the Sphere website, and other referenced sites. Please do your best to find workarounds, record them, and share them with the Sphere team.

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https://kayaconnect.org/pluginfile.php/1532/mod_page/content/9/Offline%20Quick%20Guide%20Player.pdf

⁴ <https://www.raspberrypi.org/>

Content

E-learning module content

The e-learning modules used during the pilot were Beta (module 1) and Alpha (module 2) versions. This means that several content-based issues identified by participants with the e-learning content (for modules 1 and 2) could be, and have been, resolved. These are not listed here.

The following items of content-based feedback have not been addressed because they would have involved significant reengineering for which it was too late in the development process. They are recorded here as potential considerations for when the course is redone in a few years' time.

1. One person suggested adding further nuance to Makenna's story (the focus of the PSEA topic in Module 2) by moving it into an urban setting.
2. Two people – who describe themselves as “visual people” – requested more videos. In defence of the low number of videos in this online course (just 5 or 6), the main **Sphere Training Package** is much more video orientated, with at least one video embedded in most of each of the 20 modules. Although the Sphere Training Package is ostensibly for Sphere trainers, around 90% of people who download it use it for private study only. Therefore, considering the whole portfolio of Sphere training products, it may not be appropriate to increase the video content of this product.
3. One person asked for more questions.
4. The training team debated the extensive use (in this training product) of photos taken from the media libraries of humanitarian organisations. Sphere has the permission of the humanitarian organisations to use them for this purpose, but can Sphere be certain that the subjects of the photos would be happy for their images to be used in this way? We have done our best to use the photos respectfully, e.g., we have been careful not to show the faces or insignia of people who are survivors or perpetrators of abuse in the fictional scenarios, but is this enough? Clearly issues surrounding the use of photos by humanitarian organisation has been present in the sector since before Sphere, but perhaps Sphere has an opportunity to occupy a higher moral ground, e.g., by using only hand-drawn images in the next version of the course. This should also increase the aesthetic value of the final product and can hopefully be achieved without excessive costs.
5. Use the ALNAP modalities of empowerment⁵ instead of the levels of participation. The who models are similar, but it would make sense to use a model from the humanitarian sector.

Other course content

Advice: Define and discuss dignity in the module 1 webinar. One participant noted ‘There's a big focus on dignity throughout the Sphere Standards. Where is that term defined? How is it measured? “Of all the rights to which everyone is entitled, dignity is perhaps the most difficult to express and to put into a tangible form. Put simply, it means we must treat each other with respect, tolerance and understanding.”’.

Suggestion: For discussion in one of the forums: “Is the principle of non-refoulement being followed?” One participant noted ‘Worse of all, in the past couple of months, the United States of America has deported twice Anglophone Cameroon Asylum seekers back to Cameroon Republic, the country they were fleeing from because of the war there. Today, the whereabouts of the deportees is yet unknown. In these 2 examples of the non-respect of non-refoulement, does the principle have any essence any longer?’

Forums

Webinars and forums are critical elements of the MOOC study route. They are what set this route apart from the self-paced e-learning (only) route, and they are the only genuinely interactive elements of the course.

⁵ See page 9 in Engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian action BACKGROUND PAPER ALNAP 29th Annual Meeting 11-12 March 2014, Addis Ababa:
<https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/background-paper-29th-meeting.pdf>

There were 5 channels offered in the pilot MOOC: *General, administration, PSEA, Sphere experts, and HSP* – ordered here from highest to lowest activity.

As noted in the [Internet censorship](#) section, some messaging platforms (or perhaps just certain workspaces within a messaging platform) may be blocked/embargoed in certain countries. In the pilot, we noticed that people in Iran could not access our Slack workspace.

Participating in forums requires a lot of confidence. Each post is recorded with the name of the person who posted it, and there is a risk of seeming stupid if you dare to ask or answer a question.

Advice: We do not want to push people outside of their comfort zones, so while it may be reasonable to require people to join the forum to get updates, reminders, and notifications, posting comments (beyond saying “hi”) should not be a requirement of passing the course.

Advice: Select a forum platform which is accessible to as many people as possible, and devise (partial) backup solutions for those that cannot access it, e.g., SMS- or WhatsApp-based notifications/reminders.

Advice: **DO** have a general channel for people to say hi to each other, and for the training team to share general information/updates and promote – and provide links to – other channels.

Advice: Use the general channel to share frequent reminders of what should be done next and the next deadlines, e.g., the date/time by which assignments must be completed for the answers to be considered by the training team ahead of the next webinar.

Advice: **DO NOT** have an administration/support channel (at least if you are using Slack). As noted in the [Technical support](#) section, forum platforms like Slack are not designed for handling support issues. If support issues are raised in the general channel, it is reasonable to answer them in the forum if they relate to problems being faced by many people, but remind people of the proper support channel(s) to minimize individual support issues in the forums.

Advice: Keep specialist-subject channels (e.g., PSEA) open for 1 week before and 1 week after the webinar where this subject is presented/discussed. The PSEA experts in the pilot (who were both the guest speakers in the Week 2 webinars and the guest moderators of the PSEA channel) reported that the PSEA channel was not widely used, but in fact this was the most active one after *general* and *administration*, with at least a dozen people contributing to the discussion.

Webinars

Webinars and forums are critical elements of the MOOC study route. They are what set this route apart from the self-paced e-learning (only) route, and they are the only genuinely interactive elements of the course. While the e-learning modules deliver the core content, there is evidence that their impact on learning is limited, i.e., that much of the content will not be retained by the learner. The webinars are therefore essential to reinforce the key messages from the e-learning, to measure whether the most important information has been retained, and to take decisive action if there are misunderstandings.

For the Module 1 webinars in the pilot course, participants that wished to do so joined a small-group discussion where they were asked to state their favourite aspects of other webinars they have attended recently. These “likes” included: energy, participation, action, involvement of affected community members, 5-minute coffee breaks, breakout room discussions (note: some people liked meeting people from around the world, while others suggested the opposite, i.e., regional groups to allow focused/contextual discussions), a smooth technical experience, active chatrooms, hands-on, international, PowerPoint-free, honest/blunt presenters, and introvert-/extrovert-friendly formats. This is not a bad question to break the ice in Module 1, though you may have limited ability to react to any suggestions ahead of the Module 2 webinar so be careful not to raise false expectations.

Advice: Have a dedicated person (who is not a presenter) to monitor the chatroom. This person can answer some questions in the chatroom, and can share links to relevant resources, some of which can be anticipated before the webinar. The Q&A moderator will rely on the chatroom monitor to identify and relay the best questions to be directed to the experts.

Advice: Having PSEA as the topic of the keynote presentation in Module 2 worked well. Follow this approach unless you have a strong alternative.

Advice: While experienced facilitators and subject matter experts are important, do not forget the human aspect. The views, opinions, and experiences of members of communities affected by disaster or crisis – and not just humanitarian professionals – must be heard. Including someone from an affected community in the training team is now a requirement in the Terms of Reference document, but even this is not automatically enough. Seek to integrate voices and examples from several different cultures throughout the course.

Advice: Always have backup plans in case the internet connection of the presenter is interrupted. This includes having several co-hosts with a copy of the slides; and having the phone number of all presenters and someone on standby to contact them to determine how long they will be offline for. The host (or backup co-host) should be ready to step in and take charge of the webinar. They could cover for the speaker for a few minutes, or potentially reorder the webinar components.

Advice: Remember to plan ahead for editing webinar recordings and making them available as soon as possible – via the learning platform – for those who could not attend the webinar(s) in person. They should be available within a few hours, or one day at most.

Advice: At the end of each webinar, remind everyone to log into the learning platform and mark the webinar activity as complete. At the same time, remind people how to complete the other activities: participants must score at least 70% in the quiz (after several attempts if necessary) and submit answers to all the open-ended questions to complete the assignment; download the infographic; mark the forum activity as complete (after taking part in the conversations for that week).

Suggestion: The learning platform could be updated to require a password when ticking off the webinar and/or forum activities. The password would be provided in the webinars and forums, respectively.

Suggestion: Allow more time for the expert presentation. This suggestion was made by both the guest speakers involved with the pilot and should be balanced against not making the webinar too long overall.

Suggestion: Make better links between the keynote presentations and the e-learning material. This suggestion is from one of the guest speakers involved with the pilot. The training team deliberately gave the guest speakers freedom to determine what to present, but the suggestion is that perhaps this was *too much* freedom.

Suggestion: Allow participants to suggest topics for webinars. It is not obvious how this could be practically implemented but could be worth exploring.

Interactive workshops

While the course materials are intended for webinars with several hundred participants, it is feasible that the Sphere in Practice online could be run with a significantly smaller number of participants (e.g., 25 to 30), or by splitting participants into smaller groups (of 25 to 30). The cost per participant of running this course will be much higher, but this would allow the webinars to be replaced with interactive online (or even in-person) workshops. Four pilot participants suggested more interactivity and more group discussion time to give everyone (who wants to) an opportunity to speak. As noted in the [Author's note](#) above, this suggestion may not have been received if we had set clear expectations as to the format of the webinars.

If you are charging one or more large NGOs a participant fee for their employees, it may be appropriate to offer these participants additional interactive workshops. As such, they get something tangible in return for paying for something which is being offered for free to the general public.

Suggestion: Use padlet (<https://padlet.com/>) or kahoot (<https://kahoot.com/>) for increased interactivity during the webinars/course. This is a suggestion from a MOOC pilot participant. These platforms are currently unknown to the Sphere office.

Suggestion: One pilot participant suggested “Add short and easy exercises for people who are new to sphere to PRACTICE. So, a game or sorting cards activity for example. Something that [allows them to discover **for themselves** the difference between standards and targets rather than just being told this in 10 different ways].”.

Suggestion: Another pilot participant suggested “Add a simulation-based case study where groups must analyse the situation and come up with a strategic plan.”

Guest speakers

This section draws on written feedback from the two PSEA/GBV experts who were contracted for 2 days (18 hours) each. As well as preparing for and delivering the keynote presentation for module 2, they were also required to moderate the PSEA discussion forum for around 1 week and to provide a written report of their end-to-end experience as a guest speaker, including any suggestions for future editions. This approach of including a MEAL component in guest speaker contracts/agreements is highly recommended.

Both guest speakers reported that they had a positive overall experience. The other feedback they provided has been integrated into the [E-learning module content](#), [Webinars](#), [Forums](#) headings.

The written feedback from the 2 experts is included in [Appendix 1: Feedback from guest speakers](#) below.

Certificates

For the pilot MOOC, participants were informed that the criteria for receiving a certificate of completion were to complete all ten activities in the LMS and submit the end-of-course survey (via SurveyMonkey). To complete the e-learning modules, participants had to click on every control. To complete the assignments, participants had to answer every question and pass the quiz (retaking several times if necessary). Because the forums and webinars were on different platforms, participants needed only mark these activities as completed in the learning LMS. The training team did not cross-reference to Zoom attendance records or Slack contribution records. As such these criteria were very easy to test.

Advice: Establish criteria for certificate eligibility, including the methods you will use to test against them. Decide whether you will check everything (e.g., Zoom attendance records, Slack analytics⁶, etc.), or whether participants are trusted to flag which activities they have completed and which they have not. Not every activity has to be mandatory, e.g., you could decide that participation in moderated chatrooms is optional.

Advice: Frequently during the course, and via various channels, remind participants to tick off activities they have completed, e.g., at the end of each webinar, remind people to log into the LMS to tick this webinar off.

Advice: Following the final webinar, remind participants, via various communication channels, of the certification requirements, and specifically remind people to log into the LMS to ensure they have completed the required activities. Apart from participating in closed forums, all activities should remain accessible for at least a week (including recordings of webinars), so participants are able to catch up on anything they missed.

⁶ With a paid Slack plan, it is possible to export a list of users including information like the number of messages they posted, days active, number of reactions, etc. Free plans only offer aggregated summary data, e.g., total number of users and total number of messages per period of time.

Advice: Establish an appeals process. Whatever criteria and testing processes you establish, there will always be people that think they deserve a certificate even though the initial sweep of the data suggests they do not. Give those appealing the benefit of reasonable doubt but be prepared to reject appeals based on strong evidence of insufficient progress. Invite anyone whose appeal is rejected to look out for next course.

Advice: Some users may not be able to access SurveyMonkey (or whatever survey platform you are using), so allow submission of the end-of-course survey via email as a backup.

Advice: Do not underestimate the amount of time required to process challenges. However, the number of appeals will be minimised by following all the advice in this section.

Suggestion: Instead of allowing participants to simply tick off the webinar activities, ask for a password which is only given out at the end of each webinar. This may require some development by the LMS platform provider, but it should be a relatively simple update.

Suggestion: Offer different certificates, e.g., bronze, silver, and gold, based on completion and participation. If you are charging some participants a fee (e.g., staff of a large INGO), then they could be offered a premium service which includes a more-thorough investigation of their individual participation to determine which certificate each should receive.

Suggestion: Organize recognition events for successful participants and extend the invitation to their managers.

Surveys

Advice: DO NOT restrict access to the survey in any way (i.e., do not require people to connect to any platform or complete any other activity in order to access the survey). The feedback of people that cannot or choose not to finish the course is very important.

Advice: Actively invite non-finishers to complete the survey. Even with no restrictions on accessing the survey, there will be a strong correlation between people that complete the course and people that complete the survey. Reduce this self-selection bias by sending a targeted e-mail to non-finishers requesting their feedback on their reasons for not finishing.

Suggestion: Use statistical methods to remove any remaining self-selection bias from the results. A better evaluation of the course may be achieved by weighting up the scores of non-finishers so that their voice is representative of the population.

Advice: Some users may not be able to access SurveyMonkey (or whatever survey platform you are using), so allow submission of the end-of-course survey via email as a backup.

Advice: Add the following questions to the end-of-course survey: 1) "Would you like to be considered for a certificate of completion?" (Yes/No); and 2) "Did you complete all the activities in the learning platform?" (Yes/No), with "If No, please give details". These two questions should assist with the certificate appeals process as presented in greater detail in the [Certificates](#) section.

Suggestion: To accompany the new questions suggested above, add a screenshot to the end-of-course survey to show people how to check that they have completed all activities on the learning platform. Experience from the pilot shows that some participants will claim to have completed all activities/requirements while data from the platforms give a very different view.

Post-course activities

Running a Sphere in Practice MOOC is a learning experience for the organizer(s) as much as the course participants. Running any Sphere course is a responsibility which makes the organizer(s) accountable to course participants and the larger Sphere network.

Advice: Capture lessons learned for future courses run by you and others. Do not underestimate the time required or the importance of recording lessons learned – and then taking action on them. Inviting feedback is easy. Analysing it is a bit more difficult. Acting on it in accountable way – including being open where action is not taken – is tough.

Advice: Provide ongoing support to graduates of the MOOC. Among the course graduates, there will be individuals – hopefully, lots of them – who are inspired to use Sphere in their work. A smaller number will want to go even further, for example, by becoming a Sphere member, trainer, focal point representative, ambassador, and/or advocate. These people must be supported on their onward Sphere journey. This is the reason why it is essential to have at least one existing Sphere focal point involved in running the course, as supporting people in their country/region is one of their regular activities. By the end of the course, ensure that participants know who to contact, and ensure these channels are monitored and responsive.

A Sphere training event should always be a **means** by which the Sphere network grows; never just an **ends** for the organizer(s) to make a profit.

Appendix 1: Feedback from guest speakers

Expert 1

“Taking part in the Sphere MOOC as a PSEA thematic expert was overall an enjoyable experience. Having opportunity to engage with people in a way that can help de-mystify dealing with sexual exploitation and abuse is a good thing!

Working with the Slack platform as a point for engaging discussion prior to the PSEA workshop is in theory a useful space. The way it was actually used by participants in relation to SEA was minimal. This could be affected by different factors including too many things to look at and respond to on the platform or challenges to articulate what may be uncomfortable to discuss. Consider using it as a “week after follow up” platform to the MOOC to address questions of more knowledgeable participants. For the moderator it would then be easier to provide documents and links that participants will find more useful and/or encourage further discussion.

The case scenario used is very simple and straight forward for participants to understand. On one side this is helpful for quick learning. On the other side, consider nuancing the scenario to be more complex with different genders and maybe urban based. The complexity could require deeper thinking about different types of SEA playing out in a humanitarian context.

The actual presentation time is too short. The 20-minute time slot goes very quickly for the amount that should be covered as basic knowledge. Consider adding an extra 10 minutes, especially if meaningful participation is wanted. I found it helpful to speak with my counterpart in developing the session. Both of us were of the understanding that we should coordinate what we talk about so that every participant comes away with equal knowledge. There is still so much stigma around talking about PSEA that I want to ensure that we are giving the same strong message.

Interaction with participants was positive and well managed. The break-out rooms are super and give space to talk with colleagues. I think that use of real time polling and feedback was valuable and well executed!

I enjoyed working with your team and I am curious to see how the MOOC continues to grow. Sphere has played a huge roll in my professional life through the years and I glad to see it changing to the evolving humanitarian world.”

Expert 2

“The Sphere MOOC colleagues were very helpful and made the process easy for the thematic experts to step in and provide the training. The training went smoothly with no technical or other issues. Participants reported appreciating the opportunity to share learning and challenges linked to PSEA with each other in the break-out group. There was also some activity among participants in the Slack chatroom. Overall, the end-to-end experience was very positive, and the Sphere teams was organized and supportive.

A few suggestions from the pilot experience are offered below:

- Consider making the time for the presentation on PSEA longer. There was a lot of information to cover in the short time. There was limited time for questions and answers of participants.
- Consider making engagement in Slack a mandatory part of the training process.
- Consider linking the expert presentation more directly and explicitly the Sphere online learning.”