

## **Webinars: A cookbook for educators**

**NICKY HOCKLY**

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**Reviewed by Kyle Smith**

Recently, I co-presented a webinar for the first time without having read Nicky Hockly's *Webinars: A cookbook for educators*. My three co-presenters and I were fortunate to have Nicky Hockly herself organize and chair the webinar and also guide us through a dress rehearsal beforehand. The feedback and advice she provided was invaluable but the next best thing is her e-book. I did not read it until several days after the webinar and immediately wished I had done so earlier: I would have been better prepared for some of the peculiarities of the medium.

The portmanteau word 'webinar' (web + seminar) has the ability to evoke strong negative reactions in people. I personally found the term so grating when I first heard it a couple of years ago that I think I consciously avoided webinars altogether for some time afterwards. Even so, it is still probably best to make it clear immediately that *Webinars* is in fact about more than just webinars. Rather, it is about online teaching more broadly, the various platforms (e.g., MSN Messenger, Skype) that can be used and how to make effective use of them. For this reason, the e-book's potential readership is greater than the title indicates.

It will, however, be most useful for people who are getting involved in online teaching for the first time and have little confidence with the technology. Such readers will be pleased that Hockly has assumed the bare minimum of background knowledge and has not glossed over any of the technical details of setting up and running a webinar. She provides thorough explanations of text-chat, audio-only and video-conferencing platforms, troubleshooting tips, webinar formats (or 'recipes') and online teaching activities. There is also a glossary at the end to assist readers in coming to terms with the inevitable jargon.

Helpfully, Hockly anticipates several potential problems for presenters, such as what to do if you ask your webinar participants to view a video in their own web browser, separate from the webinar platform. However, there is no problematisation of the *language* abilities of the participants. Following the dress rehearsal for the webinar I was involved in, Hockly pointed out that our audience would not consist entirely of native speakers so we would have to lighten up on the idiomatic language. While Hockly's readers might not necessarily have international audiences for their future webinars, similar advice would be a valuable addition to *Webinars*.

Hockly uses the e-book format to good effect. She ensures that there are plenty of screenshots and links to fully illustrate the tools and techniques she describes. Instead of flipping to and from the back of a book to access the glossary, the reader can click a hyperlink and go straight there. The format also helps to bring to life a feature of teacher development handbooks which is *de rigueur* but frequently fails to add any real value: reflective tasks. Several of Hockly's tasks are based on videos of real webinars, and are extremely useful.

A particular highlight is the 'advice from experts' section at the end. Two comments that resonated strongly following my own webinar experience were these:

If you look at your monitor all the time, you'll look a bit evasive. Look at the camera as much as possible. *Scott Thornbury, Spain*

Try to moderate in pairs just in case something goes wrong. *Jennifer Verschoor, Argentina*

Scott Thornbury's comment is important because it is not necessarily obvious where one should be looking while presenting and it is very easy to simply follow your slides or notes on the monitor throughout. Jennifer Verschoor's suggestion is especially relevant if you are hoping to be able to keep track of and respond to the text chat during the webinar – having someone else to assist is a definite boon.

The only real failing of *Webinars* is a stylistic one: the catchy 'cookbook' reference in the title appears to have locked the writer into gratuitous use of cooking metaphors. This is at its most obtrusive in sentences such as, 'The dual-fuel stove is preferred by many professional chefs because heat can be controlled better and faster on a gas hob, while food heats more evenly in an electric oven' (i.e., each platform has its own strengths and weaknesses so choose wisely). While such analogies might be helpful to some readers, (especially the gastronomically-inclined) I found them distracting. However, once each chapter's obligatory culinary reference is out of the way, Hockly's writing is clear and direct.

In summary, *Webinars* was written with a particular audience in mind and Nicky Hockly has taken great care to anticipate and address the potential questions and concerns of that audience. For this reason, and the fact that it costs a mere \$5.99 to download, *Webinars* is highly recommended for educators who are just beginning to get involved or interested in online teaching.

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