
Building Transformative Online Programs

Adam Yukelson

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Welcome

This document is for people stewarding successful in-person work—teachings, programs, or practices—and who feel the pull to bring that work online.

You'll find questions, provocations, and design principles drawn from years of experimenting with large-scale online learning environments. These are the kinds of design considerations I explore with leaders and organizations as they consider how to translate a powerful in-person program into a transformative online environment.

This is an early iteration. If questions arise as you read—or if you'd like to talk through your plans in more detail—I'd welcome the conversation: adam.yukelson@gmail.com

About Me

Two of the initiatives I reference throughout this document are *u.lab* (developed with MIT / the Presencing Institute) and *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, an online course created with Plum Village. I co-created the former and advised on the latter. Both shaped how I think about scale, participation, and what it takes for learning environments to come alive online.

Today, I work with organizations on the kinds of questions and design challenges outlined here—often at moments when something real is working in person and the question is how it should move online. You can read more about my work at [my website](#).

Ready to get started? Here are a few foundational questions to consider as you begin.

Before You Build

Before deciding to build an online program, it's worth pausing to ask a small set of foundational questions about intention, scale, participation, and what your program may set in motion. Many design decisions flow downstream from these choices.

- Why build an online program?
- What scale are you aiming for?
- How will people participate?
- What happens after?

Why build an online program?

What, actually, is your intention?

Organizations create online programs for many reasons: to expand reach, deepen engagement, build community, generate revenue, or seed a movement. You'll likely hold more than one intention. The key question is which is core, and which are secondary?

Tradeoffs are inevitable. They're far easier to navigate when your primary intention is clear.

What scale are you aiming for?

A cohort of 50, 500, or 5,000 leads to very different design choices—especially if you plan to include live sessions or small-group experiences.

How will people participate?

Will the program be synchronous (facilitated) or asynchronous? If synchronous: when does it happen, and will it repeat in cohorts?

What happens after – and are you ready for it?

If you convene large numbers of people, some will want to stay engaged. It's useful to consider in advance what pathways might emerge for participants once the program ends.



Reflection from Practice

When Plum Village began building *Zen and The Art of Saving the Planet*, a core intention was to reach people who couldn't attend in-person retreats.

In practice, the course became an entry point into the wider Plum Village community. Some participants later wanted to attend retreats in person or deepen their involvement in the practice.

Online programs often generate second-order consequences. A useful early question is: *What might this program make possible that we're not explicitly designing for—and are we prepared for that?*

Core Provocations

Every medium has its strengths. Online learning comes with different constraints—and different possibilities—than in-person work. Rather than translating what already exists, these questions help open up the creative potential of the medium itself:

- What is the essence of your in-person program that you want to preserve?
- What becomes possible online that cannot happen in person?
- What could a great online program *also* be?



Reflection from Practice

In 2014, while envisioning *u.lab*, I was inspired by an early social-psychology MOOC that used scale itself as a teaching tool. With tens of thousands of learners enrolled, participants were asked to answer a simple experiential question—and then to predict how others would respond. Provocatively, the question was about UFOs.

When the aggregated results were revealed, the gap between personal experience and assumptions about others became immediately visible at massive scale. What would have been subtle or anecdotal in a room became deeply memorable online.

At the time, this kind of real-time, large-scale sense-making wasn't something we could easily do in in-person workshops. It pointed to a distinctive affordance of online learning: using scale to surface collective blind spots.

We carried this insight into *u.lab*. When introducing the levels of listening framework, for example, we asked participants both how they were currently operating and where their work required them to operate. Aggregating responses across tens of thousands of learners made the gap visible.

Learner Psychology: The Invisible Architecture

Beginnings matter.

Before structure, pedagogy, or platform decisions, it's worth attending to the psychological stance learners bring into online experiences—often unconsciously—and how early design choices shape everything that follows.

The way participants are invited in, both explicitly and implicitly, sets the tone for the entire experience. When a program begins with a syllabus, requirements, or expectations, it often activates the psychology of *school* rather than the psychology of a *journey*.

In that mode, learners orient toward *doing it right*. They worry about falling behind. They relate to the experience as something to keep up with rather than something to practice. Over time, this stance can quietly undermine the very pedagogy that makes online learning powerful: one that places learners in the driver's seat of their own education.

When the invitation is clear, warm, and meaningful, people orient differently. They make intentional choices about how deeply to engage. They rely less on external motivators (notifications, reminders, deadlines) and more on intrinsic commitment.



Reflection from Practice

In *u.lab* and *Zen and The Art of Saving the Planet*, we saw again and again that early design choices can shift learner psychology in subtle but important ways. For example:

- Inviting participants to reflect on their deeper intention for joining, rather than leading with expectations or outcomes
- Invoking beauty through music, imagery, and video to signal that this is a different kind of learning space
- Naming upfront that browsing and watching are possible—but not where transformation happens
- Making visible who else is in the course, reinforcing the reality that you are part of a bigger movement
- Leveraging institutional credibility to build trust

In one early *u.lab* introduction video, sent out by email prior to the start of the course, we named this explicitly: yes, it's possible to browse content and learn frameworks. But deeper transformation comes from practice. From applying the work in real contexts. Making this distinction early helped participants choose their own level of engagement and connect with their intrinsic motivation for participating.

Structural Layers

One way almost any online or global offering can be strengthened is by designing for multiple levels of participation. And by intentionally sequencing, harvesting, and weaving together what emerges from each layer.

Each layer invites a different kind of engagement. Together, they allow learning to move fluidly between inner reflection, relationship, and collective sensemaking.

Individual Reflection Questions

A useful design question is not only *what becomes possible* online, but also *what becomes uninteresting* at scale.

If hundreds or thousands of learners are responding to the same prompt, consider what you would genuinely want to read—and what you wouldn't.

- **Personal stories tend to work better than opinions.** What someone experienced is often more compelling than what they think.
- **Prompts grounded in lived experience, thresholds, or moments of insight** scale better than abstract reflection questions.

Pairs

Learners can be invited to have a dialogue with someone in their life or work, even if the other person isn't enrolled in the program.

This simple move helps shift learning off the screen and into immediate relationships.



Reflection from Practice

In *u.lab*, we focused deeply on listening. Participants were invited to have a real conversation with someone in their life and pay attention to how they listened. They didn't even need to tell the other person they were practicing. This small design choice allowed the learning to move directly into the real world.

Small Groups

Small groups can be powerful, but it depends on how they're designed.

Key considerations include:

- Clear process and simple protocols, especially when groups are self-facilitated
- Encouraging risk-taking and vulnerability, rather than polished sharing
- Discouraging fixing and problem-solving, which often shuts down deeper learning

In 2026, many people are more practiced with online small groups—and also more fatigued by them. This raises the bar for clarity, purpose, and pacing.

Hubs (Offline or Place-Based)

One of the most underused design opportunities is enabling people to take an online course together, in place.

As appetite for offline connection grows, online programs can serve as a coordinating mechanism that supports local hubs or practice groups. In this way, the online experience doesn't replace in-person connection; it helps catalyze it.

 Vishal Jodhani
@VJTheCatalyst

Checking out as a group in one big circle after the first #uLab live session! Inspired & ready #berlin @ImpactHubBLN



9:05 AM · Sep 17, 2015

Comment 4 · Like 6 · Share · Upvote

 Creek Viviana Galdames W @co_incidir · Nov 15, 2018
#ULAB

Today's live session, sharing #SPT with @chile_hub



Comment 4 · Like 4 · Share · Upvote

Whole Group (Live Sessions)

Live sessions deserve their own guidebook. But at minimum:

- Begin warm, clear, and compelling. The opening minutes matter disproportionately
- Help the system see itself: how many people are present, from where, and across what diversity of contexts

When designed well, live sessions create a sense of shared field rather than broadcast. And they can impact people in surprising ways:



Markéta Kunešová @supermarket76 · Jan 28, 2015

🔗 ...

#Ulab This session brought me closer to my Self than previous 10 years of meditations, reading, occasional therapy and coaching! Thanks!

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Bookmark

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Design Principles

Many of the most important design decisions are about sequencing, pacing, and what kind of journey people are invited into.

Sacred Hospitality

This is a term I learned from the teacher Orland Bishop. Applied to online learning environments, it's about how people are welcomed and hosted.

This includes clear invitations, thoughtful framing, and attention to how people arrive, emotionally as well as cognitively. When learners feel received, they are more willing to take risks and engage fully. (See *Learner Psychology* above for more on this dynamic.)

Pacing

Most online programs try to do too much.

Attention is finite. Time is constrained. Learning deepens when there is space to practice, reflect, and integrate. Err on the side of less: fewer concepts, fewer assignments, and practices people may want to return to again and again.

What you leave out often matters as much as what you include.

Art, Music, and Aesthetics

Art and music shape tone, signal care, and help people transition between modes of attention.



Reflection from Practice

In *Zen and The Art of Saving the Planet*, music, artwork and visual design functioned as part of the pedagogy.

Combined with the deep blue background we chose for the course platform, these choices created moments of stillness, emotional resonance, and a felt sense that the experience was intentionally crafted rather than assembled.

Scribing and Sensemaking

Live scribing, visual harvesting, and other forms of shared sensemaking help make learning visible. This can happen during live sessions and as the course unfolds.

For example, a scribe might review reflections from Week 1 and post a visual harvest as Week 2 begins, surfacing themes and questions that are already alive in the group.

These practices allow participants to see what is emerging collectively. Over time, they surface patterns and reinforce the sense that something meaningful is being created together.

Production and Presence

Learners can tell when content has been designed for this context, rather than repurposed from somewhere else.

Whether through video, writing, or facilitation, the goal is not high production value for its own sake, but presence: the felt sense of "*I am here with you.*"

Pedagogy

Beyond structure and design choices lies pedagogy: the deeper logic of how learning is invited, experienced, and embodied over time. In transformative online offerings, pedagogy is less about content delivery and more about the conditions that allow insight to take root.

The principles below point to a pedagogy that treats learners as active participants in shaping their own learning.

Wholeness

Modern life tends to split things that belong together. Thinking gets separated from feeling. Reflection from action. Personal life from professional role. Head from heart from hands.

At their best, online learning environments help people reconnect what has been divided. This doesn't require explicit acknowledgment. It happens through design: invitations that speak to more than the intellect, practices that engage the body, prompts that surface what matters, and making visible – often simply through the existence of such a program – that many others are on a similar journey.

In the Driver's Seat of Your Own Learning

A subtle but consequential shift happens when learners move from consuming to convening.

Most online programs position participants as recipients: content flows toward them, they engage with it, perhaps they discuss it with others. But when learners take responsibility for gathering people, holding space, or supporting practice together, they're no longer just learners—they are co-facilitators. And this generates a sense of agency.



Reflection from Practice

In 2013, before building *u.lab*, we noticed something unexpected at a Presencing Institute forum. We convened 300 people in Boston and livestreamed the two-day gathering to hundreds more around the world. Alongside this, we shared a short hosting guide with anyone who wanted to gather people locally in different parts of the world.

After the event, we compared survey responses from those who attended the centralized, in-person gathering with those who participated through self-organized local hubs. Consistently, participants who hosted or joined local hubs reported more powerful learning experiences.

Something important was happening. When people took responsibility for convening others by choosing the setting, holding the space, and practicing together, the learning shifted. The forum became a catalyst rather than the center of gravity. This insight became a foundation for *u.lab* hubs and gave us confidence that distributed, self-organized learning could be not only viable, but often more transformative.

Skin in the Game

Learning that stays conceptual tends to fade. Learning that moves toward action tends to stick.

The arc of a course matters. Over time, participants should be invited toward experimentation—real change in their lives or work, however modest. A difficult conversation initiated. A new practice tried. A risk taken in a relationship or a role.

What matters is not the size of the action, but its sincerity. Even small experiments, chosen with care, can shift the trajectory of someone's life.

Going Further

The principles above are starting points. Every program has its own constraints and possibilities.

In my experience, the most generative part of building online programs is sensing into what the work actually wants to become.

At that stage, it can help to have a thinking partner. When I do this work alongside leaders and organizations, it often includes:

- clarifying intention and scope
- thinking through scale, pacing, and participation
- getting concrete about practicalities like budgets, roles, and timelines
- and, when useful, getting hands-on with the creation and editing of content

This usually begins with a conversation to help you decide what's worth building now, and what might be better left alone, or left for later.

If that would be useful, you're welcome to reach out: adam.yukelson@gmail.com