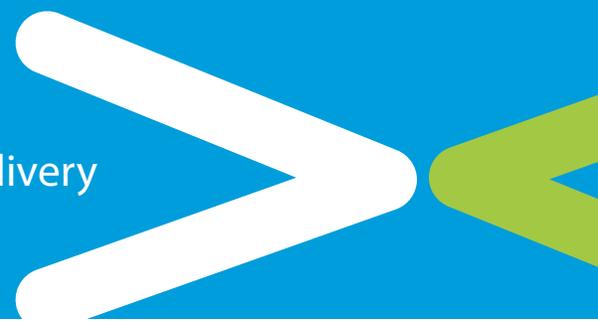
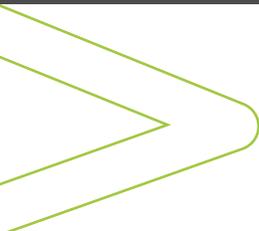


How to Bridge the Gap from Traditional Training Delivery to the Virtual Classroom



Approaches for Adapting Local Classroom Techniques to the Virtual Classroom

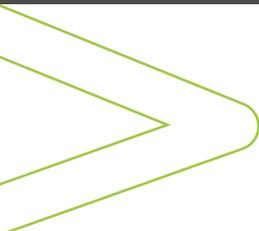


Advent of the Virtual Classroom

Although training budgets may be back on the rise, the recent years of a down economy have disciplined training organizations to do more with less, focusing on improving training effectiveness while simultaneously cutting costs¹. Although many organizations found that instructor-led training produced excellent results, they were compelled to reduce the cost of travel, meals, and accommodations, which took a deep cut out of training budgets. As a result, organizations turned to self-paced e-learning and other forms of self-study as their primary source of training delivery. Rather than pay outside firms to develop custom e-learning, training organizations used rapid authoring tools to create their own e-learning using internal staff. Although there have been some success stories with this approach, unfortunately numerous failure stories abound. Many organizations that had previously delivered highly successful instructor-led training found themselves delivering poorly constructed self-paced e-learning that did not produce effective results.

Many organizations have come to realize that web conferencing tools – such as iLinc, WebEx, Citrix GoToMeeting, Microsoft Lync, Adobe Connect, and others – enable them to once again deliver highly interactive, engaging instructor-led training without the expenses associated with transporting remote learners and instructors into the same classroom. And they do not have to settle for providing an e-learning-only training solution. They can continue to use e-learning where it is appropriate and effective. Social networks, media-sharing, and collaboration sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, wikis, blogs, Twitter, YouTube, RSS/podcasts, SharePoint, and other tools round out the performance improvement tool set, enabling training organizations to foster communities of learning before and after the training event.

The virtual classroom has become the core around which many organizations now design their training programs. In a 2009 study, Bersin & Associates found that more than half of organizations surveyed in the fields of technology, business services and consulting, insurance, banking, financial services, and government use virtual classroom technology for training. As much as 86% of technology companies utilize the virtual classroom to deliver training.²



Adapting to the Virtual Classroom

Organizations that have long provided instructor-led training in a traditional classroom training environment have found that traditional methods and resources adapt well to the virtual classroom. Most web-conferencing tools provide features that are analogous to those provided in the traditional classroom. For example, slides can be displayed online to accompany the instructor's delivery of content. Software can be demonstrated through desktop sharing. Many services provide an online whiteboard that instructors and students can use to draw diagrams or mark up images. Discussion can occur through text messaging, telephone conferencing, or integrated IP telephony services provided by the web conferencing tool. Questions and polling are provided through integrated questioning and survey tools. Services even provide a facility to enable learners to "raise their hand" by clicking a button. The market for web conferencing services has been very competitive, and vendors continue to add innovative features. As features are added or refined, other vendors scramble to add something comparable to their offering.

For many subject matter domains, the local classroom experience translates well to the virtual classroom. In fact, using web conferencing technologies within the local classroom can even improve the learning experience for on-site learners. For example, the ability to broadcast the instructor's computer display to every learner's screen may provide some learners with a better view than a projected image at the front of the room. Polling, messaging, and questioning tools may give shy learners a chance to be heard that they might miss if required to call out a response audibly in a room full of other learners. Web-based conferencing tools may help to level the playing field for some on-site learners.

A Methodology for Translating Delivery to the Virtual Classroom

The virtual classroom provides flexibility, as well as potential savings in training costs. However, making the transition to teaching in an environment that uses these technologies does require some adjustment in the design and delivery of training. You should not have to lower your expectations regarding learner engagement, interaction, collaboration, and performance for the virtual classroom.

To identify adjustments you need to make, consider performing this exercise in a simple worksheet that you can create on paper or in a software application such as Microsoft Excel or Word.

1. **Identify goals** for the learning experience.
2. **List techniques** that you currently use to attain those goals in the traditional local classroom.
3. **Identify potential problems** by evaluating your techniques in the context of the virtual classroom. Some techniques may translate easily. Others may require some innovation and problem-solving to produce a comparable learning experience.
4. **Identify solutions** you must make to translate the experience to the virtual classroom.

Approaches

Following are three worked approaches. In each case: 1) the goal for the learning experience is identified and described, 2) the techniques used to attain that goal in the local classroom are listed, and 3) a list of potential problems and solutions are identified.

Approach #1

Step 1 Identify Goal

Goal: Establish Community among Learners.

In a successful instructor-led course, I seek to create a sense of community among learners. Not only does this improve the classroom experience, but it also fosters a community of learning, which I want to promote before and after the training event.

Step 2 List Techniques used in the traditional local classroom

- I have learners introduce themselves at the start of the class. They share their experience, goals for learning, and fun and interesting facts about themselves.
- I promote dialogue. I encourage learners to interact and ask questions of the entire group during individual practice exercises.
- I employ breakout sessions in which I form the class into various teams to complete learning activities and report on those activities when the whole group reconvenes.
- I encourage learners who successfully finish activities early to help other learners who are struggling to complete the activity.

Steps 3 and 4 Identify potential problems and solutions

Problem: In the virtual classroom, students cannot easily see and interact with other students. Their lack of “presence” diminishes interaction.

Solution: I will do things to foster a sense that learners are present even though they are off-site:

- Ensure that all participants have a webcam so they can interact visually.
- If learners can’t use a webcam, ensure they have a good photo associated with their user account, which will represent them in the virtual classroom environment.
- Maintain continual display of each learner’s video feed in the room and on the shared screen. When individual learners speak for an extended period, as in the “introductions” activity, zoom their video feed to full size in the web conferencing environment.
- Maintain frequent dialogue through audio/video and text messaging. Learners can use the chat system to convey private messages to you and other learners.

Problem: The web conferencing system we use is session-based. Only one person “has the floor” at a time. This makes it awkward to break up into separate teams. Do we need to spin off learners into separate sessions to provide virtual breakout rooms?

Solution: Use breakout room functionality provided by the web conferencing tool to temporarily provide each activity team with its own meeting area. Monitor each breakout room to see how each team is doing. When we reconvene the whole group, team captains can individually share their desktops as they present their team’s results.

Problem: Using our conferencing system, only one person at a time can share his or her screen, making it difficult for one student to share his or her screen with another to work together on an activity.

Solution: Move two or more participants to a breakout room to work with each other. In some cases, I can ask a learner who has run into difficulties to share his or her screen with the entire class to perform a group troubleshooting exercise, which could be a learning opportunity for all participants.

Approach #2

Goal: Maintain Effective Pacing and Delivery.

I like to know when learners aren’t “getting it.” By monitoring learners closely, I can adjust my pacing or try different approaches as needed.

I use a number of strategies and techniques to monitor pacing and comprehension.

For example:

- Observe learner performance in activities and assessments
- Periodically ask learners how they are doing (Are we moving too fast? Do you have any questions?)
- Read body language
- Casually view learners’ screens to see how well they are following along

Step 1
Identify Goal

Step 2
List Techniques used
in the traditional local
classroom

Steps 3 and 4
Identify potential
problems and solutions

Problem: With all of my remote learners working separately on practice labs, it's hard to know when they're all finished.

Solution: I will have learners click the "raise hand" button when they are done with the activity so I can tell who has finished.

Problem: Reading body language is challenging through a web conferencing system, even when I have a high quality video feed from every learner.

Solution: At the beginning of the class, I need to set ground rules and establish techniques (e.g., use of private chat messages) for learners to discreetly let me know when they are having trouble keeping up.

Problem: Casually viewing a learner's screen is not possible the way it is in the local classroom.

Solution: I will rely more on other means to evaluate learner performance, such as how long it takes for learners to complete activities. I will use the conferencing system's questioning or survey tools to pose informal content questions to evaluate understanding. If learners aren't "getting it", I will double back and review material before moving on. I will cover the course material over four 90-minute sessions, rather than all in one session. This will provide "catch up" time in between sessions that I can use to help learners get caught up on a one-on-one basis, when I'm not slowing down the learning experience for other learners.

Approach #3

Step 1
Identify Goal

Goal: Keep Learners Engaged.

I seek to keep learners thinking and actively engaged throughout the training session.

Step 2
List Techniques used
in the traditional local
classroom

I believe that learning should be immersive. Techniques I have used in the classroom to promote active learning include:

- Minimize lecture; use dialogue and storytelling to keep learners engaged
- Foster a classroom environment with no outside distractions
- Employ real-world scenarios, role play exercises, and training simulations
- To keep interest and engagement high, I intersperse delivery of new material and hands-on activities in frequent small chunks

Steps 3 and 4
Identify potential
problems and solutions

Problem: Without all of the audio and video cues present when the whole class is live and in-person, it can be difficult to effectively conduct a group conversation over web conferencing tools. Some systems provide “simplex” communication that only allows one audio feed at a time to be active. In such a system, the person talking may not realize that someone else is talking at the same time.

Solution: I can facilitate discussion by addressing the next person to speak by name. Some systems provide an animated speaker icon that shows whose audio is currently active. When our class is using such a system, I will remind learners to get into the habit of glancing at the icon as they are talking to verify that they indeed have the floor.

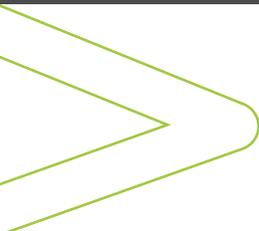
I will use questioning and polling tools to get input from all learners without the concerns of multiple people speaking at once or one person’s audio feed blocking that of another.

Problem: I cannot control the environment of remote learners. I know that some of my learners are distracted by email, telephone calls, and so forth.

Solution: I will encourage learners to close email, turn off the phone, and so forth. Since many of my learners are unable to ignore communications for a long period of time, I will schedule my training sessions in short installments. I will remind off-site learners that I want them to have the same advantage as on-site learners to focus on learning without distractions.

Problem: In a hybrid classroom environment, on-site participants have an advantage over off-site participants in classroom discussions.

Solution: I can “level the playing field” by conducting classroom discussions through the web conferencing tool. I will use chat/messaging, questioning, and polling tools to interact with all learners. When possible, I will provide each student station in the classroom with a webcam and microphone headset so learners use the conferencing system the same as other learners.



Virtual Success

Delivering training through the virtual classroom enables you to offer a high quality learning experience while providing you with flexibility and choice in time and location, and helping you to reduce the costs associated with training delivery. As more organizations embrace the virtual classroom, more tools and resources become available. Seek out tools, resources, and content that embrace and support the virtual classroom model. As you deliver more courses in the virtual classroom environment, you will undoubtedly identify additional tools and techniques to help you successfully translate your training for the virtual classroom.

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