

Delivering Virtual Learning Results: Practical Tips from Experienced Practitioners

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“Why can’t we do this via webcast?” “Can virtual learning be truly interactive?” “How can we make our next virtual learning session more effective?”

If these questions seem familiar, you’re not alone. The appeal of virtual learning is growing as training and travel budgets shrink, work groups become more dispersed, and companies become more reluctant to take people off the job. In this environment, it makes a lot of sense to bring learning to employees where they work. The challenge? Ensuring virtual learning efforts succeed in engaging learners to deliver the real business results company leaders expect.

Wilson Learning started experimenting with virtual learning over 10 years ago, acquiring significant experience along the way. Recently, we sat down with a group of our most knowledgeable virtual learning facilitators and designers and asked them to talk about lessons learned and their personal secrets of success. The insights and practical tips offered below represent wisdom gained by these pioneers in the field who’ve learned through trial and error how best to leverage virtual learning technologies while avoiding some of the most common pitfalls.

THE KEYS TO VIRTUAL LEARNING EFFECTIVENESS

The key to making virtual learning effective is in some ways the same secret that makes any learning initiative effective: careful attention to design, delivery, and follow-through. In

a virtual classroom, however, these elements are all affected by four features that make the learning experience unique:

- Participants feel largely alone. Learning from the privacy of your own desktop has many advantages, but it also poses significant challenges.
- Facilitators lack information provided by nonverbal cues of emotional state. We all know that body language communicates more about engagement, attention, and attitude than any other cue, and in virtual learning it is not available.
- The old ways to engage learners (e.g., eye contact, flipcharts, physical proximity) are gone, requiring facilitators to learn a whole new set of techniques.
- The pace of learning changes. The live classroom can move at the pace of a casual conversation, while virtual learning needs to move at a faster pace—more akin to radio show banter.

What emerges as the overall challenge is to make certain the learning design and facilitation work seamlessly together to keep participants continuously engaged and motivated.

To achieve this critical objective necessitates adapting to the requirements of the virtual learning environment and using available technology in creative ways so that it enhances learning, rather than getting in the way.

As we listened to the lively discussion among our experts, five clear guidelines emerged:

1. Engage learners proactively and continuously.
2. Maintain fast-paced, clear, and concise delivery.
3. Integrate real-life work situations.
4. Create a comfortable online experience.
5. Extend the learning.

ENGAGE LEARNERS PROACTIVELY

Every effective facilitator tries to keep participants actively involved. Our experts stressed that it is easier to capture and hold sustained attention in the virtual classroom if activities are varied and change often. Current virtual learning technology platforms offer a variety of options for keeping learners actively engaged with the facilitator and each other.

Our experts agreed that it is important to engage individual learners. This can be done by calling on specific individuals to answer a question or contribute a comment, rather than throwing out an open question to the group and waiting for an answer. Whereas this might be done less often in a traditional classroom, it is strongly encouraged in a virtual setting. Another suggestion is to ask people to “raise hands” to respond to a question.

Using the “chat” function is also a good alternative to the traditional large-group discussion. The facilitator can ask a question and have people write responses in the chat area, allowing the facilitator to comment or ask for further clarification. It’s also possible to open up the chat box to all participants and ask people to respond to each others’ comments. Quick polls are another way to check on involvement and encourage people to respond to a specific issue or question.

Some of our facilitators have also created hashtags in Twitter so participants can share comments both during and after a session. One facilitator noted that “it is amazing how freed the participants feel when you add the outside (Twitter) dialogue.”

Breakout room functions, available in many platforms, can be used in a wide variety of ways to generate engagement. For example, small groups can be asked to gather in audio breakout rooms to conduct a role-play, or to work together on a question or a case study the facilitator has assigned. By using an interactive white board, they can record their responses and show them to the large group.



In one Wilson Learning sales training session, participants were assigned to a “home team” of people who worked together on tasks such as practicing a call on a customer and filling out an electronic sales planner as a group. The home teams then shared their insights and ideas with the rest of the group via the white board.

Most platforms allow the facilitator to visit breakout rooms and listen to the conversation, just as it might happen in a classroom session. Our facilitators agreed this is useful, but participants should be told ahead of time that this is going to happen.

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Whatever the activity, it is especially important in a virtual classroom that each activity be grounded in a clear purpose and outcome. A gratuitous quick poll or time wasted in a chat room will weaken learners' motivation and sense of engagement.

MAINTAIN FAST-PACED, CLEAR, CONCISE DELIVERY

During a virtual learning experience, people will tend to check out if the pace begins to drag. Successful facilitators focus on “netting out” the main points, keeping presentations concise and clear, and making sure the delivery is fast-paced and challenging. One facilitator noted that you can't take three minutes to tell a story, which might be tolerated in a traditional classroom. He suggested trying digital storytelling, illustrated with lively visuals to keep attention on the point being made. Everyone agreed that it is important to keep the visual stimuli consistently changing. (The creation of visuals is also critical, but is outside the scope of this discussion).

Another facilitator stressed the importance of being very clear when questions are being asked, and making sure people know what is expected. In a face-to-face session, a facilitator might say, “I want to hear what three or four of you think about this issue.” In a virtual learning environment the facilitator needs to say, “I would like to hear from John, Elizabeth, and then Alex about why you feel this topic is important.” In the classroom, social pressure will prompt several people to respond; in the virtual world, directions need to be more specific.

INTEGRATE REAL-LIFE WORK SITUATIONS

Since learners are usually in their work environments, virtual learning offers unique opportunities to have them use real work experiences as part of the learning. Learners can access real-time information to use in exercises, learn how to use a new tool, and then immediately apply it to their work.

The latter option is especially good for learning that is delivered across multiple sessions. Participants can complete an on-the-job application that can be debriefed at the beginning of the next session. For example, suppose you are teaching a sales skill such as a new approach to gaining an appointment with a prospect. You can ask participants to select three prospects and actually use the new approach to make calls between sessions. Their calls and results can be discussed at the beginning of the next session, and the whole group can learn from hearing about others' experiences.

CREATE A COMFORTABLE ONLINE EXPERIENCE

Not every learner is equally comfortable with technology. Learners can struggle with how to raise a hand, chat with a neighbor, or ask a question, causing distractions or delays. Providing things such as a fail-safe log-on process, technical support, and basic instructions for interacting in the virtual environment can go a long way toward assuring learners are comfortable and ready to learn. It's also critical that the facilitator be completely familiar and comfortable with the technology platform and all the features that will be used during the session. Of course, glitches can occur no matter how well prepared the facilitator is, and our experts stress the value of having a “Plan B” in case something does go wrong.

Other facilitation management tips focused on practical matters such as making sure there is plenty of room to spread out both physical and online materials, and taking care to balance one's own energy and that of the participants.

EXTEND THE LEARNING

As with any learning experience, ongoing practice, support, and application on the job are crucial to achieving desired outcomes. Most estimates suggest that only about 15–20 percent of learning investments actually result in

performance changes. The use of new skills declines over time, so that only about 35 percent of new skills are still being used at the end of 12 months.

As mentioned earlier, virtual learning environments make it possible to leverage the immediacy of the work environment in a very effective way to ensure learning extends beyond the classroom session. Virtual learning technology can be used in innovative ways for reinforcement and to create a learning culture that transcends the boundaries of space and time. Learners can receive e-mails reminding them of specific tools, concepts, and application assignments.

Since virtual learning occurs in the workplace, managers can be more easily and naturally involved throughout the process. They can receive just-in-time tips for coaching and supporting particular skills and on-the-job applications and assignments. Because the learning applications are integrated with the work, they are much less likely to be perceived as an extra, time-consuming burden.

Based on our clients' positive experiences, it's clear that virtual learning has great potential that is just beginning to be realized as new technology becomes available and people become increasingly comfortable with the idea. With careful attention to best practices, there is no reason your organization can't benefit from these new technologies and techniques to bring people together to learn in new, exciting, and cost-effective ways.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Barb Taruscio is a senior consultant, executive coach, client relationship manager, and facilitator. Barb has more than 20 years experience consulting with clients and developing and facilitating interventions to enhance employees' performance. She has also worked one-on-one with executives, facilitating their process of setting and reaching personal and business goals, conducting strategy sessions, and facilitating group learning via the physical or virtual classroom. She contributes to the design of customized client offerings, has done extensive tailoring of courses, and has managed large-scale projects, the most significant one being a two-year nationwide training curriculum for 5,000 salespeople and sales managers. She is on the virtual learning team, helping to lead the design and delivery of best practices. Barb is highly sought after for her expertise.

To learn more about the concepts shared within this article and how Wilson Learning can assist you in addressing these issues, contact Wilson Learning at 1.800.328.7937 or visit wilsonlearning-americas.com.



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