THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO
THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

All you ever need to know about live online learning

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INTRODUCING THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Virtual classroom learning, also known as live online, instructor-led learning - has become an established component in the modern learning workplace blend.

Live online learning provides instructor-led training in shorter durations that fit into the workflow, with global reach, reduced costs (through travel and accommodation cost savings)and greater engagement through interactive technologies.

- According to a 2017 survey of 670 talent development leaders carried out in the US by the ATD and i4cp, **64% of organisations already use virtual classrooms** for employee learning and another 22% plan to start using them within the next two years.

- Global data from Towards Maturity (2016) shows that live online learning is the **number one learning technology**, according to 89% of L&D professionals.

- Research from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development shows that 40% of L&D professionals believe that virtual classrooms will have had the **greatest impact** on the L&D profession by the year 2020, second only to mobile learning.
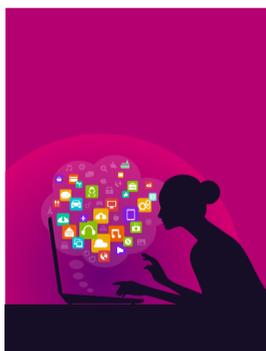
Whilst it should not be seen as a magic bullet, the virtual classroom is without doubt a highly powerful tool in the arsenal of the modern learning professional.

It continues to be adopted by organisations worldwide and is, in many cases, the go-to solution for interactive, synchronous elements of blended learning interventions.

A natural response to our on-demand learning culture

Technology and generational shifts have created a world of rich-media and web resources available at people's fingertips. With always-on internet access, on any device, we have a learn-on-demand culture.

Add to this the pressures of the modern workplace, demanding that learners be agile, efficient and resourceful, and it is clear there is a growing need for learning solutions that deliver just-in-time learning, accessed anywhere/anytime, for a dispersed workforce.

As a result, agile learning delivery using virtual classrooms is increasingly seen as the perfect way to keep with the pace of business change. Face-to-face classroom courses can be cumbersome and costly to continuously update and change. Conversely, live online learning in virtual classrooms engages learners in short, focused sessions which fit into busy schedules and can be easily adapted.

Live online learning fosters learner autonomy, self-pacing, personalisation and shorter times-to-competence. It also acts as a powerful form of micro-learning, for example, connecting learners with remote colleagues, hosting a show and tell or Q&A session with a subject matter expert.

Live online learning and the virtual classroom now need to sit alongside all the other elements of a modern blend - a true blend of video, recordings, documents, assessments, e-learning, recommendations, web links, assignments, practice and social learning.

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THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF LIVE ONLINE LEARNING

For many organisations, formal learning is still undertaken in the classroom, and trainers are still delivering courses. The reasons are simple: face-to-face classroom training is familiar, predictable, and ticks many of the "delivered" boxes for training managers.

But new technology regularly nips at the heels of classroom training, ever promising to make it redundant. When the laserdisc was launched in the 1980s, there was so much media hype that many large employers quickly took up the challenge and began replacing classroom courses with video-based courses. The belief was that laserdiscs would enable employees to learn by themselves and would provide employers with the opportunity to reduce the number of classroom-based courses. Additionally, the pundits were having a field day, proclaiming that it was the end of classroom training and that it would drastically cut the number of classroom trainers that were employed.

To some extent, the same was true with the launch of Computer-Based Training (CBT). It was claimed that CBT would mean the end of the classroom and trainers, as staff could learn on their own at their computers whenever and wherever they wanted. It would revolutionise how we learned, and employers would save on classroom and associated costs.

Although both of those delivery methods were a comparative success, they completely failed to replace the physical classroom, despite many thinking they would.

So where does live online learning fit in? Is it a viable method for delivering learning successfully without the need for a physical, shared space?

To answer this question, let's take a look at some of the benefits and challenges that live online learning provides.

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The benefits of live online learning

Live online learning offers a myriad of benefits for both for employers and learners alike.

The benefits to employers are generally:

- reduced travel time and accommodation costs
- staff spend less time away from the job
- faster deployment of knowledge and skills; supports a micro-learning approach
- higher completion rates compared to offline self-study
- opportunity to provide training to larger numbers and reach geographically dispersed learners - at a much lower cost
- can facilitate specialist coaching – management or leadership skills for example - to small groups with the benefit of peer to peer interaction
- measurable and trackable
- recordable
- easy to link with other learning
- minimum use of additional technology
- minimal capital outlays - no need to 'own' the technology

From a learning perspective, users cite the following benefits:

- shorter and more focused courses
- courses that are more interactive and collaborative
- greater opportunity to practise either in groups or individually
- ability to share with other learners
- ability to learn without having to leave the place of work
- ability to learn at a convenient time
- more likelihood of receiving 'Just in Time' learning
- probability of being trained more often and in a more timely way

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The challenges of live online learning

The live online learning environment is not problem-free. Those who are 'anti-online learning' usually cite all or many of the following reasons:

- lack of connectivity/software won't work
- poor facilitation skills of trainers/presenters
- desktop distractions/multi-tasking
- poor visual aid skills of trainers/presenters
- lack of understanding of live online content design
- IT holding perceived security issues with software/plugins
- Welcome emails blocked by spam filters or deleted
- Usernames and passwords to access the sessions get forgotten or mislaid

But by far the biggest issue is the facilitator's lack of requisite skills in the live online environment, and the resulting lack of interaction and engagement with the learners.

The problems begin when employers - and many trainers - assume that their training staff can simply take existing classroom courses and deliver them in the online classroom. ***This is a misguided and totally incorrect assumption***. To be able to deliver quality learning events in the live online learning environment, trainers need a complete new layer of skills and techniques which they must overlay on their classroom design and delivery skills.

It is a huge challenge to get this point of view across to employers and, to some extent, the trainers themselves. Unfortunately, many trainers are either not convinced that they need new skills, or they do not believe that the medium is able to offer the same learning effectiveness as their trusty classrooms.

If we can create engaging learner-centred online events which eliminate distractions and change the way we present visual aids to aid learning - and, most importantly get the trainer/facilitator skills right - we have the means to deliver on the huge potential that live online learning offers. In so doing we can greatly improve the performance and effectiveness of our organisations.

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DOES REMOTE TEACHING HINDER LEARNING?

Many trainers remain sceptical about the effectiveness of learning at a distance (that is, outside the physical confines of the classroom). They believe that the learner can only learn best when their trainer and fellow learners are in the same room.

The main concern of established trainers is that it is impossible to train a class if they are unable to physically see the all-important body language cues. It is a valid view, and it remains one of the most important challenges that live online trainers face. But it can be overcome with proper online facilitator coaching.

Trainers are also concerned about the potential for distraction. Learners in the virtual classroom are not confined in the same way as they are in a physical classroom. In-person training puts every learner under the watchful eye of the trainer, as well as within view of all other participants. There is nowhere to hide. Even when an activity is being carried out by one of the other participants, the fellow learners are never quite out of the spotlight, leaving them with no choice but to observe passively.

The same is not the case for participants in a virtual classroom. They are rarely in view (unless webcams are being used) and there will be many opportunities to be distracted. Instead of passively observing, a virtual classroom attendee may take the opportunity to check email or respond to Facebook and WhatsApp messages.

To counter the risk of distraction there is one key method that all great virtual classroom facilitators follow - keeping learners engaged with frequent interactive activities.

Ensuring learning is effective

To take full advantage of the many opportunities offered by the live online learning environment, online facilitators must learn a suite of new skills and techniques which complement their existing classroom skills. They will then be able to sense these all-important body language cues, and will know how to help and encourage learners thereby creating engaging learning experiences.

Of course, like every training modality that has come before - classroom, CBT, e-learning, correspondence courses, video, and so on - there is no guarantee that the online training session will automatically translate into learning. The key to effective online learning is held by two groups of individuals: the instructional designer, and the trainer or facilitator. Often, these two functions are carried out by the same person.

Effective learning needs a base of solid instructional design, but the role of the trainer is equally, if not more, important. A good classroom trainer will go far beyond what is required to simply teach the course material. They will bring real-life experience, humour and adaptability to a session, and create a comfortable engaging learning experience for the learners.

We must strive to bring that to the online classroom too. In the online classroom, it can be a challenge to capture that same level of connectedness that comes naturally in the classroom. However, we must remember that this exciting new medium is just that; it is a medium. In other words, the web conferencing software does not guarantee effective learning.

The software is simply the technology that provides the functions and facilities to allow a trainer or facilitator to use their skills and techniques to enable learners to learn in an effective manner.

"There has been a veritable explosion of live online learning over the last few years and that dramatic increase will continue as companies see the value of linking their staff to an expert in real time without having to ferry everyone to the same place.

Nigel Paine

HOW DOES THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM COMPARE TO OTHER INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS?

Let's now explore the instructional methods in common use today and compare them with the opportunities provided by the online classroom. Taking each one, starting with face-to-face learning, we'll explore their plus and minus points.

Face-to-face classroom

Traditional classrooms are characterised by the trainer and the learners being in the same room, at the same time, and all involved in the same activities together. The trainer uses common tools such as a projector, whiteboards and flip charts, to assist in delivering content. Additionally, the use of breakout (or syndicate) rooms facilitates additional discussion and collaboration.

Of course, the advantages of the face-to-face classroom are many. The most important of these is that everyone is in a recognisable learning environment. Everyone is used to classrooms from nursery school through to university and on to the workplace. Trainers don't need to explain to the learners how they should interact, behave and learn. Learners can ask questions spontaneously, a sense of community can be developed, and they often appreciate being able to leave their regular place of work—sometimes away from their workplace—and learn in a new setting.

The trainer also knows how to manage this environment, especially as he or she has been trained that way too. Eye contact and body language are the all-important indicators to the trainer and help to direct pace and communication.

This method of instruction, however, does have its drawbacks:

- Classrooms are expensive in terms of the cost of accommodation, the expense of getting learners to the location, and the opportunity costs of the learners being away from their job, usually for extensive periods of time.
- Classrooms can only accommodate a certain number of learners—for a large workforce, many events will need to be run to accommodate all of the people being trained.
- The trainer can often try to be the star of the show with various methods of presentation, jokes and demonstrations of superior knowledge and skill.
- The cost of facilities can also be prohibitive, so every classroom has an associated property, maintenance, equipment and insurance cost.

Self Study

Self-study, or self-paced training, enables learners to learn at their own pace through books, videos, web-based tutorials (e.g. e-learning) and podcasts.

Learning through self-study helps delegates learn at a time that is convenient to them, often out of working hours.

However, self-study learning does have some drawbacks:

- Learners can find it difficult to motivate themselves to complete programmes due to lack of specific deadlines, deliverables and encouragement.

- Unless the instructional materials used have been independently accredited, endorsed or otherwise benchmarked against a recognisable quality framework, or have been rated highly by a community of users, there is no guarantee they will be fit for purpose. It is up to the learner to discover this for themselves.

- It is a very passive medium and, although suited to some learning styles, it is best in short bursts; one to two hours is ideal.

Blended Learning

Blended learning refers to a combination, or blend, of a number of different learning methods. Blended learning is becoming increasingly common as both organisations and learning designers realise the benefit of using appropriate media within the learning mix.

An example of a blended learning programme would be a course that consists of a traditional classroom session followed up by, say, a self-study session then, later, with a live online session. Throughout the event, social networks can be utilised to encourage the learners to collaborate using networking sites/forums and live chats/messaging.

Note that 'blended learning' does not necessarily imply only 'formal' learning such as courses, whether classroom, online, or e-learning. It can incorporate informal learning too; so a blended learning programme could comprise elements such as assignments, social learning, reading, practising on the job, and so on.

It is becoming apparent to many learning practitioners that the blended formats are the best way of accommodating different learning styles and supporting learning objectives where there are different types of learning required; for example, problem-solving skills, interpersonal skills, and skill-based learning.

Consequently, today's trainers will often need to manage a combination of traditional, self-study, and online classroom training technologies.

Live Online Learning / Virtual Classroom Learning

Live online classroom instruction is led by a facilitator in real time over the internet. The online classroom is characterised by group interaction and collaboration amongst learners under the guidance of a facilitator or trainer. It is essentially focused on the learner, not the instructor.

Discussion and problem-solving can be managed using a variety of tools and methods, and people in different cultures and personal situations can be involved at the same time from a variety of locations.

Classroom-based trainers must learn many new skills and techniques in order to conduct a successful online classroom event. That said, much of the trainer's knowledge of delivery, learning styles, questioning techniques, conducting discussions, adult learning theory, learner management etc. is just as important and can be transferred to the virtual classroom environment.

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WEB CONFERENCING SYSTEMS

Let's now turn our attention to the software systems that provide the facilities for us to conduct live online learning events—we will refer to these as **web conferencing systems**.

Many vendors now offer highly capable products and services to enable the running of live online sessions. According to wikipedia, there are more than 40 (at time of writing) web conferencing systems that have the potential to be used for virtual classrooms, although some are considerably less feature-rich than others.
Mature, web conferencing systems in common use are:

- WebEx Training Centre
- Adobe Connect
- Microsoft Teams
- Citrix GotoMeeting
- Saba Classroom
- Zoom

Selecting a web conferencing system is something that should be considered carefully. Besides deciding whether to host the system or have it hosted by the vendor, a decision will need to be made about the tools and facilities needed. For example, certain systems do not have breakout rooms or whiteboards, and these should be on the required feature list for learning events.

Additionally, it is crucial to enrol the support of the IT department, as it will be an important player in determining the success of live online events. We strongly recommend that the IT department is informed as early as possible of any plans to implement virtual classrooms, and that the project scope is defined with a robust and achievable set of functional and non-functional requirements.

Assuming that you have a web conferencing system in place, let's now look at the types of events you can run on it. There are three main types of events that web conferencing systems can deliver:

- Web Meetings
- Webinars
- Learning Events

Let's take a look at each one to see what they are best used for and what their main differences are.

Web Meetings

Web meetings are the online version of the much-maligned, but frequently attended, face-to-face meeting. In web meetings, the software is used for small groups to meet online in order to collaborate, share documents and make decisions, irrespective of the participants' locations. Common uses for web meetings include trainer meetings, sales meetings, management meetings and so on, but the software has uses elsewhere; notably for system/software support, coaching, and mentoring.

Web conferencing systems allow organisations, who have staff and associates spread around the world, to have frequent live online, collaborative meetings at little to no cost.

Webinars

Webinars are events where you want to distribute information or raise awareness to a large audience.

A webinar is an online seminar, delivered by a presenter to an audience which may consist of many hundreds of people. At webinars, the presenter conducts a presentation and invites questions from the audience.

These events are primarily presenter-focused, inasmuch as the presenter is the main focus for the event, as opposed to an online classroom event which is learner-centred.

Webinars are very popular with organisations, allowing them to disseminate information to many employees at once. They are, however, quite passive for the learner, unless of course the presenter has the necessary skills to engage learners through frequent interaction.

Learning Events

Learning events are sessions with a small audience for providing performance-based outcomes. They are live, facilitator-led, *interactive* events which use the web conferencing system to provide the facilities for live online learning sessions. This type of event is explicitly learner-centred as opposed to the 'broadcast' approach of webinars.

The skills and techniques required to run an effective learning event are the primary focus of this eBook, but many of these skills are also applicable for running meetings and webinars.

It is important to make the distinction between live online learning events and 'webinars'. These two applications of web conferencing systems are completely different, as discussed above.

Live online learning gets tarnished with the 'boring' tag because people have been on a non-interactive webinar and assume all online events are run in the same way.

Features and Facilities

The following section provides an overview of the main features and facilities provided by typical web conferencing systems to enable you to deliver online events.

Audio

The audio facility enables the facilitator's voice to be heard and enables the facilitator and learners to talk to one another. One- or two-way audio is available in most web conferencing software. Audio is delivered either via the Internet—Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP)—or by using a telephone connection. For an event to be successful, the quality of your audio signal is vital, so pay careful attention to getting the quality right. This means using a fast reliable Internet connection, a quality headset or microphone, and ensuring your environment has minimal ambient noise.

Chat / Messaging

Text-based chat allows the learners and facilitator to communicate with one another through text messaging. Private messaging between learner and presenter enables learners to signal difficulties to the facilitator without disrupting the session.

Often the facilitator will use chat to ask learners to respond to questions. At first, learners are more likely to interact with text chat than by using a microphone, especially those who are shy. As a facilitator, you should constantly monitor the text chat panel for any learner questions, as this will provide you with valuable feedback.

Provided the facilitator gives permission, learners may also chat with other learners, either all at once or directly with another learner, as well as directly with the facilitator.

Emoticons/response icons

A useful way of obtaining feedback from your learners is to get them to use emoticons and response icons. Typical emoticons are Agree, Disagree, Raise Hand, Step-Away/Step-In, Speak Louder/Softer, Speed Up/Slow Down, Laughter and Applause.
Encouraging learners to use this form of feedback helps to make up for the 'loss of eye contact', so set an example by using them yourself on a frequent basis.

Polling

Another useful way of obtaining feedback is through the use of the polling feature (an online survey). One of the benefits of using the polling facility is that it allows for all learners to be active at the same time and provides real-time collated feedback from a large group of people. Polls are generally very easy to set up and they can help you get a quick check on the pulse of the class. For example, you could use a poll to get feedback on, say, the experience levels of your learners. Remember to share the results with the class to foster a sense of community.

Whiteboard

The whiteboard facility is the online equivalent of a classroom whiteboard. The whiteboard has annotation (mark-up) tools which allow learners to add text, draw pictures and highlight items using the marker pen tool. Whiteboards allow trainers and learners to post ideas, either by entering text or drawing, and it is an excellent way of getting learners working at the same time and engaged with the lesson. One good use of the whiteboard is to ask learners at the start of the lesson to paste their expectations for the session and revisit them at the end. Try to promote discussions by asking learners to elaborate on their whiteboard input—your questioning skills need to come into play here.

Web Browsing

This feature allows the facilitator and/or learners to bring to the class an Internet site or corporate intranet for everyone to view. The facilitator is able to demonstrate websites, but note that learners are just viewing the website that the facilitator has on their screen. A variation of this feature gives control of the web browser facility to each learner allowing them to explore different websites on their own. This valuable resource enables learners to take control of their own learning.

Application Sharing

This feature allows you to share software applications running on your computer with the learners. There are many variations of this feature, ranging from 'view only' on the learners' side to allowing learners to actually interact with and use the application. This feature is particularly advantageous when demonstrating software on a one-to-one basis – so it is very popular with IT support/help centres, as well as for use during lessons when you need to demonstrate software applications.

Document Share

Sharing documents is the most used facility in the online classroom. You display your slides by sharing your slide deck in the main viewer window to enable everyone to follow your presentation. You simply upload your slides and then click through as you would in the classroom by using your mouse, space bar or pointer. You can share other documents too: most systems can handle Microsoft Office documents, PDFs and various media files. Some systems will also allow learners to download documents that you have uploaded. This is a really useful facility for, say, course materials or supporting documentation that you wish to distribute to the learners.

Live Video

Webcams using one- or two-way video streaming are provided by nearly all the main web conferencing systems. Being able to see the facilitator live (as well as the other learners) is a real bonus as it aids engagement and allows the facilitator to see the learner's body language in real time. It does, however, have some drawbacks to consider. Live video is a very bandwidth-intensive feature which often limits its use to learners with fast broadband connections but, even then, it can slow the system down. Video is excellent for your session opening, and perhaps for the Q&A sessions, but it is advised not to use live video throughout the session, as it can be very distracting for the learners and take attention away from your slides.

Breakout Rooms

This feature allows the facilitator to create separate breakout rooms for group exercises, in much the same way that you would use syndicate rooms in your classroom sessions. In breakout rooms, learners have access to all of the major facilities of the main room, such as chat, audio, whiteboards and document share (show your presentation slides or share a document). Breakout rooms are ideal for training sessions in which groups can collaborate on specific content in their own rooms. The facilitator can visit each room to provide help and advice—or just listen—and then bring the groups back into the main room.

Managing breakout rooms can be a bit tricky at first, but after some practice you will be able to manage them effectively. This feature is a great way to achieve group collaboration amongst your learners and you'll find that you will probably use them much more frequently than you would in a classroom environment, with the added bonus that no-one has to walk down the corridor to the rooms—they can be set up almost instantaneously.

Recordings

Most web conferencing software provides the ability to record the session—either to the hosted server or, in some cases, your own computer. Provided the facilitator has recorded the session, this feature allows learners to play back a recording of the session for reflection or further study. This facility also enables learners, who perhaps have missed a session, to play it back at a later date. Another valuable use of the recordings is the ability for the facilitator to assess how the session went and what could have been improved. Some web conferencing systems allow the facilitator to edit the recording to eliminate parts that are not required.

That was a brief walk-through of the main features that can be found on web conferencing systems. Knowledge of these tools is important for virtual classroom facilitators, however the key skill is in determining how to select and apply the appropriate interactions to support the learning aims and objectives of each activity within the session. It affects the effectiveness and success of the session, and impacts greatly on the overall learner experience.
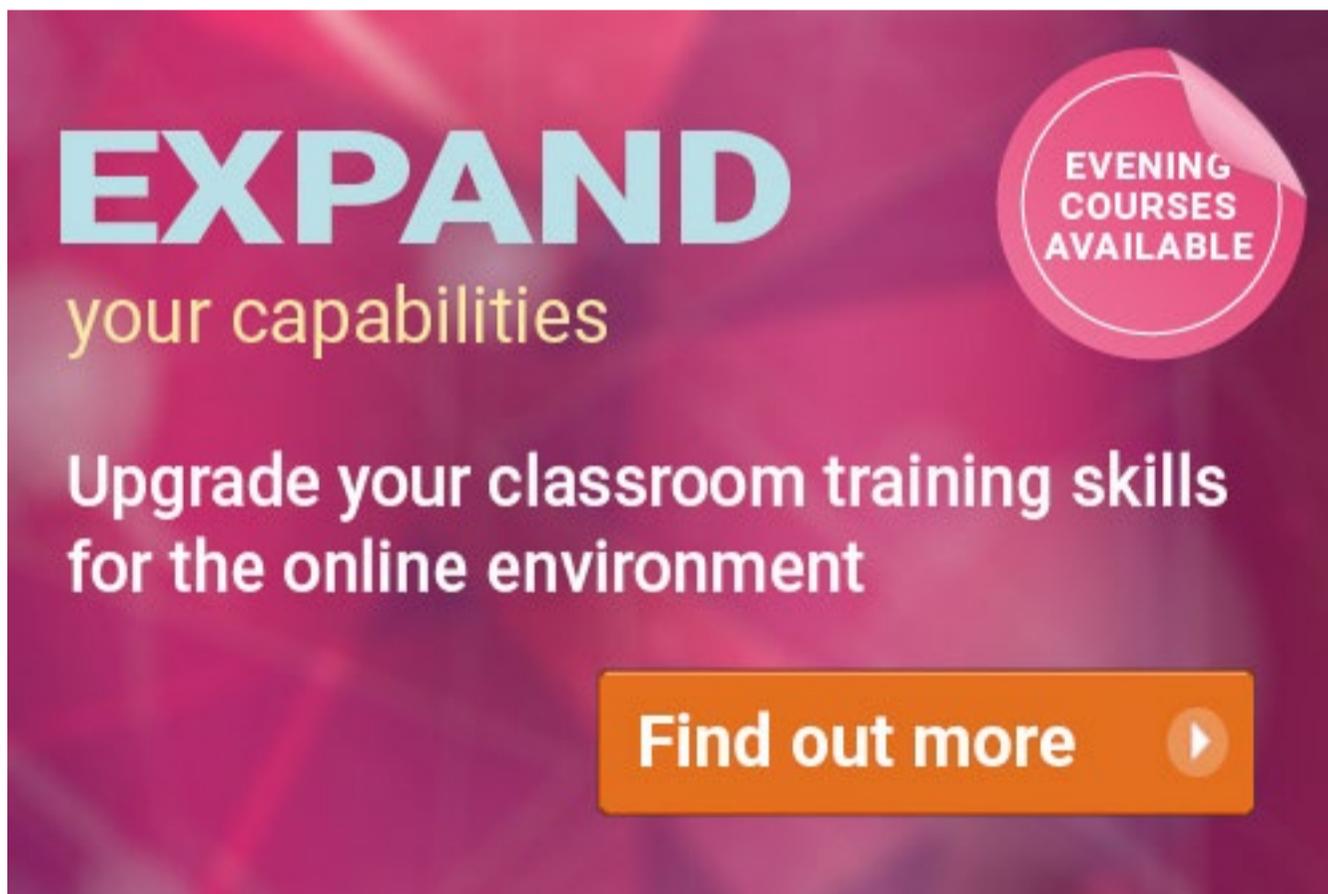
How could your organisation use web conferencing facilities?

Let's now think about how your organisation could use a web conferencing system to provide learning events for employees. Here are a few examples, but note these are just some of the available options.

Where face-to-face interaction is not critical.

For some training programmes it is vital that that the trainer is in the same room as the learners in order for the programme to be successful. Lab courses for hardware specialists, where learners physically build computer systems; training in self defence; wine-tasting for beginners - these are typical examples where web conferencing would not be a good choice. However, in each of these scenarios, some elements of the training may be possible online; so always keep your mind open to the use of online learning in combination with other delivery methods.

Where your audience is dispersed throughout a geographic area.

Where learners are not all located in the same place, the online classroom will minimise travel time and save on expenses for travel and accommodation. Therefore, any organisation with locations throughout the country—indeed throughout the world—would likely achieve cost savings by using web conferencing systems.

Where the topic is sufficiently critical that all employees must complete the training

Although self-study instruction may be appropriate for teaching the content of, say, compliance training, the learners may not be motivated to complete the work. Where a topic is mandatory, using an online event as a follow-up to self-study will provide the impetus for learners to complete the requirements.

Where you have a new product or service and you need to update your entire workforce

Here is a great example of how using the online environment would be invaluable in getting product/service information out to your workforce more quickly and providing some cost savings.

Where your workgroup needs to collaborate

If you have a geographically dispersed work group that needs to come to a consensus, say to agree the sign-off for a new product, or agree sales targets, you can utilise web conferencing to allow the group to collaborate and share ideas and documents.

Where a company official or content expert is available for a specific time.

Let's say that your managing director needs to address all staff on the company's results. By using web conferencing, all staff can see and 'attend' the presentation. This is also true for when, say, a leading expert in your field is available for a particular time on a specific day.

Keeping your options open

A typical response from some trainers when discussing live online training is that their content is not suitable for teaching in the online environment. With experience you will find that you can design a wide range of effective and interactive online events that you may have previously thought not possible.

However, not every topic for every course is best suited to online instruction. It is important to realise that you should not convert every available course to the online environment just because you can. That said, there are very few courses that could not be adapted in some way for the online environment.

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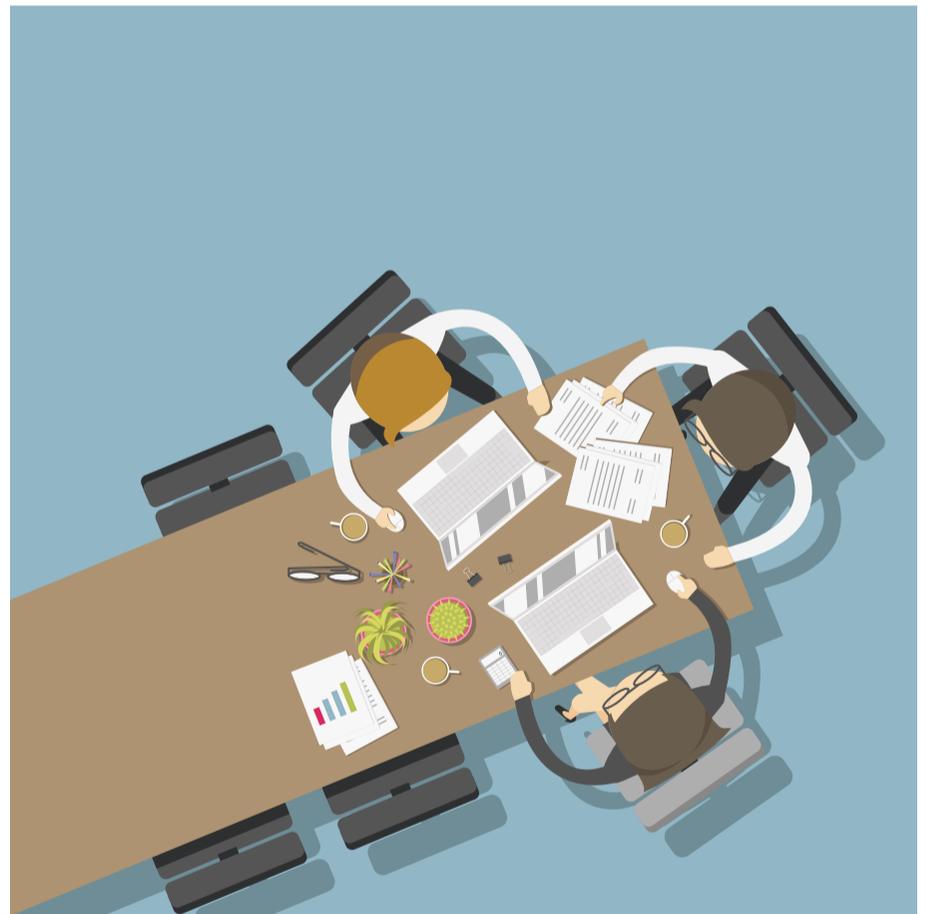
VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS IN THE LEARNING ECOSYSTEM

Now that we have examined web conferencing systems and identified the great opportunities for your organisation to use them for live online learning, let's look at the bigger picture. It is essential to consider how your virtual classrooms will work in the wider learning design and how this impacts the "learner experience".

In a previous chapter we identified the breadth of features that can be used in a virtual classroom to deliver an engaging learner experience. It is just as important to think about your learners' experience when they are OUTSIDE the virtual classroom.

In recent years, the use of web conferencing systems for webinars has moved into the mainstream. Webinars are the go-to methodology for marketers to engage their audience. Yet, why aren't we seeing live online learning being used as prominently? The benefits of migrating classroom training into a blended online experience are huge - *if the delivery infrastructure is "fit-for-purpose".*

However, learning providers are challenged to achieve that "fit-for-purpose" capability due to the disparate nature of the systems used to handle digital learning, social interactions, web conferencing and in-person training.
Live online learning, powered by virtual classrooms, should be considered not so much as a standalone tool but as a learning ecosystem of systems integration, process automation and user interfaces that overcome the practical real world obstacles.

A "learning ecosystem" brings disparate systems and content together into one single learning environment. An effective learning ecosystem facilitates all learning activities through a single system that can combine in-house and external learning resources. Through an integrated design, the learning ecosystem can embed your web conferencing activities alongside your other learning activities – 'wrapping' digital content, on-the-job assignments, tests, social interactions and other related resources around your virtual classrooms.

So, as well as planning how to best use your virtual classrooms, you should also consider how to manage your virtual classrooms within your wider learning environment. Your plans should focus on two key areas: *Learner Experience* and *Learning Design.*

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Learner Experience

Ideally, reminder emails with access links should go out automatically and frequently before each session so that learners can fast-track into the classroom with no obstacles. Learning ecosystems are providing ongoing continuous learning environments where admins can adapt and extend learning programmes. By linking all activities, including the VILT classes, learners can see what they are doing and why. Admins can be assured that they get the maximum use from support materials by making them clearly visible and accessible.

All your best efforts will be wasted if you prepare a fantastic virtual classroom session, but your learners don't understand enough about:

- when is it running?
- how do they join it?
- what are the pre-requisites for attending?
- where do they find pre-reading to prepare for it?
- are there any pre-class activities to complete?
- how does the class relate to other learning activities if it is part of a wider design?
- what support is available to them outside of the class, and how can they ask questions or share comments?
- where do they find out more information after the class?
- how do they access post-class resources?
- do they need to complete post-class activities?
- can they view a recording of the class and, if so, how?

and many more.

If you cannot provide this information in an intuitive way that can be easily accessed then you will be exposed to the risk of your learners disengaging from the process.

A learning ecosystem that really focuses on ***getting the learner experience right***, by seamlessly connecting your virtual classroom sessions with all other learning activities, will inform and motivate your learners to participate resulting in higher levels of engagement.

Learner Design

The great potential of virtual classrooms is fully realised when using them as a blended learning solution. Research tells us that blending interactive, instructor-led learning with self-paced learning is more effective than delivering instructor-led training alone.

A different approach is needed, where classroom training designs can be re-purposed for online delivery that includes pre-class and post-class activities.

Since virtual classrooms make it easier to fit short classes into your learners' busy schedules, a good design can spread out several virtual classroom sessions over a longer period. Each session focused on a specific topic, with the time between the sessions allowing for self-paced learning activities, reflection and practical application.

Consider the "flipped classroom" approach, highly effective in the academic field in America, where the interactive classroom time is focused on doing, practising and asking, while the consumption of theory and information is carried out in the learner's own time. Virtual classrooms can be instrumental within a learning ecosystem to facilitate modern learning designs such as microlearning, spaced learning, online coaching and mentoring, and continuous learning support.

Running virtual classrooms at scale - overcoming the challenges

The live online learning market is relatively young and immature, as organisations see use cases covering remote team meetings, informal one-off collaborative support, autonomous training sessions and mass broadcast webinars.

However, the market is maturing rapidly as organisations see the benefit of welding online learning and virtual classrooms for true comprehensive blended learning solutions that can deliver highly effective and interactive learning at scale.

Successful learning organisations are now running live online training with multiple virtual classroom sessions, chunking courses, tackling different topics, chapters or lessons within a single intervention.
Integrating your virtual classroom in a learning ecosystem will help you to tackle the biggest challenges to running "live" online events at scale:

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Significant administration time and cost savings

Challenge: Managing web conferencing software alongside other learning technologies and business systems, including email. Disparate systems result in administrative overload, vulnerability to errors, and risk of confusing learners and wasting their time - all of which impact productivity and cost, while disengaging learners.

A learning ecosystem saves you having to manage several disparate systems as it fully integrates, and automates, your web conferencing activities with your user management and learning management processes. Information and activities from different sources can all be brought together into one place making it very easy for you to deploy, and for learners to participate.

Increased event attendance and engagement

Challenge: Learners need to access session URLs, to remember usernames and passwords, to save session times in calendars, to understand what they need to join the session and how they join it.

A learning ecosystem fully automates your virtual classroom processes ensuring that all barriers to joining sessions are removed, leading to higher attendances. Pressure on your facilitators, who would usually need to assist learners to overcome those barriers, is removed. As a result, your facilitators are more focused on the event without any distractions.

Ideally, reminder emails with access links should go out automatically and frequently before each session so that learners can fast-track into the classroom with no obstacles. Admins can be assured that they get the maximum use from support materials by making them clearly visible and accessible

Better "Learner Experience" for better results

Challenge: To use your virtual classrooms within modern learning designs, you will need to manage pre and post-session activities, support your learners if things change (which they will!), and provide related resources such as recordings of the sessions.

A learning ecosystem connects all of your information and activities together in one intuitive user interface, providing a better understanding of the learning structure and alerting to changes - removing potential for confusion and frustration. You can easily wrap complimentary learning activities around the "live" online events to enrich the learner experience, ensuring that learners get the most out of the events and can extend their learning beyond them.

This support is especially valuable to you in managing your recordings of virtual classroom sessions. These recordings can be fantastic learning assets that can be reused by your learners, and you can also take advantage of them to distribute to other learners who could not attend. This becomes a highly cost-effective way of creating online learning content that does not require long development lead times and specialist technical knowledge.

However, to get the most from the recording, it is important to make it easily accessible to your learners. Positioning the recording in the same learning ecosystem as the virtual class itself, and linking it to other related learning activities that support the virtual class, ensures that learners know where it is, what it relates to, and how they can access it.

Better control through performance metrics

Challenge: You will want to know what your learners are doing and how they are performing. Tracking learner activity is limited in web conferencing systems. Wider metrics such as interactions with recordings and related digital resources, completions of assignments, and test scores require significant effort to extract and consolidate from a variety of different sources.

A learning ecosystem tracks and captures activity from all systems and content connected within it, providing a full picture of engagement and performance levels, and indicating areas for development or improvement.
This will enable you to interrogate the data to see a record of your learner accessing pre-class content, attendance records for your virtual class, and completion of post-class activities - all in one dashboard report. Low attendance of virtual classes can be correlated against a learner's poor performance in knowledge tests or assignments, and non-conformance with your learning instructions can be identified and resolved.

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There are many benefits from supporting virtual classrooms in a learning ecosystem, including:

- Reduction in per-learner costs
- Increase in reach
- Improvement in learner engagement
- Reduction in management and administration costs
- Improvement in stakeholder engagements
- Reduction in time-to-deploy
- Reduction in time-to-competence
- Reduction in time-to-value

The following section provides a helpful summary and guide to achieving success with your virtual classrooms.
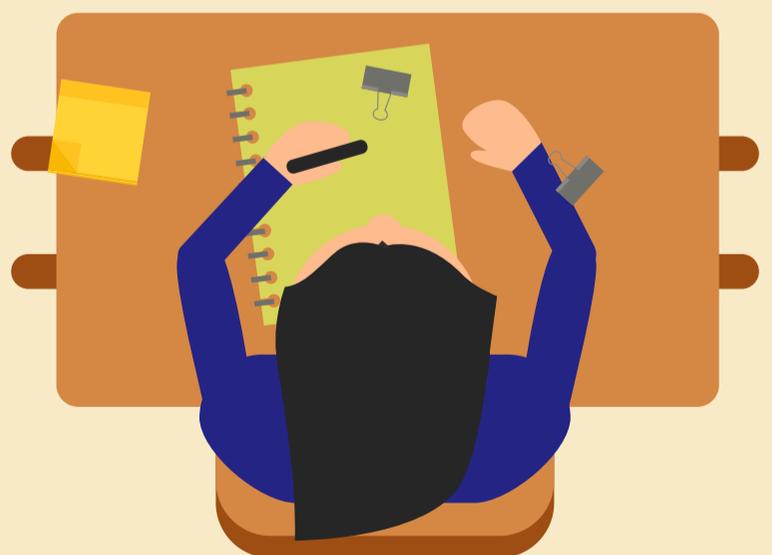
7 ESSENTIAL STEPS TO SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS

Select the best web conferencing software to fit your needs

1 Consider the number of interactive tools built into the software. Weigh that up against the ease to install and deploy. Will a cloud-based solution be preferable over an on-premise installation?

Equip your facilitators with the skills and knowledge to use the web conferencing software effectively

2 This falls into two areas - user of software and best practices for engaging learners online. Technical training from the software vendor should provide the former, and the LPI has designed industry leading blended learning programmes to address the latter.

Design your online learning interventions for the virtual classroom

3 This is more than a case of copying the approach used in the physical classroom. Careful consideration should be given to the repurposing of your classroom course so that a more effective redesign can be achieved. A typical migration of a classroom course will involve segmenting the interactive elements of the course for the virtual classroom, while on-demand, asynchronous activities such as reading notes, and completing exercises can be delivered to your learners in a more effective manner using better learning technologies.

Wrap your virtual classrooms in a supportive learning ecosystem

4 Motivate your learners to participate by using a learning ecosystem to support all aspects of your virtual class. Clearly communicate the role of each virtual class within the wider scope of your learning intervention. Manage the expectations of your participants by putting all related activities into a single learning design, defining pre-class and post-class activities so that all learners arrive into your classes prepared and engaged. A good ecosystem should make it easy for you to manage the full learning experience, and it should automate all learning processes to remove the risk of human error and increase your operational efficiency.

Think about the full blend

5 Multiple, mixed modes of learning are generally accepted as a better way to learn. Consider mobile access and reaching remote learners. Utilise social learning tools to provide ongoing support to your learners.

Measure the progress and performance of your learners

6 Traditional online learning courses were designed as e-learning courses which were wholly self-contained materials and included tests to confirm understanding or competence.
Next generation tools and modern learning practices are enabling designers to break away from the fixed mould of e-learning courses and apply explicit tests, surveys or exams directly in the workflow.

Analyse and continuously improve your delivery

7 Track activities at the granular level, monitoring all interactions within the learning ecosystem. Gain an understanding of what content is most appreciated and what is not hitting the spot. Use data analytics to make better decisions about the development of your solutions.
Next generation tools and modern learning practices are enabling designers to break away from the fixed mould of e-learning courses and apply explicit tests, surveys or exams directly in the workflow.

This '7 Steps' framework is the property of v-learning Solutions and may not be re-used or modified without express permission

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The Complete Guide to the Virtual Classroom

V LEARNING SOLUTIONS

THERE IS ANOTHER WAY

Revolutionise your training business by replacing face-to-face sessions with live online learning.

- Train more people for less, creating measurable business impact
- Eliminate expensive travel and catering costs
- Cut back on physical course material production
- Reduce time spent out of the office for trainers and trainees
- Provide a secure environment for future collaboration and sharing

The Learning and Performance Institute offers a globally-recognised certificate that gives you the knowledge and skills to run your own virtual classrooms

Find out more ▶

V LEARNING SOLUTIONS

Do what you do best, and we'll take care of the rest!

You can now easily realise the full potential of Live Online Learning.

As a great online learning facilitator, you have maximum impact when you're fully engaging learners in the virtual class or webinar, so why compromise because of distractions and administrative overload.

The vLearning Platform (vLP) is a modern online learning ecosystem that ensures you deliver the best experience to learners. A true modern blend.

Easily organise digital resources including video, social discussions, quizzes and assignments around your live online events - so your learners know where everything is and how it relates.

Engage with them before and after your live online events, and switch to a continuous learning model.

The vLP streamlines and fully automates all the steps to enable running live online learning at scale.

No more managing multiple systems; the webinar application, email for notifications, multiple locations for content. Sit back and watch your learners fast-track into your live online sessions. No more support calls distracting you from managing the class, just you focussing on what you do best.

For a personal demonstration please contact:

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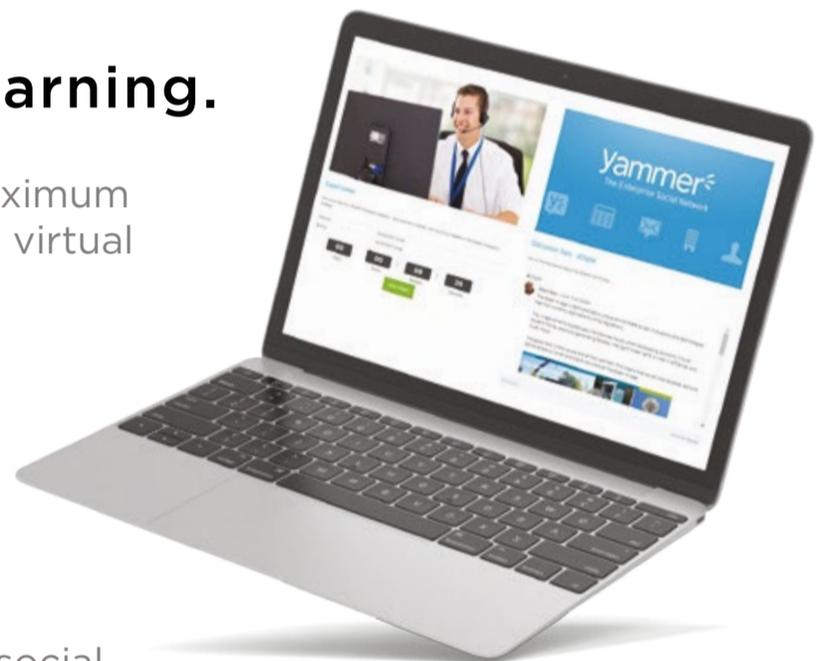
> " I have not seen anything like this before, it is ideal for managing blended, online and virtual classroom learning.
>
> Colin Steed: Ex-CEO,
> The Learning & Performance
> Institute (LPI)

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