
The Experiences of a Trainer Delivering Virtual Classroom Learning to Distributed Students

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1 Where, How And Why Virtual Classroom Delivery Began

Mid-March 2020: I'm on the way into the office to deliver the second day of a four-day classroom course; the coronavirus pandemic is upon us. On the previous evening, I read that the UK government has advised people to work from home if possible, but there's no talk of a formal lockdown yet.

As I approach the Tube station, I get an email from one of my students who has decided to follow government advice and not travel into London. He is prepared to self-study from his course materials if necessary, but asks me *"is there any way I can join in using either Webex or Skype?"*

Its 8:10 am, I'm 20 minutes away from the office, and the course starts at 9:00.

2 Welcome To The New World – Virtual Training Delivery!

I have no time to build the ideal remote learning package with custom-built polling and quiz features to keep students engaged that I've used in the past. In fact, we don't have a dedicated remote learning platform with these kinds of functions or virtual training rooms to allow group exercises/discussions to take place.

What I have got are the PowerPoint slides and the knowledge that my remote student has a copy of the same physical course materials as my other students. I have an active Skype account which will allow me to screen share, plus my personal experience as a trainer.

So, I ask myself *"Is it doable?"* and after a few minutes of reflection, I decide: *"let's find out!"*.

The problems I had to overcome (in my mind) were primarily:

1. Maintaining student engagement and getting feedback from students that I can't see (watching body language is essential when classroom teaching)
2. Managing the pacing of the course to include additional breaks (I know staring at a computer screen for extended periods of time is extremely tiring)
3. Replicating my personal teaching style (I'm a big whiteboard fan, and I like to draw out examples and show how to solve problems in real-time)
4. Facilitating set-exercises, especially group exercises when not everyone is in the same room
5. Hoping the technology would hold up (especially network bandwidth).

2.1 How did it go?

With some creative thinking and the willingness of my students (both remote and in the classroom) to participate and be flexible, we found a way to make the virtual learning work.

I was surprised how many of these problems I was able to overcome, by exploiting screen sharing facilities and by encouraging the participants to ask questions (this is where an effective audio connection is essential).

An important change was that the pace of delivery had to now accommodate a more brokered style of discussion as group conversations are challenging to manage with remote participants. This is because you can't see your fellow participants' body language, it's easy to talk over each other unintentionally, and this is exacerbated when some participants are in the same room, and others are not.

The second and third day of the course were delivered using this joint virtual and face-to-face format successfully, but rumours of a lockdown were increasing at this stage; so, we agreed to run the last day of the course as an entirely virtual delivery.

In some respects, this was more effective as we were all in the same situation re; body language and non-verbal cues. We got through the course successfully, and all the participants were satisfied that the delivery had gone well, which was a positive result.

2.2 What happened next?

It is now May 2020, and to date, I have delivered seven virtual courses successfully. Some things have changed: we're using GoToMeeting rather than Skype, we're using 100% digital course materials which we distribute to participants in advance, and we're learning all the time on ways to make the training experience as positive for the participants as possible.

In respect of my initial concerns, here's what I have learned so far (this includes what the participants have fed back to me in discussions at the end of each course):

2.3 Maintaining student engagement and getting feedback

Not being able to see the students as you are presenting to makes delivery harder, as those visual and non-verbal cues that we look for (often using our peripheral senses) are not available. Network bandwidth limitations make webcam sharing impractical. When it is available, it tends to be more of a distraction both for trainer/facilitator and the students - how many times have you ended looking at what's going on in the background of your fellow participants during a video conference?

I have found that real-time audio is the most critical tool to maintain engagement. By asking questions and waiting for answers (sometimes using silence is a powerful tool), we can get feedback and keep students engaged.

2.4 Managing the pacing of the course to include additional breaks

The pacing of the course has to change. I use shorter, but more frequent breaks to allow participants a chance to get away from the screen. Allowing participants to interrupt the flow of delivery helps with feedback and engagement but consumes time.

As such, it is important to anticipate that we won't necessarily cover the same amount of material in a given time frame as we would achieve following a standard classroom timetable. Plus, we have to take into consideration that our participants are learning from home and are often juggling other things, and so we need to be flexible.

So far the causes for additional "ad hoc" breaks have included: responding to the doorbell (unexpected delivery – forgot about that swipe to buy moment); the next-door neighbour mowing the lawn outside the window (nice gesture – but could you please do it tomorrow); anything to do with children (4-year-old didn't understand why his 8-year-old sister didn't want to play with him anymore) and misbehaving pets.

2.5 Replicating my personal teaching style

This actually proved to be a 'non-problem'. Once I got hold of a digitising tablet and stylus, I found I was able to create 'virtual whiteboards' to write on and respond to questions, ad-lib practical examples, and generally mark-up whatever I can share on a screen in order to get the message across.

One of the useful features of the tools that are available in the virtual environment is that students are able to screen-grab anything from lectures and discussion without having to make extensive handwritten notes.

2.6 Facilitating set-exercises, especially group exercises

This is the biggest challenge, and to be honest, they can't always be fully replicated in the virtual learning environment; especially for collaborative tasks, as the group dynamic is significantly different from the classroom.

This is the area where lateral thinking can help, and exercises need to be creatively refactored. In some situations, I have found that getting participants to share their screens with the class (but only voluntarily) can be used to replicate some aspects of group working exercises.

2.7 Hoping the technology would hold up

The delivery platform we've been using has proven to be robust, but strong network connectivity and adequate bandwidth are essential. The two-way audio conversations are a necessary aspect of the course. Even if we've got this sorted out at our end, there can always be potential problems at the other participant's end. As a result, we always provide a dial-in option for students whose VOIP is being problematic.

3 Other Things That I Have Learned

3.1 People are amazing

Every participant has shown a willingness to adapt, to bear with the niggles when the technology (or to be honest - usually the operator) hasn't gone as smoothly as I'd like. They've shown great humour and have generally been supportive and flexible as we've all learned a new way of working together at such a stressful and uncertain time.

3.2 The training room doesn't look like it used to

It's weird sitting at my dining table with a set of monitors, headset and all the other paraphernalia (I'm used to training standing up – with a great big whiteboard and screen behind me). It's not at all corporate and coffee breaks are a bit different (there's a whole fridge to raid, plus cakes). The commute is a lot shorter, and the dress code is "flexible".

3.3 Our house is a lot quieter, for longer periods

My wife has developed a "silent routine" which is in operation between 8:45 and 17:00 every day when the dining room is "on-air". We live in a bungalow, so there's nowhere to go except the bedroom, kitchen (that's why there are all these cakes) and the garden. The radio, TV and landline phone are switched off, so I have got to acknowledge the support I get from her – thanks, Jo.

It's a similar challenge for all those participants who have to find a space in which they can focus and concentrate. On reflection, I think I should say thanks to all their partners, families and co-habitants who've had to creep around the home while I'm blathering on about whatever it is I blather on about.

4 Finally

Most participants have said that if they had a choice, their preference would be for classroom learning; but that the virtual classes have been an effective and positive experience. This I totally understand, face-to-face will always be my preferred way of communicating and teaching. However, the margin of difference between face-to-face and virtual teaching is now much smaller than I'd have expected. I am learning almost as much as my students as we go through this experience.

I have been very pleasantly surprised about what we can now do with collaborative tools and look forward to evolving my teaching style and techniques. Now, let's see what next week has to offer.