

Is Anything Being Learned Virtually?

BY CRAIG MINDRUM

Virtual learning has its pros and cons, but with proper design and a focus on relationship building, learning leaders can capitalize on the benefits and minimize the risks.



Virtual technologies are giving organizations and their learning executives the ability to design and deliver a new generation of learning experiences. Companies can bring together more people easier and cheaper than ever before in real-time communities that can stretch around the world in an instant. But at what cost to an organization's culture and to employees' engagement and sense of belonging? As people grow accustomed to virtual experiences, and as virtual collaboration platforms steadily become the norm, are our organizational communities being enriched in a larger sense? Or, as the title of a book from Sherry Turkle suggests, are we increasingly becoming "alone together"? Is there any learning going on in a virtual environment, or is it just a big lie we've all agreed to believe?

There are benefits and unintended consequences of virtual learning, and overuse of these technologies is not without risk. A communications diet restricted only to virtual experiences can result in a strange kind of famine in terms of what employees need to nurture their relationships with each other and with the organization that pays their salaries. In a 2009 interview on the PBS television show "Frontline," Turkle said virtual communications can provide the "illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship." The corporate equivalent of that is that virtual learning may afford the "illusion of collaboration without the demands of collegiality."

At the same time, the benefits of virtual learning and collaboration — the ability to engage people in a rich learning environment and to stimulate additional conversations and experiences — far

IN PRACTICE VIRTUAL LEARNING FOR SENIOR EXECUTIVES

Virtual learning experiences involving social media are often discussed because of their appeal for younger audiences, but these experiences aren't just for millennials anymore.

In December 2010, customer-owned health insurer Health Care Service Corp. (HCSC), which operates Blue Cross and Blue Shield plans in Illinois, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Texas, piloted a learning experience called the Executive Cohort Program.

The virtual session brought senior-level thought leaders from around the company together to focus on timely business topics such as the effects of health care reform law. Because the participants are busy executives, the synchronous portion of the program is only one hour a week for three weeks. HCSC found the associated technologies and social media opportunities that are part of the program helped to extend commitment and enrich the participants' experience.

The organization supplemented the original in-person virtual event in several ways. First, each participant received a digital collection of related research recommended as pre-reading. HCSC also created a private, secure social network group where participants could have asynchronous discussions about thought-provoking questions related to the business topic. That chat was monitored and directed by facilitators as well as the primary executive thought leader driving the course.

Participants logged on to the discussion board at all hours of the day and night to see what their colleagues were saying and

to add to the dialogue. This level of access is one of the benefits of social media technologies: One can't accomplish everything during a relatively short, live telepresence activity; social media opportunities naturally extend and enrich the original experience while simultaneously motivating participants to look forward to the next online session. Based on the pilot's success, the program will launch fully this year.

The Executive Cohort Program produced several lessons. First, designers and participants can become especially excited about the technologies and applications, but they should always remind themselves that the course is driven by the learners' needs and the organization's goals, and not by technological capabilities.

Second, learning designers and the participants themselves should share their thoughts to establish guidelines about what kinds of virtual interactions are meaningful but still professional. Even in an internal chat room protected by a firewall, employees are still representing the company and its brand to each other. Words matter, and in an electronic environment, they last forever. The interaction is virtual, but its effect is as real as an in-person communication. That's an important insight for everyone to remember. [CLO](#)

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outweigh the risks, if virtual learning can be planned and designed effectively.

Beyond the One-Room Schoolhouse

One of the hallmarks of the virtual learning environment is that it competes with e-mail, instant messaging and social media. Not everyone sees this interruptive environment as a solely negative force, however. Eric Davidove, senior director of the Learning and Development Center of Expertise at Yahoo, likens the traditional corporate learning environment — in its simpler, classroom-based mode — to an old-fashioned schoolroom where students learn the same thing at the same time and are not allowed to speak to each other during class.

Neither the monolithic learning experience nor the constant interruptions is necessarily ideal from the learner's perspective. However, given the choice, Davidove said he would choose the latter "because those so-called interruptions are actually helping me learn," he said. "For example, in a virtual environment, I can ask other students a question, or debate one of

the main points presented by the instructor, all without halting the presentation itself. In the schoolhouse paradigm, I can't do that because it's disruptive."

Further, those opportunities aren't necessarily interfering with the learning experience. "The false presumption the classroom gives teachers is that they actually have the full attention of engaged learners," Davidove said. "Just because people are looking at you as you lecture doesn't mean they're not thinking about tonight's dinner or last night's ball game."

The virtual environment actually gives instructors more ways to engage learners and then monitor that engagement. "In a physical classroom, it's difficult to gauge who's involved and who's not," he said. "But in a virtual environment, I can ask people to participate in a survey or poll, or I can have them microblog their thoughts, monitor a tweet stream or have side discussions while I'm leading a session. They're not giving me 100 percent of their attention, but they probably weren't doing so anyway. These technologies let me engage learners in a richer way in the material and experience — which is what we ultimately want anyway."

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Meeting Isn't Always Learning

In the virtual environment, bringing people together is now so easy that one can overlook that the experience still must be designed. The need for specialized virtual learning design skills is critical, according to Christina Griffin, a learning architect at Accenture. “If companies blur the distinction between a meeting and training, they are likely to fall back on the ‘put up a presentation and talk to it’ kind of pedagogy,” she said. “Without good design, the focus of the learning experience can be lost; organizations should not be surprised when they then lose participants’ attention.”

Griffin said there are several important elements of solid virtual learning design. First, train instructors in the nuances and needs of virtual instruction. “Instructors might be fantastic in front of a live audience, but they may not understand the facilitation techniques needed to bring a virtual classroom to life. Asking if there are any questions is not enough. In a virtual environment, you have to ask specific questions about specific content, solicit opinions and follow up to engage participants in discussion and reflection. This works best through open microphones, but directed-chat exercises, polling, whiteboarding and breakouts can be effective too.”

Second, effective interface design is important to direct learners’ attention and to prevent cognitive overload. “Think about the screen your learners will have open during the learning event, and concentrate just on what’s suited, moment by moment, to the experience at hand,” Griffin said. “That might involve turning off the chat function temporarily to focus your people in the right direction. Or, if you are using webcams, turn those off occasionally to focus on a particular online activity.”

Third, the facilitator should make it clear that people may be called on by name for commentary and opinion to enhance the learning experience.

Open up the microphones and direct a question to a participant or two. There may be “gotcha” moments if people aren’t paying attention, but that’s not the point. It’s a way to make sure participants are invested in what’s going on. They become active contributors, not passive receivers.

Finally, remember that a virtual event should be part of a greater blended learning experience. This spring, Griffin and her team are releasing a 40-hour virtual course that will replace one week of her company’s traditional three-week, in-person new-hire orientation. The course combines knowledge- and skill-based events, pacing the week so that a two-hour online session, for example, might be followed by a small group session at the participant’s local office. It is helpful for online participants to connect with each other visually through webcams, and then instructors have the ability to see learners and interact with them directly.

“One key to a good virtual experience is variety,” Griffin said. “This is important not only to help with learning retention, but to more faithfully mimic the work environment our people are in every day. Some of the offline events we include ask people to network globally to accomplish a task — something they will do all the time as employees. Or they might have to adjust their work schedule to get something done with part of their team located in a different time zone — again, something they’ll encounter on the job. It immediately puts them into situations where they have to innovate as team members, while working with a culturally diverse group.”

Davidove said this kind of variety can channel potentially disruptive technologies toward the goals of the learning event and its sponsoring organization. “Distractions can be harnessed as part of the virtual learning design to keep participants occupied so they don’t check out on you,” he explained.

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Focus on Relationships, Not Technology

Hand in hand with good virtual learning design goes the subtler, harder work of leadership and cultural development needed to set the ground rules and to ensure that relationships are created and nurtured as organizations rely more on virtual interactions.

“People should take precedence over technology,” said Mary Jo Burfeind, vice president of human resources for Health Care Service Corp. “We need to give our attention to human beings first, or else we risk losing the ability to interact effectively with others.”

Sherry Turkle also made this point, based on the research she conducted that led to her book *Alone Together*. Relationships are partly about risking ourselves to each other, and texting and other virtual communications can be used to shield ourselves from that risk.

“I don’t have to get involved,” she said in the aforementioned 2009 PBS interview. “It’s more efficient.” Relationships can be demanding and complicated because they require negotiation. It’s risky if people use technology “to skip and to cut corners and to not have to do some of these very hard things,” she said. Utilizing virtual learning in the name of efficiency, organizations can risk weakening the relationships that are the basis for their culture and distinctive human capabilities.

Leaders need to model relevant behaviors to establish strong relationships in increasingly virtual organizations. Honor people by paying attention to them; ignore a text message when it comes in on the phone if involved in a face-to-face conversation; take a few moments of a virtual interaction to engage in some personal information sharing. Beyond setting ground rules, leaders have a critical role to play in establishing and modeling which virtual behaviors are acceptable and which are not.

Further, establishing relationships needs to be one

of the purposes for a virtual learning experience. It’s not just about disseminating information. This is part of the proper use of interactive technologies in virtual learning. “The idea of social presence is critical in designing an effective virtual experience — making sure you’re not just talking at your participants but that you’re building up a community and making participants realize they are part of something,” Griffin said. “We want participants to share their knowledge with others to make their experience, and everyone else’s experience, better. You may learn something from other people that you didn’t know. And, in that process, we can strengthen the entire organization and culture.”

In the end, virtual environments are not the only ones where educators have avoided some hard truths about whether they are designing optimal learning experiences or not. Does effective learning really take place in a large university lecture hall where a teacher talks uninterrupted at hundreds of students? It’s debatable.

On the other hand, there are important truths about learning that virtual technologies can actually encourage. For example, learning is heavily dependent on interaction; therefore, properly designed and applied social media technologies can enable greater networking and the multiplication of learning’s benefits.

Missteps will be made as learning professionals learn to cope with and integrate new technologies into virtual environments. Whether such technologies can become an effective tool or simply more sophisticated distractions is, for now, an open question. In that regard, we’re all still learning. [CLO](#)

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