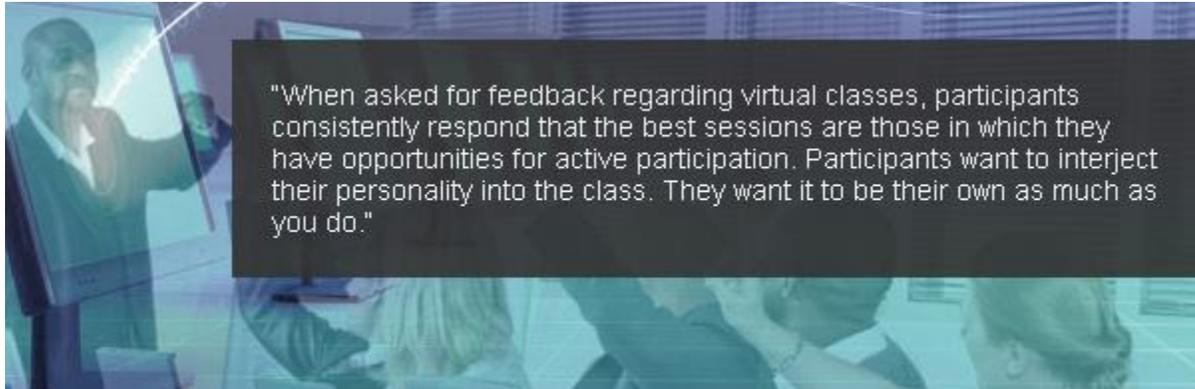# Tailoring Virtual Training Delivery for Adult Learners (Mar 11)

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"When asked for feedback regarding virtual classes, participants consistently respond that the best sessions are those in which they have opportunities for active participation. Participants want to interject their personality into the class. They want it to be their own as much as you do."

There are differences between teaching a virtual class, as you might through a Webinar, and a face-to-face class. Some of the differences are obvious, and some are not. In this article, I offer my summary of the main things that an instructor should keep in mind when moving from delivering training face-to-face to delivering training virtually.

While I have in mind instructors who are new to delivery in the virtual environment, others may also find these points useful; for example, if you are coaching a new virtual instructor, this article could provide a kind of checklist to assist in the process. In particular, I provide a set of adjustments to instructor practice that tailors delivery to adults in the virtual environment. This set of adjustments is the not-so-obvious part of the change in delivery. But first, I'd like to list a few of the differences that usually trouble new virtual instructors, and some things that an instructor can do about them.

The obvious differences and how to deal with them

First, you will not meet the virtual participants face to face. This will seem awkward at first. However, you may share your personality and possibly even your picture, thus adding personality to each class.

Next, remember that teaching a class virtually offers a number of benefits not found in the classroom environment. The virtual environment allows participants to apply their knowledge in real time on the job. As a result, they are able to meet and develop relationships with customers and coworkers. You should leverage this opportunity and incorporate discussion of the participants' experiences on the job during your virtual training session. In the next part of this article, I show you how to successfully take advantage of participants' real-time experiences during virtual training sessions.

Remember that another benefit of training virtually is reduced commutes for participants. Participants appreciate this, and they may appreciate the opportunity to even take part in training from home. Managers appreciate that virtual training is less cost-prohibitive and takes employees away from work for less time.

Finally, one marked difference between the classroom setting and virtual training sessions is seen in time management. There are often lessons that seem to take longer than allotted on the lesson plan, and some that take less time. This is true in both the virtual and classroom environments. Particularly during virtual training sessions, topics often take longer than anticipated. Just think about the first time you had to help someone on the job in a different city find something on the intranet. Clear explanations are vital,

and they take time! Be aware of your time. In your limited session time, you must complete the lesson, answer questions, address issues and concerns from participants and work with participants who join the virtual training session late. Be flexible, and stay positive. Your flexibility and positive attitude are your best tools!

Adult learning principles in the virtual classroom

The virtual training environment allows for the use of a number of adult learning principles. I recommend applying seven adult learning principles as the framework when delivering instruction in the virtual classroom.

Experience counts

Adults bring considerable experience with them. Therefore, they wish to speak, participate, and contribute to the proceedings. They dislike long lectures and one-way communication.

Your online sessions should be as interactive as possible. Ask questions, and value the participants' experiences, including what they see and encounter in their offices each day. The experiences they share may be based on a previous job or may be based on perceived differences between our organization and a previous employer. Anything your participants share adds value to the session. This helps to engage other participants and to develop a team environment. Often these experiences serve as a way to begin a deeper discussion of your objectives.

Another difference between the classroom and virtual training is the way we call on participants. Best practice for virtual training includes calling on participants directly, and mixing it up by varying who you call on. Participants may not raise their hands using the tools available to them. Calling on participants directly will keep them on their toes. If participants believe they may be the next to be called on, they are more likely to remain engaged. They do not know whom you will call on next, so they continue to pay attention.

You can leverage your tone of voice to keep your audience engaged as well. As in the classroom, no participant wants to listen to a monotone voice drone on at length. Instead, they respond to a positive and upbeat delivery and voice. But avoid the trap of being overly animated. Instead be your best positive, upbeat self. By making the call engaging for participants, it will also be engaging for you.

Respect the need for self-esteem

Adults have something to lose. They have a strong need to maintain their self-esteem. Therefore, listen to them, and set the course for their success.

A great way to ensure *your* success when applying this principle is to *practice listening*! Practice makes perfect, right? Adults need respect. By focusing on your participants and listening to them, you show them respect. Treat participants the way you would want to be treated. When participants feel they have something to share, allow them to share their experiences. Be a good listener.

Keep it real and keep it moving

Adults want to focus on real-life problems and tasks, not on academic material. A strong how-to focus is important. Adults become restless if they feel they are wasting their time.

This is another opportunity to value the participants' experiences. Ask directed questions to determine the situations and behaviors they are observing on the job. Participants want to know their time is valued, so give them ample time to answer questions and discuss their observations.

Keep the conversation at a professional level and find small, easy ways to interject your personality that do not lead away from the topic. Participants will feel comfortable with you and each other, because you are establishing a team environment, just like you would in the classroom setting.

Another way to value participants' time is to make sure you are prepared. Well in advance, prepare any polls or the Webinar permissions (i.e. chatting and annotating) your participants will need. Just as you arrive early to a physical classroom to set up, you must dial in early to a Webinar to set up the virtual classroom. Use this time for final preparation and troubleshooting, as well as for greeting participants as they join the session. When participants join the session, greeting them allows you to make sure audio capabilities are on target (i.e., that you can hear one another). This greeting should become part of your troubleshooting regimen.

Be clear about outcomes

Adults see learning as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. They must know what there is to gain, and they must see that they are making progress.

Clearly state and review objectives in any presentation you use. Share anything you want your participants to focus on.

Stay focused

Adults are practical. Focus on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their job.

Adults care a great deal about staying on topic. When not facing participants in person, it is easy to stray off topic. And, as in the classroom setting, participants themselves may lead you off topic with their questions. Getting off topic is a sly "time burglar," perhaps the trickiest one we face. Stay flexible. Handle questions the same way you would in a physical classroom. Value participant experiences and build on their comments, but don't allow them to sweep you off track. This means finding balance between time devoted to sharing experiences of participants and delivering the planned lesson in the time allotted for the session.

Engaging participants in activity is a priority

Adults are accustomed to being active. Give them an opportunity for active participation whenever possible.

When asked for feedback regarding virtual classes, participants consistently respond that the best sessions are those in which they have opportunities for active participation. You can achieve such participation in the virtual environment through interactivity, such as a WebEx Hands-on-Lab, or breakout sessions and teach-back activities. Participants want to interject their personality into the class. They want it to be their own as much as you do.

Watch for "raised hands" during the Webinar session. Participants can raise their hands to ask you questions or make comments during the lesson. In WebEx, this feature is located on the participant panel that defaults to the top right hand panel of your WebEx session. If you are sharing your desktop, WebEx will show "raised hands" on the lower right side of your screen. When several participants raise their hands, WebEx will put them in order by placing a small number next to each name. This can help to ensure you are calling on participants in order, or help when reviewing or playing a game.

When participants raise their hands, make sure you acknowledge them. If they have a question, answer it in a timely fashion. This includes use of the Q&A panel and the chat panel. There is a lot to monitor at

times. Make sure you are watching the screens, or have another trainer assist you with the technical aspects during a session.

As adults, we are accustomed to being active. This may present a challenge when you begin teaching virtually. For example, in your classroom you may need to be aware of your movements, hand gestures, walking around, or pacing. Participants won't see if you are sitting or standing during a Webinar; instead, they will see all of your mouse movements! Participants' eyes are automatically drawn to anything moving on the screen, so if you have a Webcam, be aware of your gestures. If you are moving your hands while you talk, participants will see you through the Webcam. If you are fidgeting with your mouse movements, participants will see this as well. Move with a purpose! If you are trying to draw participants back on task or get their attentions, it is fine to employ calculated movement. If you are doing it out of habit or as a kill-time for your nervousness, participants will know it!

Webcams should be used to help facilitate a personable environment. However, leaving your Webcam on constantly will only misdirect a participant's focus. Turn it on to give your voice a picture, put a name with a face; and then, turn it off. Turn it on again when you need to refocus the group, or when coming back from break.

Allow self-direction

Adults are accustomed to being self-directed. They have expectations and wants that need to be met. Instructors must consult and work with adult learners, rather than being too directive.

The seventh and final principle is to make use of self-directed learning, such as asynchronous e-Learning courses and job aids. Your participants will likely complete independent e-Learning courses and may have questions regarding these courses. These are self-directed courses, so a great resource to get these questions answered would be their fellow participants. Often they will have similar questions and by allowing them to assist each other, you are building an environment conducive to teamwork.

By creating a team environment, we not only teach participants what they need to know to succeed in class, we also teach them how to succeed in their jobs. After all, that is why we are here right? Teach them the right way first, and these employees will be our future leaders.

Conclusion

Here are three more tips.

1. Join *The eLearning Guild*! Even a free membership will get you a wide variety of helpful information and materials. You can read articles for free, research classes, and get ideas. The Web address is http://www.elearningguild.com/
2. Observe as many other trainers as possible. See what other trainers are doing. You don't have to observe all of their calls; instead, just observe when you can. You will be surprised how many ideas and tips you get.
3. Make sure your participants can always see something.

Practice makes perfect. Practice your skills and use of your tools. Record your online sessions so you can learn from yourself. You may find it painful to listen to recordings of your own sessions; however, this can be the best tool you have to reach your full potential. Keep in mind that often you are your own worst critic. Use this criticism to push yourself toward excellence. Learn from each session you lead. This will ensure future success.

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