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Virtual Learning

FOR DUMMIES®

Learn to:

- **Effectively train online**
- **Create exceptional virtual learning environments**
- **Measure your virtual training effectiveness**

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Virtual Learning
FOR
DUMMIES ®
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by Ryan C. Williams

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Publisher's Acknowledgments

Introduction

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*T*his may seem like a small-ish book, but there's a ton of information in here about virtual learning. By the time you page through this book (and really, it shouldn't take you that long), you'll understand how virtual learning allows you to educate any audience you need to about whatever topic you choose, such as:

- ✔ New sales techniques
- ✔ New products
- ✔ Target market shifts
- ✔ The Loch Ness monster

Alright, the last one isn't a common request, but even expert Nessie-ologists could take advantage of virtual learning technology to share their vital information.

About This Book

This slim volume introduces you to basic virtual learning concepts and how you can implement them. You find out what goes into a virtual learning application, how you can apply virtual learning concepts to your needs, and how best to implement virtual learning in your business. You even see how others have implemented virtual learning (and how wonderfully it worked out for them). Aren't you glad you set aside the time to take in this book?

How This Book Is Organized

There's no trick to reading this book. It has five chapters — the first four give an explanation of virtual learning and the fifth is a Part of Tens chapter, in that familiar *For Dummies* style, that outlines, well, not ten but actually seven use cases. It's probably best to go through the chapters in some general order, but feel free to refer to a specific section whenever you need to. Everything is clearly labeled, and it's much easier to leaf through than a Russian novel.

Icons Used in This Book

A few times throughout this book, you see little graphics in the margin and some accompanying text. You don't have to read that text immediately, but go ahead and give it a glance when you can. The additional information can be quite useful!

REMEMBER

This icon calls out helpful reminders that you should keep in mind when implementing your virtual learning plan.

TECHNICAL STUFF

Yep, once or twice we get a little technical in this book. I'm not going to ask for advanced calculus, but a little geek inclination here wouldn't hurt.

Chapter 1

Your Seat in the Virtual Learning Classroom

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In This Chapter

▶ Understanding the components of virtual learning

▶ Realizing the benefits of virtual learning

▶ Using virtual learning for CE accreditation

▶ Assessing the results of virtual learning

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*T*hese days, you can get just about everything virtually. That's not a reference to everything that's available for purchase (no matter how much online shopping you do) — but it's a statement that simply points out that there's now a virtual version of many services that once had to be transacted face to face, before the advent of the Internet. Besides shopping, you can read in virtual libraries, watch movies in virtual theaters, and get an education in virtual classrooms.

Virtual learning allows employees who can't travel long distances or afford a lot of time off of work to get access to education they otherwise wouldn't be able to take advantage of. But the benefits of virtual learning extend far beyond geographical location and financial issues. This chapter shows why virtual learning makes a compelling option for many situations and businesses.

Education Anywhere, Anytime

Virtual learning manages to take the fixed location and timeframe of traditional learning and free both the students and the instructors from those constraints. Both sides of the equation can manage their own schedules and get the teaching and learning done whenever the time is best.

Trainers can create a single set of materials and make the information available for a wide cross-section of employees at a common location. Not only does this save your business from possibly having to accommodate multiple sessions (if you can't get a single large group together), but it also ensures that all of your team members get access to the same material with a consistent message.

While virtual training can be a real-time experience, often students can also take the virtual learning material and review it at a time and place of their choosing. By better fitting into their schedule, students are more likely to approach the material with a clear and focused mind. They can also review the materials multiple times, making sure that the materials reinforce the original message and therefore providing a better learning experience.

Managing Your Costs

Even if you're just gathering a local sales team together for a training meeting, taking them off the streets for a few hours and providing the resources for your training meeting (meeting room, A/V resources, paper, and probably a decent lunch) can cost you money. Just

think of all of the expenses you can bypass by using virtual learning instead of hosting a large gathering:

- ✔ Travel
- ✔ Lodging
- ✔ Meals
- ✔ Lost time/productivity
- ✔ Physical materials

You can use virtual learning (either as a live large event or as an on-demand series of events that team members can take advantage of on their own time) to eliminate these costs and get the most out of your learning time and resources. The fact that you're getting great results while keeping costs down makes this, well, a no-brainer.

Having All Your Resources Available

A more traditional learning environment takes place at a certain place and time, and the learning can only effectively take place at that time. Even if the educator uses handouts and other physical media and encourages students to take notes, they can't revisit the full experience after the learning session finishes. It's gone, fini, over, and no longer retrievable.

Virtual learning allows students complete and repetitive access to the full learning experience. Want to review the lecture one more time? Replay the video. Want to spend a little more time grasping the concept on that slide? Stop the presentation and focus on that little bit. Want to continue the conversation with your

fellow students even after you've scattered back to wherever it is you came from? Use online forums and social media to stay in touch, keep talking, and improve everybody's understanding of the material.

Virtual learning creates a consistent and readily available repository of knowledge available to all students that can be re-used and reviewed whenever necessary.

Instant Feedback and Engagement

Using the tools available with virtual learning goes beyond just making materials available in multiple times and places. Virtual learning can use interactive media (from tutorials to automatic quizzes and tests) that offer instant feedback and reinforcement regarding the student's understanding of the material (and simple and automatic assessment and evaluation for you).

That instant feedback goes a long way toward improving the student's grasp of the information. However, none of that feedback helps if the student isn't even at the session. The instant engagement of virtual learning means a student is more likely to attend and interact with the provided content. It's not just a matter of time and place — making virtual learning available on the students' terms gives you a better chance of reaching them.

> **REMEMBER**
> More opportunities to learn plus more available resources plus instant feedback on that learning equals a better educated student!

Virtual Learning Applications

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In This Chapter

▶ Using virtual learning for CE

▶ Communicating your message with virtual learning

▶ Training your clients or partners with virtual learning

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*V*irtual learning presents all sorts of advantages for a multitude of applications. No matter the industry or application, virtual learning can benefit both you and the people you are educating.

This chapter takes a look at how you can apply different types of virtual learning to your needs.

Continuing Your Education

Several industries require education above and beyond any initial training to make sure that all persons involved can function properly. Without current information, employees can fail to adhere to regulations or serve customers correctly. Think about how a lack of up-to-date training could affect those in the following lines of work:

- ✔ Accounting firms
- ✔ Law firms
- ✔ Financial services
- ✔ Life sciences
- ✔ Education
- ✔ Medical facilities

Every one of the pursuits in the preceding list requires current training and continuing education (CE) for many reasons, but virtual learning speaks to three important use cases.

You're certified!

If your industry requires ongoing or annual certification, you already know what's required and how often you need to do it. Set up a regular training program to keep your employees ready for all necessary testing, and you can reduce the impact on their (and your) schedules while keeping everybody's certifications in order. The employees can access the program whenever necessary.

More current knowledge

Because all of your materials reside in a central repository of knowledge, it's much easier to keep everything up-to-date. Think of how much easier it would be to change a single virtual learning center than run through multiple training manuals and then distribute them.

The fringe benefits

All of the standard benefits of virtual learning, including easy access to repeat viewings and practice tests

and quizzes, apply to the continuing education use case.

Training Your Employees

It's easy enough to gather a small group of employees in a conference room to let them know of your new product line or to educate them about new software that's being used in the office. Grow to the point where you have multiple locations or offices spread out over different cities, states and countries, and that kind of meeting isn't so simple anymore. Enter virtual learning, and you've just solved the problem of bringing everybody together.

The workflow

Education using virtual learning follows a simple path. Check out the following steps for a sample:

1. **Pre-event information.** Gather information about your attendees and pass on important details before the actual event.

2. **The e-learning event.** Pass on the necessary material and alert your attendees to additional online and offline resources.

3. **Post-event test.** Let your attendees demonstrate their knowledge and comprehension.

4. **Auto-score.** Don't waste time scoring individual tests; let the automated systems take care of that.

5. **Certification.** Congratulate your new success stories!

Test, test, test!

The workflow shown here may include a post-test, but that doesn't mean that you can only run tests after the event. Virtual learning allows you to utilize a variety of testing methods that reinforce the learning process, keep participants engaged, and help you to evaluate your employees.

Consider using a pre-test before the training event to provide a baseline for later evaluation. You can use the results to establish how much knowledge your employees retained and measure the effectiveness of your virtual learning methods. You can also consider using several smaller quizzes during the virtual learning session. The more frequent testing method lets you zero in on specific areas of interest and/or areas on which to focus. It also makes the training session more interesting. The right testing method helps you and your employees learn more!

Roll out the products

It's time to debut your new widget, and everybody in your organization needs to know what's going to hit the market. Use virtual learning to display the product and get your employees up-to-speed on what it does and how to use it. You can use videos for the initial introduction and post documents for further reference once the initial presentation is finished.

Refresh my memory

Want to make sure everybody is on the same page? Use a quick virtual learning session to emphasize your message. Again, posted material makes this information available at any time, wherever the employee needs it.

Filling the Sales

Your sales staff spreads the message of your product to the world, so you have to make sure that they have the most up-to-date information and know everything possible about what you have to offer. Combine that need with the reality of a sales team spread out over different territories, and virtual learning becomes a necessity for your organization.

Don't sweat the technique

Even the most experienced salesperson can learn a few new tips and acquire tools about the business. Use virtual learning as a way to keep your old dogs learning new tricks.

New products

When your new product makes an entrance, your sales staff has to be the most knowledgable people on the planet about what the product is and what it can do. Use virtual learning to show off everything the product can do and keep material online for further reference. Constant availability means that your sales staff never misses a step.

Kick it off!

A knowledgeable sales team still needs excitement and drive, and the annual sales kickoff (SKO) meeting is often the go-to solution for motivating and training sales staff. You can produce an entirely virtual SKO or archive SKO content online for future viewing. Either way, the content of your kickoff lives on after the event and extends the use of your valuable training material.

Getting Your Customers on the Train

Your employees aren't the only people you need to train. Especially in the case of advanced pieces of equipment or software, you'll need to bring your customers in and make sure they know what they're doing as well. More than likely, though, your customers aren't in the same building as you are. They may not even be in the same country. That's where virtual learning comes in.

New products

Everybody gets excited about something new — until they realize they know next to nothing about putting that new product to use. That's why it's especially important to put a virtual learning plan in place before your gift to the world ever sees the light of day. That education makes sure that the initial excitement of your new product lasts through the initial stage and continues through the practical usage phase.

Ongoing usage

Once your product is out, people will find new and different ways to approach it. Sharing that information with others deepens your relationship with customers and keeps them loyal to your business. You can use virtual learning to join you and your customers together no matter what the difference in time and distance — there are no barriers between you and your customers anymore.

Improved methods

Every product has updates and and new additions. Think of software upgrades or new accessories for a product, and then think about how you're going to tell people about them. You can demonstrate how the new methods work and leave that information available for others who might come in late to the party.

You're not the only one who can spread the message. By making these materials available to many people in many locations, they can continue the conversation even when you're not there.

Partnering Up

In the enterprise, partnerships can be a critical part of your sales and marketing efforts. Training and regular updates are essential to maintaining your partners' effectiveness and focus on your products. However, since your partners often cover a broad geographical area, virtual training can be an important tool, providing partners with the information and resources they need, when they need them.

Let me introduce myself

Part of what makes partnerships appealing is the fact that you don't occupy the same territory or areas of interest. For example, a reseller can combine your product or services with others in a bundle that benefits their customers. They sell, you provide — everybody wins. That's why the initial introduction is so important.

No matter where this partner resides, you can use virtual learning to make a vital first impression and share your mission. Use the materials to directly make the introduction and then leave training materials and advertising materials to fully enable your partners.

Working together

Even when you and your partners are working on separate efforts, you can use virtual learning to keep everybody abreast of those efforts and how you can use the activities to keep both sides motivated and productive. Schedules may differ (whether based on tasks or time zones), but virtual learning can cross the divides of distance and time to keep everybody on the same page. For example, you can use regularly scheduled virtual learning sessions to provide updated information and create interactive materials that demonstrate your progress.

Chapter 3

Virtual Learning Product Approaches

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In This Chapter

▶ Setting up your virtual learning environment

▶ Planning your webcast

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*I*f you've read Chapters 1 and 2, you know why virtual learning is important. This chapter introduces you to virtual learning tools and how you can best implement them to meet your needs.

Take a look at the following sections to see what's available and how you can put virtual learning to work for you.

Virtual Learning Environments

Virtual learning uses the same basic formula as classroom-based learning — it takes place in a contained environment with available tools and resources.

You can customize virtual learning environments more than traditional classroom environments, of course,

and you never have to stay late to accommodate the needs of those in attendance (which is nice when dinner is waiting on the table).

> **REMEMBER**
> The virtual classroom can be open for use whenever you need it.

The virtual learning and virtual briefing centers

You may be familiar with virtual learning centers and briefing centers as tools for debuting new products and services to customers and audiences. But just as you can set up a virtual room for a trade show or sales meeting, you can use that same virtual room with the following tools to educate and certify your staff, customers, or partners:

- ✔ Classroom
- ✔ Communications center
- ✔ Lecture hall
- ✔ Product showcase
- ✔ Resource center and library

Sound familiar? Whether you're in a convention center or on a college campus, these rooms are common occurrences. Create their equivalent virtually, and you'll be able to bring in attendees from any location or time zone to learn about what you're teaching.

Being resourceful

The resource center contains a host of materials that your attendees can access either during or after any virtual event you schedule.

Depending on what your training involves, you can take advantage of one or more of these materials:

- ✔ PDFs
- ✔ Podcasts
- ✔ Slide decks
- ✔ Videos

REMEMBER You don't have to use all of these materials — know your audience and pick which one works best for them (and you).

TECHNICAL STUFF Always be sure to know what technology is available to your audience and make the most of it. At the same time, make sure you don't use material they can't take advantage of.

Your online content repositories

The virtual learning center lives online, and as such it acts as the central source of knowledge for your virtual training efforts.

Use your learning center as a continuation of your initial efforts to both introduce and reinforce your learning points.

Think of the kind of takeaways your content repository could host:

- ✔ Summary point documents
- ✔ Worksheets
- ✔ Refresher podcasts and videos
- ✔ Sales support materials
- ✔ Additional resources

> ✔ Webcasts
> ✔ Product demos

Webcasting

Some materials can be consumed at a different time than when they were originally created. Some things just have to be experienced in real time, however, where the sense of excitement can be more realistically passed on.

The webcast handles both sides of this experience well. You can pre-record a webcast or present it live, take live questions afterwards, and then archive the whole thing for future use.

Webcasts have become a core training tool. They are used in virtual learning centers and as stand-alone training solutions. You can produce webinars easily and affordably, and they can be just as effective as in-person seminars.

Engaging your audience

New webcasting platforms offer even more opportunities for interaction and can be integrated with social media. The result is greater trainee engagement.

Information, on demand

Even in real time, webcasts can reach audiences around the world in any time zone (even if it means staying up late or getting up a little early). The webcast gives you access to a global audience whenever you need to talk to them.

You can also schedule a series of webcasts to address more targeted audiences, depending on the needs of your attendees. Address the demand for information in whatever direct or indirect manner you need.

All webcasts get archived for future reference. You want those attending to be able to access your webcasts later for their review and reinforcement. Or you may just want to set up a webcast for on-demand use later.

A New Dimension

Your virtual environment contains a ton of content, but that doesn't mean you have to lose any of the flair or pizzazz you may want to show off as well. Remember — this is your virtual environment. Customize it to look the way you want it, and present your organization in the best light possible.

3-D!

You're not making a huge Hollywood blockbuster, but you can work 3-D technology into your virtual learning approach. Remember, virtual learning often takes the place of physical events, so you want to try to capture the same impact that an in-person learner might experience. In fact, a virtual learning experience can have even more impact than the in-person training session it's replacing.

Trainers should fully leverage all the creative solutions, including 3-D design, made possible with virtual communication technology. Doing so maximizes impact and learning program ROI.

Template to go or custom?

Depending on your needs, a pre-created template experience might fit the bill. These templates make life easy when it comes to implementation, and they contain the elements you need to effectively communicate your message. If a unique branding experience is necessary, you can utilize the support provided by a virtual event design team to create the virtual environment you envision. Several factors (including time and finance) must be addressed here, but take the time to evaluate your options and make the experience everything it can be.

Make it your own!

No matter how you choose to implement your virtual learning environment, remember that you're working with a wide variety of possibilities designed to help you get the most out of your virtual learning environment. Even a template contains customizable aspects that can match your educational and branding needs. Whichever direction you go, know that you're creating a unique and memorable virtual learning experience.

Chapter 4

Virtual Learning Best Practices

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In This Chapter

▶ Getting the word out

▶ Creating the best possible virtual learning environment

▶ Establishing standards for use in evaluating virtual learning materials

▶ Making sure that your students get what they need to succeed

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*W*hile virtual learning is a relatively new practice (at least when compared to traditional classrooms and textbooks), enough experts have studied and evaluated the process to establish a series of best practices. Following these practices help to ensure that you create the most effective virtual learning environment possible and enable your students to succeed in their efforts, which is what this chapter is about.

Spread the Word!

Use all of the communication tools at your disposal. From e-mail to break room bulletin boards, you need to let everybody know early and often about the virtual learning event. Reinforce your message!

Be Consistent

Your education efforts have an overall goal. It's the story you want to tell, and it's the message you want to communicate. Make sure that message permeates every product you create to educate your audience. It's easy to distract your students when you lose track of your efforts and take a detour. Know what you want to say and make it clear and consistent.

Know Your Attendees

A good instructor knows what kind of attendees they have in a classroom. It may be a little easier to make this evaluation when everybody is in the same room, but you can still use pre-event surveys and question-naires to learn about who will attend your virtual training event and how you want to address them.

Know what your attendees want and how they learn best when designing your materials. It'll go a long way in creating a good virtual environment.

Reward Your Attendees

Everybody learns better when they're given incentive to continue through the learning environment. Remember to design rewards into any material you

create, both when it's used in real time or at a later date. Even simple praise can help a person learn more and progress farther. Consider adding a point system that clearly indicates your attendees' progress as well.

Make It User-friendly

Design your materials to encourage ease of use. Think about how much your attendees have to do to get to the appropriate materials. Minimize the number of clicks — no more than two to get to the content of their choice. Basically, those attending are more likely to learn when they have to take fewer steps to get to the materials.

Make It Fun

Intimidation may work in boot camp, but the soldiers don't really have any other options available to them. You're working with individuals who have tons of options regarding their free time, and you want to engage them as soon as you can to make sure they learn what you want them to learn.

You don't have to do a happy clown dance every time somebody does something right, but a fun and engaging environment goes a long way to ensuring your attendees stick around and learn.

Make It Social

Social networking plays a larger role in our lives every day, and social networking tools make a great resource to further your virtual learning environment. Individuals can share their findings and tips via social

networks, and you can use social media to share updated times and offerings to your attendees. Students only show up to school when class is in session, and you can use the following tools to make sure that your attendees know the bell is ringing:

- ✔ Yammer
- ✔ Online communities
- ✔ Facebook
- ✔ LinkedIn
- ✔ Twitter

Watch the Clock

If you're working with people in different time zones, make sure that your live sessions are scheduled to be convenient for everybody. If you can't schedule one session for everybody, use a series of smaller sessions.

Everything to Everyone

When developing your content, make sure to operate over a variety of content platforms (webinars, interactive materials, and more) to keep people's interests. Make sure that you involve subject matter experts when developing your content as well, to ensure that you get the best, most current training material possible.

Chapter 5

Ten (Okay, Seven) Virtual Learning Use Cases

In This Chapter

▶ Looking at proven cases of virtual learning

▶ Applying cases to your own virtual learning needs

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*U*nderstanding the concepts behind virtual learning helps you to craft and create your own learning or briefing center. You even know how to make your materials effective and help your students learn. However, there's nothing like the real thing to show you how to implement virtual learning and what you should do (and should avoid doing, in some cases). Take a look at the use cases detailed in this chapter and apply their lessons to your own circumstances.

The Customer Training Cure

One company used ON24's extensive virtual event capabilities to develop a virtual learning center directed toward physicians and medical personnel.

This audience gets a chance to see the company's products in action, interact with the company regarding how best to use them, and exchange information with others about how the products work in the real world. By maintaining an always-on presence, the company takes every advantage to spread the word about its products and to make sure that everybody makes use of those products to the best potential. The fact that they can do so with such highly technical information demonstrates how useful virtual learning centers can be, even with the most demanding audience.

Summer School

This food service company provides training to employees spread out all over the world. To accomplish this, they used ON24 to create a virtual summer training event. They refreshed content every two weeks, and topics addressed included training, introducing new executives, and increasing employee engagement.

That last part may sound trivial at first, but consider that most of the company's employees are seasonal, and the company needs to address them outside of the workplace, depending on where they're located at the time.

The virtual learning center allowed the training team to engage 90 percent of the management staff, display more than 50,000 pages of vital information, and save an estimated $1.4 million. Those numbers speak for themselves.

Above and Beyond Training

A tech company already used e-learning courses as part of their training regimen, but they wanted to do more. ON24 built a virtual partner training and enablement center that helped their efforts in two ways:

- ✔ By creating a central storage location for training information that can be reviewed at any time

- ✔ By integrating tightly with their own existing website

Partners could log in to the virtual learning center and get access to helpful information at any time, and the greeting video and material gave them more of an "event" feel than your standard training information. The virtual learning center combined well with the existing training information, and the company could track the progress of users as they went through the study material.

Communicating Everywhere

Here, a company took advantage of ON24's cloud-based technology to communicate both special events and weekly updates as part of its ongoing training efforts. Employees had to maintain certification by the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy, and the ON24 system allowed the company to reach far-flung employees wherever and whenever necessary.

The system also provided online certification and tracking information, meaning managers could accurately track performance and adjust their efforts accordingly. Virtual learning made all of these goals possible where nothing else would function properly.

Keeping Sales in the Loop

In this company's case, their sales teams need up-to-date information, and expensive travel isn't always an option. ON24's webcast platform provided on-demand training for the sales staff without the company having to spend money on tickets and lodging. Couple these webcasts with special events, and the sales staff can stay current with all offerings at a minimum of cost and logistical planning.

Multi-day Sessions

One medical company used multi-day sessions (and a variety of communication channels) to target hundreds of people. Topics covered product knowledge and regulatory issues about Medicare. The interactive training not only saved money over in-person training, but it also conveyed information as quickly and efficiently as possible. The virtual environment integrated all of the company's available materials into an immersive experience that benefitted all members of the sales team.

Training the Executives

This institute provides executive training services to companies across the world via its weekly Wednesday webcast series. ON24 provides a central location for these webcasts, along with metrics that show how those webcasts were consumed and technical support to make sure everybody gets the full experience. From registration to the final numbers, ON24 has this organization covered.