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Synchronous Team Teaching: Put Your Heads Together



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A producer or assistant trainer can help transform synchronous programs into trouble-free, fast moving, interactive events that keep learners involved and the trainer on track. In short, the trainer can stay focused on content while the producer takes care of everything else.

The traditional classroom trainer is a very busy person. In addition to delivering content, he or she facilitates interaction between participants, manages tools such as the LCD projector, writes on whiteboards and flip charts, and interprets the body language of learners. Constantly gauging participants interest and comprehension, the trainer also makes on-the-fly adjustments to the program design; for example, shortening breaks, lengthening days, or skipping content. By any standard, the trainer's job requires constant attention and total concentration.

Synchronous online learning introduces a few important differences to the classroom environment. For example:

- The toolset changes from flip charts and LCD projectors to interactive whiteboards, chat rooms, and application sharing.
- Short program times of one to two hours minimize a trainer's ability to make adjustments when the class goes off-schedule.
- The language of eye contact and body movement is eliminated. (Those visual cues constitute 60 to 70 percent of the

communication from learners in a traditional setting.)

- New cues fight for the trainer's attention, including chat between participants and private (often off-topic) questions sent to the trainer, as well as participants' whiteboard activity, application sharing, and Web browsing.
- Participants rely on trainers for help with technical problems, from determining why content isn't synchronized to resolving computer crashes.

In the new virtual environment, many trainers opt not to take advantage of all of the tools available to increase interaction. They can't see themselves being able to multi-task to the extent required, so they limit participant use of chat, whiteboard tools, and other interactive features of the synchronous classroom. The trainer's role is then reduced to pushing content and lecturing, instead of facilitating interactions and knowledge sharing.

The solution to this dilemma lies in the idea of team teaching. An assistant trainer (I call this person a producer) can help transform synchronous programs into trouble-free, fast moving, interactive events that keep learners involved and the trainer on track. In short, the trainer can stay focused on content while the producer takes care of everything else.

A producer's to-do list might include these items.

- **Handle technical questions and problems.** Any major technical problems should've been identified and fixed long before the synchronous training, but even prepared participants can run into problems during a live event. A trainer who tries to fix those problems herself can lose valuable class time. Instead, give participants the producer's phone number so he or she can manage any technical support issues that arise. The producer can assess whether the participant can return to class or whether another level of technical support is required.
- **Respond to messages and manage chat.** Many trainers limit the use of the chat and message features because they find it impossible to respond while also facilitating a class. However, crucial interaction can occur in the chat and message areas. For example, five learners suddenly sending questions at the same time can be a sign that the class missed a key point. People chatting off-topic may mean that the current activity isn't keeping them engaged. People chatting on-topic may have something important to add to the conversation. The producer can watch for all of those signals from participants, answer questions, and alert the trainer when he or she needs to get involved.
- **Launch surveys, breakout rooms, and shared applications.** While the trainer is engaged with participants, the producer should ensure that all of the exercises that require technology setup are in cue and ready to launch as soon as the trainer prompts for them. This minimizes "dead-air" and makes the program move quickly.

- **Scribe on the whiteboard.** Activity on the whiteboard, including scribing a participant's comments, writing down important points, and capturing exercise instructions, makes the program more visually engaging and helps participants focus. The producer can scribe while the trainer is otherwise engaged.
- **Warm up the participants before class begins.** While participants are logging on, the producer can verify that technology is working, answer navigation questions, and facilitate warm-up exercises. When the trainer starts speaking or typing, participants know class has begun.

Here are some tips for making the trainer/producer model work for you.

- **Create a leader guide that specifically outlines production tasks.** For example, include instructions for writing on the whiteboard, conducting warm-up exercises, and pasting text into the chat area. The guide should be very specific and cover the when and the why in addition to the what. Formatting the guide so that the production tasks can be quickly identified will help the trainer be better prepared for times when a producer isn't available. Reading over the lists of tasks, the trainer can make informed decisions about which items he is able to manage on his own and which need to be modified in the absence of that second pair of hands.
- **Meet at least a week ahead of time to walk through and discuss the exercises.** This meeting is best held in a synchronous format so that the trainer/producer team can plan exactly how things are going to work. It will also allow the producer, who may not be a content expert, to familiarize herself with the content. During this walk-through, the trainer should lay out how the producer should respond to content questions that arise in the chat area.
- **Establish emergency protocols.** What happens if the trainer drops offline and the producer is left with a room full of participants? The answer to that question needs to be determined ahead of time. The producer should know whether to call for a break or to ask participants to complete an exercise, such as typing into chat all of the questions they have for the trainer when he returns. Or, short self-paced exercises can be included in course workbooks so that the producer can direct people to them to while they're waiting for the trainer to return.
- **Establish course ground rules.** The producer needs to know how to respond to participants who get to class late or leave early. For example, if someone logs on 20 minutes into a program, should the producer tell her that class has already started and provide a schedule for future offerings?
- **Ensure that the producer has all participant and leader materials.** This will make it easier for him or her to support the trainer and the participants.

- **Rehearse in a realistic environment.** Consider whether the trainer, producer, or participants will be logging on with dial-up modems or behind firewalls. If the trainer and producer will be at remote locations during the live event, then the rehearsal should be conducted that way as well.
- **Create an environment of trust.** The trainer/producer relationship should represent a true team. For example, if the producer suggests that the trainer take a moment to review the questions in the chat area, the trainer needs to trust that issues there are worth considering.
- **Debrief the experience.** After the live event, share notes about what went well and what needs to be changed. Make sure you document lessons learned for different trainer/producer pairs who may tackle your class in the future.

Try team teaching in your next synchronous class. Although you may discover that some courses don't require two people to manage, many will be improved by the second set of hands. At the least, a second person will become familiar with the course content. At the best, team teaching can help you feel as comfortable in the virtual classroom as in a traditional one.

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