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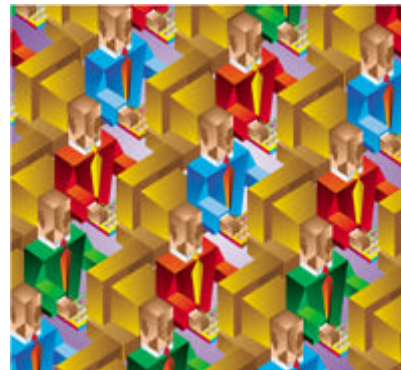
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Synchronous Exercises from Scratch

By Jennifer Hofmann

Want to incorporate collaboration tools into your next synchronous class? Use these tips to build engaging exercises.



Organizations that invest in synchronous training products have visions of brilliant collaboration taking place across the bandwidth. Why then are so many synchronous programs still designed to highlight the "Sage on Stage?"

Links

- [Matching Content to Delivery](#)
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The answer lies in the notion that training departments have little time to experiment with collaborative tools, or to adapt classroom exercises to get the most impact from the new delivery method. Consequently, programs often create passive experiences for participants, and they fail to meet quality standards set for traditional training programs.

Designers need to learn to take advantage of the various communication features offered by synchronous classroom applications. For example, conduct a brainstorming activity in the chat area to engage kinetic learners who need to physically do something. Similarly, use group whiteboard activities that appeal to kinetic learners and attract visual learners who prefer a graphic representation of ideas. You can gauge participants' interest and comprehension by their level of participation in such exercises. More important, instant collaboration tools can reduce the feeling of isolation that participants feel when they're remote from the instructor.

Here are some tips for building effective collaborative exercises.

Whiteboard designs

Whiteboards typically contain some combination of the following tools: pencil, eraser, text, color, lines, and various shapes. Each vendor offers different whiteboard features, such as the capability

to import files and use them in the style of prepared flip charts. Likewise, some whiteboards are object-oriented. My personal favorite feature is the capability for multiple people to write on the whiteboard at one time.

For visual learners, a whiteboard can be one of the most effective tools in the synchronous classroom. Whiteboards allow for instant visual communication over a long distance and invite everyone to participate. Kinesthetic learners appreciate the ability to interact physically with the tool because it helps to keep their attention focused.

Tips for creating whiteboard exercises include the following:

- Plan the exercise. If you want to have six people write responses on the whiteboard, prepare a grid with six boxes so participants can clearly identify their individual spaces.
- Encourage creativity. Rather than instruct participants to type responses, encourage them to draw pictures, use different colors and fonts, and highlight important parts of their drawing.
- Let it get messy. Sometimes participants will color outside the lines or write in someone else's box. So what? If they're too concerned about crossing over, they'll tend to be less creative.
- Involve everyone. If only a few participants are writing ideas on the whiteboard, ask the rest to comment or interpret the pictures.
- Play games. Have participants draw in missing parts of diagrams, complete crossword puzzles, or play games. This is a great way to reinforce content, energize the audience, and have fun.

Chat designs

Chat tools are most commonly used to address technical support issues and content-related questions--particularly anonymous questions. While that's an important function, it's a shortsighted view of a potentially powerful interaction tool.

Chat exercises can be an effective outlet for excess energy present in kinesthetic learners. Chat offers a different communication method to break up lectures. If your chat application offers a transcript feature, you can post assignments, expectations, and participant feedback, and use the results later in the class or after the class. For example, chat exercises can capture results of brainstorming exercises.

Sometimes you might need feedback from all participants at the same time, but can't afford to spend too much time on the exercise. Using the chat function keeps everyone engaged and minimizes the time investment. For example, rather than having all participants in a 10-person class answer a question verbally, ask them to type their answers in the chat room and give them time to review the answers provided by peers. You can then respond to certain comments as appropriate.

Tips for facilitating chat exercises include the following:

- Provide time boundaries. I once made the mistake of telling participants to take a minute to record their thoughts in the chat area. When I stopped the exercise at 30 seconds, I got complaints from participants who expected the full minute. Give specific time limits for chat exercises, and let people know when they have 15 seconds left. This will allow those who need more time to budget their time, and let those who respond more quickly know that they should get ready to refocus on the class.
- Ignore poor spelling. Let participants know that they don't need to be anxious about spelling and grammar while using the chat feature. The time allotted is for idea development and communication rather than editing.
- Be specific about anticipated outcomes. Make certain participants know specifically what you want them to do and how you want their answers recorded. Good instructions equal effective exercises.
- Let participants reflect on peer responses. It's important for learners to have time to compare and contrast their responses. Encourage peer review by saying, "I'd like everyone to take a look at Mary's response. Then take 30 more seconds to record what you think led her to that decision. Respond in the chat room."

Web browser designs

The synchronous Web browsing feature on most collaboration tools effectively makes the entire Internet, as well as an organization's corporate intranet, part of the synchronous classroom. Unfortunately, this feature isn't used for much more than showing off an individual's or organization's Website.

But there are several ways to maximize this tool's potential. One practical exercise is to conduct scavenger hunts. For example, send participants in a sales training class to individual breakout rooms and have them each research a competitor. In a writing class, participants can visit publication Websites and critique writing styles.

There are numerous sites available that boast trivia games, team building exercises, and advanced testing applications. Send participants to those sites, either as an intact class or individual users or small groups in breakout rooms, to create competitions or icebreakers that bridge the distance across the bandwidth.

Tips for facilitating Web exercises include the following

- Check a Website's policies before incorporating it into your program. You might need to pay a fee or subscribe before you can use it in a training program. Usually an email to the Webmaster can answer your policy questions.
- Check URLs before class. Websites go down or site content changes unexpectedly. Always have a backup plan or exercise. Don't let the Internet's changing nature make

you anxious; embrace it.

- Make certain participants have necessary plug-ins. If Websites require such programs as Flash, Adobe Acrobat, or Real Player, you must give learners instructions for downloading the necessary files to their browsers. Plug-ins are updated often, so remember to check for the newest version.
- Be aware of bandwidth and firewall issues. Don't stream movies that require high-bandwidth to participants on 56K modems. Have test logins for participants who login from behind firewalls.
- Test secured sites for access requirements. If you need a password to access a secure site, your participants may need one as well.
- Provide clear instructions. Be sure to give participants printed workbooks that include URLs, step-by-step instructions for using the collaboration tools, and detailed information about the exercises. Remember that when participants are in breakout rooms their access to the facilitator isn't immediate. You don't want them to feel lost in cyberspace.
- Tie individual and small group results to the program design. Create a debrief session. If participants don't understand the exercise's relevance to the program, they may resent doing the work. If the exercise was an icebreaker or energizer, make those intentions clear.

The best way to maximize your investment in a synchronous training tool is to maximize the quality of your programs by encouraging collaboration between your participants. Take time to design creative exercises that engage users, deliver results, and exceed expectations.

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