Enabling Virtual Learners by Design

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InSync Training: Your Source for Blended Learning and Virtual Design and Delivery

InSync Training sets standards for synchronous learning, specializing in developing the best training professionals for your organization.

InSync Training is the acknowledged leader in the synchronous training design and delivery field – we have been in the business of synchronous training delivery since 1999, and are routinely identified as the “go-to” vendor for expertise in this field. InSync provides customized, accredited, comprehensive live and interactive online training solutions, enabling learning and development professionals and organizations to realize the full potential of individual and organizational growth by leveraging the live online environment. InSync’s curriculum offerings provide its clients with the skills required to become knowledgeable, effective, and dynamic instructional experts in the synchronous virtual classroom. We help learning and development professionals understand the world of synchronous training, empowering them with the skills to support their organization’s growth.

Our passion lies in improving the effectiveness of your live online learning initiatives, allowing your organization to reach its potential.

We work with organizations from all sectors, global corporations in numerous industries (including energy and utilities, financial, government, healthcare, information technology, manufacturing, medical devices, oil and gas, software development, and telecommunications).

Our ethos is “Reaching Learners Globally” which we do with our global team based in the USA and Europe.

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We all know that the use of virtual classrooms, e-learning, and blended learning has gone beyond a trend to become an accepted and permanent part of the learning mix. It’s hard to find a subject that isn’t, in some form and at some level, taught online. Whether it’s astronomy or zoology, Arabic or Zulu, addition or...well...you see where I’m going with this. Besides being plentiful, online programs are often low-priced or sometimes even free!

This begs the question: With so much content and technology readily available, why don't people seem to be learning more? And why are so many people being forced to learn online at (metaphorical) gunpoint?

**It's NOT About the Technology**

One of the answers is easy to identify. Although organizations are spending money on technology, they’re rarely investing in resources that create effective learning environments. They're treating virtual training and blended learning implementations as technology initiatives rather than change initiatives.

We need to find ways to make learners feel that the investment is worthwhile. One way to accomplish this is by ensuring that some critical concepts are contemplated during the design of a program, not as an afterthought once a program has already been implemented.

In this paper, I’ll be looking more closely at implementing five critical elements that set our learners up for success. When implementing, designing, and delivering virtual and blended programs, training professionals should strive to design the following elements (success factors) at the planning stages of the program.

Motivation to learn built into the program. Why do we need to be more concerned about motivating online learners than traditional learners? Because often, online learning comes with a stigma that’s totally unmotivating. Learners often feel that they’re being cheated out of an instructor, that online learning isn’t real learning, and that having to learn at their desk is more trouble than it’s worth. While going to a traditional class may have interrupted the work week, at least it gave them a change of environment—and usually there were snacks.
Opportunities to collaborate. How can virtual training and blended learning be collaborative? You can create collaboration by finding ways to bring learners together in some kind of social interaction or get groups to work together to solve problems. Learners involved in these types of interactive collaborative programs feel more engaged in the process, and therefore learn more effectively. Though the solution sounds simple, implementing programs that foster real collaboration remain a hurdle for most online initiatives, primarily because new designers tend to rely on the technology to engage learners, instead of the design.

A blend of delivery methods designed to maximize the learning outcome. When it comes to designing training, one size does NOT fit all. In other words, we can't rely on just one technology to provide total treatment for a learning program. Blended learning allows us to match learning objectives to the most appropriate learning technologies.

Usable technology. Critical to a learner's success is a physical learning environment that includes usable technology, accessible support, and an area conducive to full participation during live lessons, as well as concentration/focus during self-directed activities. The proper implementation and management of technology is critical to the success of all learning initiatives. Though technology advances are one of the reasons online learning is going through such a growth spurt, it can create roadblocks that divert learners from success.

Active and participative facilitators that believe in and support the blended learning experience. Adoption of educational technologies isn't just new to our learner audience, it is often a new experience for the people facilitating the process. Ensuring that facilitators are ready to support the process will go a long way towards maximizing the return on investment of time and budget.
Bringing it All Together

Creating a successful virtual learning program means more than using the latest gizmos. It means more than applying successful instructional design techniques. You need to create a solid learning environment which enables your learners. If you don’t, the best curriculum in the world will fall flat.

MOTIVATION

We all understand how to learn in a traditional classroom environment. We’ve been doing that for most of our lives. It’s comfortable and we know what to expect.

The virtual classroom has introduced a new learning culture - one that takes time to become familiar with. Organizations spend a lot of time planning for, and investing in, technologies - but often forget about the culture change involved with this new learning environment.

In order for virtual learning to be successful, we need to create environments in which people can effectively learn. Our participants need to be open to learning in this new way, and confident that their time in the virtual classroom is well-spent.

Motivation often comes down to answering the question, "What's in it for me?" The latest technologies and best designs won't mean a thing if you can't answer that question for your participants.

We’ve identified 10 ways to motivate virtual learners:

1. Publish requirements and set expectations ahead of time. Getting more work than you bargained for or taking a class that isn't appropriate isn't only demotivating, it can be downright aggravating. Armed with enough information about course requirements, participants can make an informed choice about the appropriateness of the course or the time commitment involved. If the course is
required, individuals can try to balance their schedules to accommodate the workload and can inform supervisors regarding any impact on normal duties.

2. **Establish relevance for the virtual learner.** Before requiring someone to take a course, communicate the reasons why the content is important to the individual and the organization. If the participants don't understand the relevance, they will tend to do the minimal amount necessary in order to complete the program.

3. **Provide continuous encouragement throughout the entire virtual experience.** Participants can quickly lose motivation by feeling "lost in cyberspace." Email and other communications are great, cheap, and easy ways to encourage your virtual learners. Knowing that a real person is watching out for them helps humanize the virtual environment, and motivates participants to stay engaged.

4. **Assess learning.** When they know they will be tested, participants are motivated to learn. Don't focus solely on assessing the live interactions and activities. Use a variety of assessment techniques before, during, and after the curriculum.

5. **Provide organizational support for the virtual learning process.** One of the most difficult parts about learning at one's desk is the constant interruptions by those working around you. There is a perception that virtual learning can be interrupted - but the reality is that once a participant has been interrupted several times, retention fails and the chances that the program will be completed is dramatically lessened. If participants feel they need to work after-hours in order to complete a program, they will grow to resent the virtual classroom. One of the most important things you can do is create an organization where virtual learning is valued and considered a "Do Not Disturb" activity.

6. **Implement an internal marketing plan to encourage adoption.** In our networked world, word gets around fast. Make sure the word about virtual learning is positive, and constantly being reinforced. An initial marketing burst without a continuing campaign will make your initiative seem like another passing fad.
Regular news about what courses are coming up, and their importance to the organization, will help employees to understand that virtual learning is an integral part of the organization's learning culture. If virtual learning is "in," employees will demand to be part of the action.

7. **Establish, and enforce, a management mandate.** If potential participants know that management is behind a virtual learning initiative, they'll be more inclined to sign up. Get management involved by inviting them to record short "welcome" presentations for participants and encourage them to participate throughout the curriculum. Management buy-in can be extraordinarily helpful in getting participants involved and motivated!

8. **Provide rewards and recognition for virtual learning participation and success.** It feels great to answer a question correctly, and to receive positive feedback from facilitators and peers. Participants often don't expect positive reinforcement from virtual courses. Find ways to build in opportunity for tangible rewards and recognition - even for asynchronous programs. Ensure participants know that the time they spend in virtual programs is recognized as a valuable contribution to their professional development.

9. **Publish success stories.** Publishing success stories about virtual learning in your organization is a great way to reassure tentative new participants that they can be successful learning in the virtual classroom. Use those success stories to supplement your marketing effort.

10. **Design for virtual learner success.** Nothing succeeds like success! Give participants the opportunity to be successful and they will come back again and again. Do your best to create effective virtual learning environments, strong support systems, and well-designed programs and watch your virtual learners thrive!
OPPORTUNITIES TO COLLABORATE

A key to enabling virtual learners is to design opportunities for learners to interact and collaborate. But how do you make virtual learning a collaborative experience?

The answer sounds simple: find ways to bring participants together for social interaction or to solve a problem. Unfortunately, building collaborative exercises remains a major stumbling block for instructional designers when creating virtual or blended programs. Let's look at some techniques you can use to ensure that your virtual programs, both self-directed and live online, hit the mark.

The Learning & Development community has realized that simply using technology to create training isn't enough. Instead, we need to design virtual and blended programs that encourage participants to collaborate. That's all well and good, but what is online collaboration really? Why is it important? How do we achieve it?

Years ago, when trying to find the answers to these questions, I conducted a Google search. I looked at supplier websites, educational portals, and publications. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find a single standard definition of collaboration. Academic literature was a little more helpful, and based on that research, I identified the following goal of online collaboration:

When collaborating online, using asynchronous and synchronous online tools, participant groups should be able to get results (solve problems, create project plans, design projects, and so forth) that are better than the results they would have gotten working individually.

It still wasn't a definition, but I agreed with the goal. So, now that we understand the goal of online collaboration, the next question is when should you apply it?
Participants can collaborate and help one another reach learning goals by providing feedback, answering questions, and working as a distributed group. However, it’s important not to fall into the trap of thinking that virtual (i.e.: ’synchronous’) tools are your only option. In particular, moderated self-paced programs that include such tools as discussion boards and email can be collaborative in nature.

Fundamentally, you want participants to collaborate for two reasons:

**Collaboration to achieve participant engagement.** (Refer to *Use Interaction & Collaboration to Maximize Engagement in the Virtual Classroom* for our definitions of engagement, collaboration, and interaction.) Using collaboration to encourage participants to learn is always necessary. When participants know that they’ll need to be able to demonstrate what they’ve learned, they tend to stay more engaged. Interaction must include collaborative exercises that ask participants to do more than simply click on a poll answer or raise a hand.

**Collaboration to support learning outcomes.** Although all programs should offer some level of collaboration in order to keep participants engaged, you also may need to create collaborative exercises that support the actual learning goals. This is necessary because online programs often focus on teaching people collaborative skills, such as project management, team building, problem solving and interpersonal skills. These skills are performed in a collaborative social context, so interactions and exercises need to be designed to support the ultimate collaborative goal.
Three Levels of Collaboration

Three levels of collaboration identified in the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation’s, *Collaboration Handbook*, are cooperation, coordination, and true collaboration.

**COOPERATION**

Exercises that are cooperative in nature largely support individual learning goals, and participants tend to be concerned with the results of their personal assessments. If participants are asked to provide feedback or help someone else, they will—as long as it doesn’t affect their personal performance.

Here are some examples:

**Self-paced (asynchronous) cooperation.** Discussion boards found in online learning software, such as Blackboard, can be strong foundations for cooperative asynchronous exercises. For example, online instructors can ask participants to post answers to study questions in the discussion area. Participants are then required to read the postings by peers and provide some level of feedback. This is an example of learners agreeing to cooperate and assist others because it’s a course requirement.

**Virtual (synchronous) cooperation.** There are many ways to design mechanisms for participants to answer each other’s questions or provide feedback. For example, during an exercise, participants are instructed to provide critical feedback and suggestions using the chat area. Learners may then decide to alter their answers based on the feedback provided by their peers.
COORDINATION

Coordination occurs when participants start to work together as a group to achieve a common goal. They plan and assign tasks, create deadlines, and deliver a common product (presentation, report, set of answers, and so forth). Although individuals are still concerned with their own performance and assessment, they’re willing to work with a group when it supports their personal goals. If one group member starts to fall behind or fails to support the overall group effort, individuals within that group may decide to strike out on their own to ensure personal success.

If your primary reason for collaboration is participant engagement, then coordination may be your most realistic goal. You can ask participants to work together to solve technical problems, but it may not be necessary to make the success of the group their ultimate goal. Here are some examples:

**Self-paced (asynchronous) coordination.** In a recent course for an academic degree program, I participated in an asynchronous program that required group coordination. Our group had to create an instructional design project, and each member had different assignments that would merge together to create a completed project. This worked well until one of the team members became ill and was unable to complete his assignment. Concerned about our grades, the rest of the group had to continue and submit the final assignment--without giving credit to the team member who couldn’t contribute to the project. This is a perfect example of an exercise in which group members were willing to work together until it became clear that the individual personal success of each participant could be compromised.

**Virtual (synchronous) coordination.** In the live environment, participants may work together using such tools as application sharing, group chat, whiteboards, and breakout rooms to solve problems and answer questions. Because synchronous exercises often are short in duration, participants feel comfortable helping one another and working as a group. These types of coordination exercises assist the online instructor in keeping participants engaged, and they help instructors ensure that learning is actually taking place.
TRUE COLLABORATION

When the success of the group is paramount and all individuals must contribute to that success, you have true collaboration. No group member can be left behind and everyone within the group will do whatever it takes to reach the common goal. This is a very altruistic form of interaction and strongly supports collaboration as a learning outcome.

The same asynchronous or synchronous exercises designed for coordination and collaboration can be successful, and indeed work in the same way. The primary difference is whether you want the exercise to meet an engagement goal or a learning outcome goal. Also, in a truly collaborative situation, each individual within a group needs to succeed in order for the entire group to succeed.

Including Collaboration in Your Solution

Because technology-based solutions have become a permanent part of the developer’s toolbox, we need to start designing learning exercises that move smoothly between traditional classroom events and online options. For example, during a virtual training event, ask small groups of participants to work on a problem-solving exercise in a breakout room. During the breakout exercise,
they can develop additional assignments and follow-up tasks that must be completed prior to the next online event. Between the live events, participants can continue their collaboration using a variety of asynchronous tools, such as discussion boards and email. They can complete their collaborative interaction by making a group presentation to the larger class during the next face-to-face meeting.

These types of solutions are learner-centered and support the concept that learning is a process rather than an event. Once participants become accustomed to collaborating, both synchronously and asynchronously, they may start to incorporate more collaborative techniques into their daily interactions. It’s conceivable that participants in online programs may continue to assist each other long after the initial learning experience--thus, creating a learning community.

Clearly there are plenty of options for online collaboration. Take a good look at your virtual and blended programs and consider the level of collaboration that they offer. By using these definitions, you may be surprised to learn that your programs may be more point-and-click than collaborative in nature.

**A blend of delivery methods designed to maximize the learning outcome.**

Implementing blended learning is key to enabling virtual learners.

We have many options available to us when creating blended training programs. We can build self-paced programs using learning portals, websites, and e-learning. We can develop moderated discussions using social media, discussion boards and email. Finally, we can create real time events using traditional classrooms, videoconferencing, and virtual classrooms. The trick is learning what technologies to use and how to facilitate the blend.

Those of us who have been in the training profession for any length of time know there are always trends and fads. We’ve been introduced to learning organizations, life-long learning, matrixed teams, virtual classrooms, learning communities, and a myriad of other concepts. Although these practices all have true merit, it takes quite a bit of effort to implement the requisite changes. Worse still, such ideas are often just introduced at the conceptual level and forgotten about after the next reorganization or management change.

With all of these options available to us, how do we choose? Conventional wisdom tells us that the best programs are comprised of a blend of various learning technologies. Blending technologies that take advantage of learning preference, learner convenience, and instructional design best practices enable the developer to create programs that engage the learner and maximize learning retention. For this
reason, mixing the best blend of learning technologies is a critical success factor in creating effective online learning environments.

But this isn't news to you. It seems as though everyone is talking about building the right blend. Unfortunately, achieving the right blend requires work—not words. Applying instructional design at the front end and dedicating enough time to facilitate the blend at the back end is critical to success.

**Using Instructional Design to Design the Right Mix**

Instructional design is critical to the success of any program. That being said, we often shortcut the design process when creating traditionally delivered programs. Because we're still familiar with the medium, it's easy to anticipate how exercises will work, how the audience will respond, and what instructional strategies should be used. The online environment presents new and distinct challenges, though.

**What Can be Taught Online?**

Surprisingly, this is the wrong question. The question you should ask is, “Which parts of the program can I teach online, and what technology should I use?”

To effectively answer these questions, you need to go back to the instructional design drawing board. Identify the instructional goal, performance objectives, and assessment techniques. (If you’re redesigning an existing program, this is a good time to confirm that the original design assumptions remain valid.)

Once you’ve identified the performance objectives and assessment techniques, think about how you would assess that objective in the online environment. A multiple-choice test? Written essay? Oral feedback? Group application? If the assessment technique is individualized and objective in nature, such as a graded test, then that objective may be effectively delivered asynchronously. If performance is best assessed in an oral or group situation, such as giving effective feedback to a peer, a synchronous delivery method might be most effective for that part of your program. (Want more on this? See *Designing Blended Learning with Bloom’s Digital Taxonomy.*)
During this process, you may identify items that don’t require participant assessment, such as reviewing historical information, background content, and so forth. We often include this type of nice-to-know information in traditional programs, so it’s natural to try to include the same sort of data in online programs.

This is another example of where the rules change when moving to an online format. My philosophy when designing online content is: “If it’s not worth testing, it’s not worth teaching!” It’s difficult to keep participants motivated and engaged while learning online, and if they don’t feel the content is immediately relevant to what they need to accomplish, there’s a risk they may not see the value in continuing to participate in the program. Design the nice-to-know content as supplemental, easy-to-access additional material that participants can use when they want but not as a requirement for success.

After you’ve determined that an individual learning objective will be delivered in a live or self-paced environment, you can outline the specific technologies you will use to create content and assessment techniques.

You may think that if you’re converting an existing traditionally-delivered program to an online format, the design stage will take less time than if you were starting from scratch. Actually, the opposite often can be true. Design teams frequently get hung up on what worked in the classroom and try to create an exact duplicate in the online space. If the activities aren’t as effective online, the technology is viewed as the culprit. If you approach the program as if it were a new initiative intended to be taught ONLY online, and temporarily disregard what worked in a traditional setting, you will probably discover new effective interactions.

Be careful not to imply that the live (synchronous) components of your blended program are more critical than the self-directed (asynchronous) components. The right blend creates a learning process rather than individual events with a common theme. Each segment of the blend is equally important and relevant. Make sure the design communicates to participants that their individual success depends on them completing each step of the process.
Facilitating Your Blend

As with any training initiative, effective design is only one of the ingredients for success. It’s certainly not a case of “if we build it, they will come…and stay.” Strong facilitation is critical, especially as participants become accustomed to learning online. The facilitator needs to be ready, willing, and able to manage the blended initiative.

A common misconception is that the online facilitator’s job begins and ends with live events. As blended initiatives become more complex and asynchronous programs become more moderated in nature, the facilitator’s role expands in ways not immediately obvious.

Let’s take a look at what “ready, willing, and able” means.

Ready. Before facilitating a blend for the first time, the online facilitator needs to be certain that he or she is adequately prepared. At a minimum, the facilitator should:

**Understand the virtual learner experience.** It’s common for new online facilitators to lack experience as online learners. They need to take opportunities to participate in asynchronous, synchronous, and blended programs. They should critically assess these programs from the learner perspective, and note the best practices they want to emulate and the mistakes they want to avoid.

**Understand the design.** Prior to rehearsing the program, the facilitator should undertake a detailed review of the program design. It’s critical that the program activity design strategies are clear. A great way to accomplish this is to spend time with the instructional designer and have questions answered and misunderstandings clarified.

**Master the technology.** Once the design is reviewed, the facilitator needs to make sure he or she has mastered all of the technology. Besides being able to use the technology, the facilitator needs to be ready to provide some level of support to participants and direct participants to resources for additional information.

**Practice managing the blend.** Rehearsals are important before any delivery, but they’re especially critical for new facilitators. Encourage participation by other facilitators, the instructional designer, and potential audience members. Collect and incorporate feedback prior to the live event.
Willing. Not all classroom instructors want to be virtual facilitators. The best environment for online participants is one in which their facilitator is a willing player. To be effective, an online facilitator must:

**Believe in the effectiveness of online learning.** If the facilitator doesn’t believe online learning works, he or she may not deliver an effective program.

**Believe in the effectiveness of the program.** The facilitator needs to trust that he or she can deliver the program without affecting their professional credibility as a trainer. Facilitators need to know that the program is effective and that participants will be able to learn. They don’t want a program to fail because they’re concerned that they will be viewed as responsible.

Able. Finally, the online facilitator needs to rely on his or her environment to support them and the online program. Facilitators need:

**Time to get ready.** Everyone needs to realize that preparing to teach online takes time, and balance workloads accordingly.

**Time to teach.** It’s more than just the live events; facilitators need to be able to communicate with participants throughout the process. They need time to answer questions, respond to posts, and review assignments. In a blended program, for every hour of synchronous facilitation there may be an additional hour (or more!) of asynchronous facilitation and administration.

**Support for the program.** Facilitators aren’t the only people who need time. Participants need to understand how to learn online and have the time to complete all components of the blend—not just the synchronous components.
Technical support. While part of the facilitator’s job is providing technical assistance to participants, they need to have another layer of technical support to assist them. If facilitators are trying to fix the technology, they may not have time to manage the learning process.

Taking the time up front to design effective programs, and allowing the facilitator time to prepare to deliver those programs, will be well worth the time and effort. It will get easier as the industry masters the process—I promise.

Usable Technology

A seemingly obvious way to enable virtual learners is to provide useable and accessible technology. However, useable and accessible technology means more than just a system that operates. It requires technology that works efficiently, access to support tools, and programs that are designed to effectively use the technology. More importantly, facilitators must orient learners to the new environment.

MASTERING THE TECHNOLOGY

Probably the most obvious impediment to learning online is the technology: software, hardware, bandwidth--and being able to use it all. If you ask facilitators, learners, and IT folks about what worries them most about eLearning and virtual learning, educational technology is usually first on their list. And although technology is making steady advances (for example, more bandwidth is available, hardware and software are becoming less expensive), there are still many obstacles that need to be overcome to ensure that learners have a positive online experience.

The first obstacle seems easy to remedy: make sure that each learner’s set up works. Typically, training managers send out hardware and software specifications to learners, such as RAM, bandwidth, operating system requirements, and so forth. While this information is useful to the technical support contact, it generally doesn’t help the end user. To assist the end user, offer tips on how to test the software or system to see whether it meets the minimum requirements. For example, if a sound card and speakers are required, link them to a website that has sound so they can test their sound capabilities. Another way you can assist users is to send them a set of questions that they can use to communicate with their help desk, including:

- Is my machine equipped with a sound card that allows for audio-in and audio-out? (You’d be surprised!)
• Is this BYOD?
• What is the bandwidth requirement?
• What plug-ins are needed?
• What browser version am I using?
• Are there any firewall issues (for instance, if VoIP is used) and/or website access restrictions?
• Do I need an internet microphone?

Once the learner verifies that minimal technical requirements are met, be sure to provide contact information (phone number and email) for technical problems, such as password issues, system crashes, and so forth. Also, remind users to have a print copy of instructions handy because it won’t help to have the information in their computer if it shuts down.

Lastly, it’s critical that learners test their machines well ahead of any scheduled online activity. Too often, the first clue that a machine isn’t responding appropriately is when they sit down to complete their assignment or attend the program. Typically, this is too late to resolve the issue and results in a frustrating learning experience that leaves a lasting impact.
PREPARE THE LEARNERS

The next issue training managers need to address is how to ensure that learners can use the technology so effectively that collaboration becomes effortless. Even though many tools, both virtual and self-paced, are touted by suppliers as easy-to-use, participants still need to acclimate themselves to the new learning environment.

Enter the learning orientation program. Use the virtual classroom to manage this process, and offer orientation to learners on a regular basis. During the program, give participants permission to be frustrated and ask them to share their dissatisfaction during class. You want to alleviate their aggravation here, and not let it carry over to content-oriented programs.

In this virtual training orientation, consider including the following items:

A tools overview that instructs learners on how to use the different technologies.

Communication guidelines that emphasize the importance of participating actively and completing all assignments.

Ground rules to instruct learners about what is acceptable and not acceptable in this new learning environment, such as logging in early, completing self-directed work prior to live events, how to “step out” of class, and so forth.

Tips on how to maximize the learning experience from their own desk, such as how to minimize interruption, maintain focus and concentration, and communicate with their managers and peers about the learning process.

Descriptions of the various program components. For example, you may have an asynchronous discussion board supporting multiple live, online events, which may be supplemented by a printed participant workbook with assignments that need to be completed by specific deadlines.

Also, it’s a good idea to ask the IT support team to participate in online orientations and events so that they understand the environment they need to support. This insider experience may make them more empathetic to the time-is-of-the-essence pressure the learner faces.
TONE DOWN THE BELLS AND WHISTLES

Another thing that instructional designers can do to minimize the focus on technology is to resist the lure of using all the bells and whistles. Make certain that any tools used support the learning objectives rather than flaunt programming skills. For this reason, it’s crucial to include the instructional designer in the development of multimedia tutorials. Don’t simply surrender the development to a programmer and assume they’re going to create the best environment.

Likewise, the facilitator should participate in program development as well. For example, before the instructional designer decides to use a self-directed multimedia tutorial, he or she should participate in courses that use the same format in order to identify best practices in exercise design, screen design, and navigation. Also, programmers, instructional designers, and facilitators should attend live events (or watch recordings of live events) to fully understand the learner experience.

To be sure, technology expands our ability to disseminate learning across our organizations. But no matter how popular the latest tool or technology, keep in mind that our mission is to build well designed programs that effectively meet performance objectives. Ensuring the effective use of technology for the learning environment lays the groundwork for creating online programs that are as effective (dare I say, more effective?) than traditional training events.

Active and participative facilitators that believe in and support the blended learning experience.

Adoption of educational technologies isn’t just new to our learner audience, it is often a new experience for the people facilitating the process. Ensuring that facilitators are ready to support the process will go a long way towards maximizing the return on investment of time and budget.

The facilitator is the glue that holds the other four considerations together: learner motivation, opportunities to collaborate, a blended experience, and usable technology.

The virtual facilitator plays a vital role in ensuring that learners are successful. Whether participating via a traditional, virtual, self-
directed, or blended approach, learners need to feel as though they have developed a personal rapport with the facilitator.

This need is even more important in an online environment than a traditional program because the facilitator acts as an anchor, reassuring learners that support, reinforcement, and assessment is readily available. But take note: active and participative doesn’t mean excessively communicating with email messages and lectures. Instead, it means that facilitators must create a learner-centered environment. More important, they need to move the focus away from themselves and the technology to the content and the learners.

So, how does the facilitator weave together the critical considerations that enable virtual learners? Let’s look at each.

1. LEARNER MOTIVATION

One of the dangers of online learning is that learners can feel isolated. The facilitator needs to become the central human contact point, reducing the impression that people are learning from a computer. With a more participative facilitator, there are more opportunities for the facilitator to maintain a high level of motivation among learners.

The facilitator can be visibly involved in many ways. He or she can offer recognition, conduct assessments, and facilitate relationships between remote learners. Because assessments are often a key motivator for online learners (people learn what they’re being tested on), the online facilitator needs to offer continuous feedback and encourage people to complete assignments in a timely manner. An effective online facilitator continually reinforces performance by providing rewards and recognition of achievements.

2. CREATING OPPORTUNITIES TO COLLABORATE

Earlier in this paper we discussed the importance of designing interaction that maximized collaboration between learners. The skilled facilitator encourages collaboration even when it's already designed into the course. They should encourage participants to "speak" as often as possible and to offer feedback to peers. They also need to minimize lecture and maximize engagement by providing feedback to learners on the results of their collaboration.

Using language appropriately can also encourage collaboration online. For example, reduce the use of techno-jargon in order to emphasize the learning and diminish the focus on technology. For example, instead of saying, “Please wait while I launch
application sharing,” ask learners to participate in a chat activity while you launch the application. Another tip is to use people’s names frequently and to circle-back to comments made earlier in the program in order to facilitate interest amongst the learners.

3. BLENDING THE EXPERIENCE, NOT JUST THE TECHNOLOGY

There’s a tendency to treat the individual lessons in a blend (virtual classroom, eLearning, assessments) as being standalone modules. The active and participative facilitator constantly reinforces the connections and finds ways to communicate to learners that the self-directed components are critical to the overall success of the blended learning curriculum. They should ensure that self-directed work is completed in a timely manner by incorporating the knowledge gained in the self-directed portion of the course with the live portion of the course. Facilitators also need to continually communicate with learners—not just during the live events. By doing so, learning becomes a continual process rather than a compartmentalized event.

4. ENSURING USABLE TECHNOLOGY

Just because the technology is user-friendly, success isn’t guaranteed. Introducing new learning technologies, different ways of communicating, and 24/7 access to information can be overwhelming for even technologically competent learners.

The online facilitator needs to manage the learner’s adoption and mastery of such new skills without having it interfere with how they learn the content. To do this, the facilitator needs to begin communicating with learners several weeks before classes begin, addressing technology issues before participants need to focus on new skills and knowledge. Facilitators should develop a communication plan that time-releases information on how to set up the technology, offering support whenever needed (after hours, differing time zones, and so forth) and providing tech-checks and orientation to the new environment.

In order for the online facilitator to do this, he or she must have full mastery of the technology being used. The facilitator will know that they have reached mastery level when they’re able to provide detailed learner support and technical assistance remotely—with enough detail that the learner can follow along easily. For example, a master facilitator can easily relate the following instructions: “If you would like to put text on the whiteboard, locate the text tool, identified by
the letter A on your toolbar. Click on that tool once, then click once on the whiteboard. Finally, type your message. When you’ve completed typing, click anywhere outside the box so the rest of the class can read your comments.”

**Divide and Conquer**

How can a facilitator successfully accomplish all of these tasks when they’re managing multiple sessions or courses simultaneously? The answer is a team teaching approach. Using a producer, or what is sometimes referred to as an assistant facilitator, the facilitator can focus on content and maximizing interaction. Meanwhile, the producer can focus on such issues as technical support, distribution of materials and email, and validation that deadlines have been met. During the live sessions, the producer can assist by managing chat or preparing application sharing and breakout room exercises.

In essence, the course has two equally important people ensuring its success and supporting one another. To alleviate confusion, make sure that learners are aware of the dual roles, the responsibilities of each person, and to whom they should direct their questions. For example, instructional or assignment questions go to the facilitator; questions of a technical nature go to the producer.

Some organizations are resistant to the team teaching approach primarily because it’s perceived as an additional overhead expense. The producer role doesn’t need to be an expensive resource, though. Organizations have successfully used college interns, administrative assistants, and training coordinators. In addition, a facilitator can serve as a producer when a subject matter expert is delivering the content. In addition, the role of producer can fill your trainer “pipeline” by developing in-house expertise for virtual learning.
Enabling Virtual Learners

Although organizations are investing money in technology and content, they’re not always aware that they need to invest in enabling virtual learners. When designing and delivering virtual learning, strive to deliver the following:

- Motivated virtual learners.
- Opportunities for students to collaborate.
- A blended learning experience that maximizes the learning.
- Useable technology.
- An active and participative facilitator.

Designing with these considerations in mind will fully enable your virtual learners, and maximize your organization’s time, energy, and return on investment.

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About The Author – Jennifer Hofmann

Jennifer Hofmann is the president of InSync Training, LLC, a consulting firm that specializes in the design and delivery of virtual and blended learning. Featured in Forbes Most Powerful Women issue (June 16, 2014) as a New England Women Business Leader, she has led InSync Training to the Inc. 5000 as the 10th Fastest Growing Education Company in the U.S. (2013).

Hofmann is a recognized thought leader in the field of synchronous learning. She is the author of The Synchronous Trainer’s Survival Guide: Facilitating Successful Live and Online Courses, Meetings and Events (Pfeiffer, 2003), Live and Online! Tips, Techniques, and Ready-To-Use Activities for the Virtual Classroom (Pfeiffer, 2004), and How To Design For The Live Online Classroom: Creating Great Interactive and Collaborative Training Using Web Conferencing (Brandon Hall, 2005). Additionally, she is a chapter contributor to The Handbook of Blended Learning (Pfeiffer, 2006), TheAMA Handbook of E-Learning (The American Management Association, 2003), and The ASTD Handbook for Workplace Learning Professionals (ASTD, 2008 and 2014). She has co-authored, with Dr. Nanette Miner, Tailored Learning: Designing the Blend That Fits (ASTD, 2009), a book focused on taking advantage of distributed technologies to create the best blended training solution possible.

Follow Jennifer Hofmann at her blog, Body Language In The Bandwidth at http://blog.insynctraining.com or on Twitter @InSyncJennifer.
Virtual Classroom Experts Maximize Impact, ROI

Corporate employers invest more than $160 billion annually in employee training. Much of that amount is spent on live virtual-training programs, particularly for workforces spread across the globe.

Not all webinars, however, are created equal.

Jennifer Hofmann, veteran corporate training consultant and a leading expert on virtual learning for over 20 years, says employers pay a high price for subpar training sessions. In fact, the hidden costs for subpar training far exceed the $160 billion employers spend. She founded InSync Training in 1999 to banish boring webinars and help businesses extract significant value from their e-learning platforms and build core competencies for their virtual-learning teams.

Just talking to a PowerPoint presentation for an hour doesn’t cut it,” she says. “If you lose participants’ interest and attention, they don’t absorb, process and retain what they hear. Companies see little return on their investment. We set out to change all that.”

InSync is currently managing Cisco Systems’ 12-week new-hire sales training program—the Cisco Sales Associate Program (CSAP)—using Cisco’s own TelePresence and WebEx virtual learning tools. For InSync’s broad support of Cisco's training needs, the company was awarded an Excellence in Practice award by ASTD, the world’s largest organization of training and development professionals.

InSync helps virtual-classroom facilitators connect with students in a whole new way to ensure every training session meets workforce and organizational needs.

Instructional design—InSync has the expertise, reach and resources to provide seamless, end-to-end course creation as well as consulting and assessment in the field.

Facilitators and producers at the ready—InSync’s program facilitators and producers, who deliver both tech support and instructional excellence, help manage and deliver virtual-training sessions that are exciting, impactful and memorable.

“We’re a global organization,” Hofmann says. “We start on Sunday evening, supporting training in China, and we don’t stop until training ends in California on Friday afternoon. We are where ever and whenever client training takes place.”