Virtual Classroom Tool Design Basics:
A Virtual Engagement Primer

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

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

InSync Training is the acknowledged leader in the virtual training design and delivery field – we have been in the business of virtual training delivery since 1999, and are routinely identified as the “go-to” vendor for expertise in this field. InSync provides accredited and 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 virtual classroom. We help learning and development professionals understand the world of virtual 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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Virtual Classroom Tool Design Basics

Introduction

Virtual training design doesn’t need to be difficult – but designers do need a working knowledge of the features and tools each virtual classroom provides.

In this white paper, we’ll be sharing high-level summaries of virtual classroom tools, including chat, breakout rooms, whiteboards, application sharing, synchronized web browsing, and survey and feedback tools.

Why use these new tools at all? Because the virtual classroom is not the same as the traditional classroom, and we need to adapt our engagement techniques in order to create meaningful, learner-centered programs.

In this paper we will cover the following virtual classroom tools:

1. **Virtual Classroom Chat** - Chat is probably the most familiar tool in the virtual classroom, but in order to design for this tool, you need to understand its capabilities.

2. **Breakout Rooms** - Ready to kick your virtual training up a notch? Design for true collaboration with breakout room activities.

3. **Shared Whiteboards** - Creating engagement in the virtual classroom is easy when you design effective whiteboard activities.

4. **Application Sharing** - Make sure your application training is more than a demonstration. Design collaborative exercises that exploit application sharing in your virtual classroom.
5. **Synchronized Web Browsing** - Synchronized web browsing can add great interaction to a virtual classroom design, if only anyone used it. Create engagement using this versatile tool.

6. **Survey, Feedback and Other Tools** – Some virtual classroom tools are often overlooked including surveys and other feedback tools. They can easily be inserted into a program to create interactive and collaborative activities.

**Create Meaningful Engagement**

Since the introduction of the virtual classroom, poor design for live online sessions has inadvertently taught participants that virtual sessions are a "free hour" – an opportunity to listen intermittently while checking and responding to e-mail and taking care of other light duties. Participants now are so accustomed to this free hour idea that they are often annoyed when the facilitator of a live online session asks for their participation.

In short, unless you provide meaningful engagement you can be quite certain that participants will get bored. Just as in a traditional classroom, participants in a live online setting get restless, get tired, and lose interest if it is not immediately apparent that the session is worth their time.

Online, the boredom factor is particularly dangerous. Without eye contact and body language, you (the facilitator) can't know whether participants are paying attention – and they *know* you don’t know.

Consequently, designers must craft live virtual sessions carefully in order to battle boredom and its inevitable disengagement. Fight the ho-hum factor!

How? The strength of live online learning is in its capacity for engagement. No matter what topic you are discussing or which virtual classroom platform you are using, the key to a successful live online program is convincing participants to be fully present and engaged. Designing virtual programs that engage learners is a subject all to its own and we won’t cover it here (see our whitepaper, *Enabling Virtual Learners by Design*, for more information).

For now, remember this: Keep content-heavy presentations to 45 minutes at an absolute maximum, with interaction every three to five minutes. And no session, no matter how collaborative and engaging, should be longer than two hours.
Every Three to Five Minutes

"Good design is key," says a national e-learning manager in Novato, California. That means "creating plenty of interaction opportunities every three to five minutes and using real-world examples and questions." A Design Specialist at a bank in Toronto says she has adopted this motto: "Design for activity, not content!"

It should come as no surprise that regular engagement helps participants learn. One company says it prepared a course for virtual online delivery and later adapted the same course for the traditional classroom. The company found, somewhat to its surprise, that participants in the traditional classroom course adapted from the live online course actually learned better.

Why? The frequent activities built-in to the live online course stayed in the design for the traditional classroom. That kept participants in the traditional classroom engaged, and participant engagement makes any learning more effective.

This reminds us of an important lesson: As with any adult learning, adults participating in live online learning need to be involved and contributing in order to learn most effectively. This is true in any delivery medium. And it certainly remains true in live online learning.

But what do you DO every three to five minutes? Just the thought of designing that much content can be daunting.

That's where using all of the great tools available to you in the virtual classroom comes in. By using these tools effectively and appropriately, you can create engagement and participation in your live online learning events which leads to the ultimate goal in eLearning - training that "sticks."
Chat

Chat is probably the most familiar tool in the virtual classroom. It can be used for so much more than Q&A! I always encourage facilitators to make both private and public chat available to participants no matter what the audience size. It’s the easiest way to encourage interaction.

Text-based chat lets participants and facilitators communicate with one another using text messaging. Some vendors’ platforms offer group chat areas. Others have a feature more closely resembling an instant messaging function.

Instructional Applications of Chat

Chat is a versatile tool. Here are some instructional techniques for you to consider:

1. In a traditional classroom, a facilitator might give the instruction, “Turn to your partner and discuss how to justify government spending to put an astronaut on Mars.” In the virtual classroom, chat lets you conduct the same exercise in chat-based breakout groups of two or three. You can use chat for brainstorming, for submitting questions, and for responding or reacting to content. Instructions for group exercises or self-paced individual exercises can be copied and pasted from a word processing application into a chat area for participants to review during an exercise.

2. When a participant has a question, the chat feature may let the person “park” the question for a response later from the facilitator – rather than interrupting on the spot. Private messaging, another useful aspect of chat, lets participants signal the facilitator that they are having technology problems or other difficulties – without disrupting a session. If you have a technical support person (such as a producer) online with you during a session, that person can monitor chat to identify and fix technical problems without interrupting the class.

3. If you happen to be using a subject matter expert, invite that person to monitor the chat area after presenting. Then, invite participants to post questions for the expert in chat. The expert can respond immediately via chat or respond later by e-mail. Or, if warranted, the expert can respond on the spot to the full class. For example, a participant might indicate that he did not understand the instructions for an exercise.
Another advantage of chat is that participants who tend to be shy about speaking up in an audio discussion may be more likely to participate in chat discussion.

Finally, you may be able to save transcripts of chat discussions as text files for use after your learning event is over. Participants can go back and pick up points they have forgotten or didn’t notice at first. And facilitators and designers can review chat transcripts to see how well participants followed instructions and caught on to key points.

**Checking Out Your Chat: What Should You Look For?**

Before designing exercises, you need to truly understand what your chat tool can do. Every platform (Adobe Connect, WebEx, GoTo Training, etc.) is a bit different. Here are some questions to ask about the chat feature in your virtual classroom:

- Is full group chat available? Full group chat means everyone can chat simultaneously, and everyone can see all responses. Some virtual classrooms, on the other hand, only allow private chat between the facilitator and individual participants.
- Is private messaging to the facilitator and/or assistant facilitator available?
- Is private messaging among participants allowed?
- Can a private message be sent to more than one person?
- Can a transcript of chat be saved for later use?
- Will the transcript include private messages between participants and/or facilitators?

Since text chat is so ubiquitous via instant messaging, mobile phones, and social networks, there has been a tendency to overlook the potential power it can have in a training setting. Exploiting this simple feature to its fullest is an easy way to have a big impact on your level of engagement.

Chat is an easy way to get engagement, but they do say a picture is worth 1000 words. For just that reason, whiteboards are my favorite virtual classroom engagement tool.
Whiteboards

The most commonly used tool in the virtual classroom is the whiteboard, where slides and documents are shared as if they were flipcharts in a traditional setting.

Facilitators use whiteboards to record participants’ comments, to emphasize important points, and to write exercise instructions.

Use the whiteboard in the same way you would use a flip chart or marker board in a traditional classroom. For example, at the beginning of a live online learning session, you can ask participants to state their expectations. The facilitator then writes down those expectations on the whiteboard and revisits the same board at the end of a program to see whether the session met those expectations.

Facilitators can highlight content on the whiteboard as they discuss it, lending a visual emphasis to their comments.
The whiteboard can be used to create interaction or collaboration by calling on participants to write their ideas or conclusions on it. Whiteboard use makes your program more visually engaging and helps maintain participants’ focus.

The whiteboard is invaluable for visual learners. Kinesthetic learners benefit as well from the activity of marking it up. For all learners, the whiteboard helps to maintain attention.

Whiteboards have some or all of the following tools: pencil, eraser, highlighter, pointer, text, color, lines, and shapes. Some whiteboards can import files for use like prepared flip charts.

When you ask participants to use the whiteboard, encourage creativity. Suggest they use different fonts and colors as they write. Or encourage them to use the drawing tool instead of typing – making a picture and highlighting its key parts.

**Instructional Applications of Whiteboards**

At InSync Training, we LOVE using whiteboards. Here are some instructional techniques for you to consider:

1. If more than one person can write on your whiteboard at the same time, you have many options for whiteboard exercises. For example, if you want six people to write responses on your whiteboard, make a grid on the whiteboard with six boxes, each clearly labeled. Assign each of your participants to one of the spaces. This activity can work effectively for up to twenty participants. If you have more than twenty participants, ask your non-writing observers to comment on or interpret what the others put on the whiteboard.

2. You can also play “games” on the whiteboard. Ask participants to sketch in missing parts of diagrams or to fill in crossword puzzles. Games wake people up, drive home key points, and help everyone have some fun.

3. You can use the whiteboard in software training to take a “snapshot” of a screen showing the application and paste that snapshot onto the whiteboard. The facilitator or participants can then write on and draw arrows to a part of the image.
Wondering About Your Whiteboard? What Should You Look For?

Before designing exercises, you need to truly understand what your whiteboard tool can do. Every platform (Adobe Connect, WebEx, GoTo Training, etc.) is a bit different. Here are some questions to ask about the whiteboard feature in your virtual classroom platform:

- Can whiteboards be archived for reuse by participants at a later date?
- Can you paste or import graphics to the whiteboard?
- How many people can write on the whiteboard at once?
- If you close a slide on which you have written and then open it later, will your written comments still be there?
- Can drawings and other graphics be moved once they are on the whiteboard? (This is called an "object oriented" whiteboard.)

Whiteboards and PowerPoint

The most common type of file used as a whiteboard is PowerPoint. This is the visual element that has become the foundation of nearly everything we do in the virtual classroom. Using it to its best advantage is crucial.

Design your PowerPoint slides for maximum engagement. Slides become the online equivalent of eye contact and body language, and changes to the slides can help emphasize content. With PowerPoint, you can find out whether participants are paying attention and whether they understand.

How? Instead of slides with bullet points, show slides that ask questions. Invite participants to discuss the questions on your slides, either with voice responses or by having participants write on the whiteboard.

Some virtual classrooms don’t support PowerPoint animations. We’ve all been in presentations where things fly in from the right or left, or kind of sizzle into place. These are PowerPoint “builds.” Make sure your virtual classroom supports this type of visual before you spend a lot of time creating builds because your attempts at visual interaction might be for naught.

Here are some things you shouldn’t do with PowerPoint:
• Don’t place all of your content on slides and then drone on reading the material slide by slide during your live online session. "Death by PowerPoint" is a hazard of in-person presentations. It's even deadlier online because participants know you can’t see them dozing off. If you’re recording the session, participants will know they can go back and read the slides later and see everything you had to offer. In short, putting all of your content on slides sends the wrong signal to participants. Instead of saying, “Pay attention to me now!” you seem to be saying, “You can read all of this later, on your own.”

• Don’t send out your slides ahead of time. In the same way, participants will think that by reading your slides they will find out everything you have to offer – so why bother to take part in your session?

• Don’t provide application screenshots in your handouts for the session. Likewise, distributing all of your content will cause participants to think they can get the same value from reading the material on their own as they will from attending your session.

Whiteboarding is almost always available to you and to your participants. It’s easy to use, and is impactful, so why not use it as much as possible?

Chat and whiteboards work well independently and can be easily combined. To kick your training up a notch, they can be incorporated into breakout room activities.
Breakout Rooms

If you are looking to find ways to move your events from a webinar format to true training, consider designing small group activities. (Yes, just like in a "REAL" class.)

Breakout rooms allow groups of two or more participants to meet and collaborate during a larger live online session. The facilitator can assign one or more participants to breakout rooms to complete a self-paced exercise or assessment, or for team competitions. They are ideal for training sessions in which teams or groups must work with specific content – analyzing a case study, for example.

5 Things You Need to Know About Breakout Rooms

Breakout rooms can be used to create interaction or collaboration by making your content more learner-centered. Small group activities help to create working relationships between participants, and allow for true creativity and application of knowledge.
Using this impactful tool can be what makes your training effective because it demonstrates that the virtual classroom can be used to obtain real training results. Here are five things to consider about breakout rooms:

1. This tool is different than chat. Participants can talk (usually their personal audio feed follows them into the small group work area), and can collaborate using tools like whiteboards, chat, and application sharing. This is really just a more personal classroom in which to work.

2. Different groups can work with different content or on different exercises from one breakout room to the next. In classes with a range of expertise among participants, a facilitator can sort participants by expertise and send them to separate breakout rooms, each with its own assistant facilitator to moderate.

3. The facilitator can move from breakout room to breakout room to work with groups or with individuals as needed – for example, helping K-12 students with math problems or coaching trainees on how to use a software application.

4. More often, however, participants won't have a facilitator in a breakout room. That means instructions for breakout rooms must be very clear. Instructions should be both in participant guides and copied into the chat area before sending participants to their respective breakout room activities.

5. If you have more than one expert at a presentation or learning event, you can assign each expert to a breakout room, and participants can go to the room of their choice for discussion.

Questions to Ask About Breakout Rooms

Before designing exercises, you need to truly understand what your breakout room tool can do. Every platform (Adobe Connect, WebEx, GoTo Training, etc.) is a bit different. Here are some questions to ask about the breakout feature in your virtual classroom platform:

- Is this feature built-in? Many platforms were created specifically for meetings and large events, and may not have small group collaboration capabilities.

- What features are available for use inside the breakout rooms? Whiteboards? Application sharing? More capabilities mean you can send your participants to breakout rooms for activities beyond small-group discussion or brainstorming.
• Can you pre-assign participants to particular breakout rooms? It takes time to assign people and content to breakout rooms. If you cannot do this ahead of time, you'll want your producer or assistant to set these up for you, or give participants a self-directed participant guide assignment while you spend the several minutes it takes to set up the breakout exercise.

• Can participants move from room to room during an activity? If you have just one or two experts available and you’d like them to cover all the rooms, for example, popping out of one room and into another is an attractive feature.

• Can whiteboard content and other materials that participants create in breakout rooms be brought into the “main room” and shared with the full group when it reconvenes?

• Can you record individual breakout activities? (If not, and you want a recording of a breakout, you can leave one group in the main room and just record them!)

Well-designed breakout room activities can help to change the attitude of your audience with regard to virtual classroom training, and it’s an experience they won’t understand until they participate in it. It takes practice and planning- so put the time in and make it count.
Application Sharing

A very popular feature in virtual classrooms is application sharing. This feature allows the facilitator to share software applications (such as spreadsheet, word processing, or custom applications) with participants, even if the participants do not have the software installed on their individual machines. Because the feature is so visually impressive, vendors often use it as a highlight for their demonstrations.

There are many varieties of application sharing, ranging from “view only” on the participants’ side to allowing participants to actually interact with applications shared by the facilitator or by other participants.

Although the feature is very powerful, it is often not used creatively. The most common application is demonstrating software and allowing one or two participants to replicate what they saw the facilitator do. This is useful in some circumstances but it does not promote participant collaboration or provide the opportunity for all participants to learn how to use the software. There are many ways to use application sharing that do successfully teach in a collaborative manner.

Because working with an application during a sharing exercise often takes the facilitator’s focus away from the virtual classroom, it is very helpful to have a producer to monitor feedback, questions, and interactions.

Application sharing can be used to create interaction or collaboration by making your content more learner-centered. If you move out of demonstration mode and actually allow ALL participants to practice, you'll be kicking up your instruction.

And remember, participants can use the applications on their own machines during practice periods. Self-directed activities are a great way to teach software.
Instructional Uses of Application Sharing

Use application sharing to demonstrate software features. This is the most common use of this tool and is a good starting point for other, more collaborative, application sharing exercises. Some other ideas to consider would include:

1. Create a case study and pass control from participant to participant to complete steps in series. If information from previous steps is needed for later steps, it will encourage all participants to pay attention. Having everyone complete different tasks reduces tedium while teaching a process.

2. Small groups can collaborate by sharing common office software packages in the breakout rooms. For example, you may want a sales group to determine the best sales mix for their territory during the next twelve months. Give them access to a spreadsheet file and have them collaborate using the spreadsheet.

3. Participants can use application sharing in individual breakout rooms. This allows them to interact with an application residing on their own desktops. If the bandwidth is available, each individual can work in his or her own breakout room on an application and receive personal assistance from a facilitator.

4. Application sharing can be a very powerful role-playing tool for teaching skills that involve technology. A single participant can interact with the technology based on a case study or mock telephone call while the other participants watch and provide feedback.

Questions to Ask About Application Sharing

Before designing exercises, you need to truly understand what your application sharing tool can do. Every platform (Adobe Connect, WebEx, GoToTraining, etc.) is a bit different. Here are some questions to ask about the application sharing feature in your virtual classroom platform:

- What types of applications can be shared? If you have an older or very large application, it may not share well or at all. Ask your vendor about limitations, and be sure to test for effectiveness before creating exercises.

- Can the entire desktop be shared? Some virtual classroom platforms only allow you to share an entire desktop. Some offer desktop sharing as an option. You want to be sure of how to use these capabilities so you can design your exercises with a mind to what the participants will be
seeing. You need to plan whether they can see the entire desktop, the entire application, or just a fixed window size of an application.

- What are the bandwidth requirements for application sharing? The more items you are sharing, the bigger the impact on bandwidth. If you have five breakout rooms in process, each sharing its own application, it could be more than your network can gracefully manage.

- Can participants interact with the application or just view it? While most vendors offer a full application sharing option, some only allow the participants to observe the facilitator interacting with the application.

- Can applications be shared from a participant’s desktop? There are some circumstances, such as in software development courses, in which the class can benefit from viewing an application shared from a participant’s machine.

Your audience members will be accustomed to seeing application sharing in a webinar type of environment, but they may very likely be surprised to see it used so collaboratively. Just like breakout rooms, practice makes perfect.
Synchronized Web Browsing

Synchronized web browsing can add great interaction to a virtual classroom design, if only anyone used it. It's easy to create engagement using this versatile tool.

Within the virtual classroom, the feature of synchronized web browsing (or just 'web browsing') allows the facilitator or participants to bring the class to an internet site or corporate intranet. It provides the opportunity to use the entire World Wide Web as potential content in the classroom. This allows facilitators to browse the web while the participants follow them. As links are clicked or addresses entered into the URL locator, the websites will be launched on the participants' machines. This is another highly demonstrated feature in the virtual classroom sales process, but one that is frequently underutilized once such classes are implemented in organizations.

By allowing participants to work independently during a live session, web browsing can be used to create engagement by making your content more learner-centered. Remember, just because the class is meeting at a particular time does not mean we need to focus on talking. Give your participants a break, and allow them to learn on their own and then be ready to contribute to the group discussion.
Instructional Uses of Web Browsing

Here are some basic ideas to help the instructional designer create collaborative exercises using web browsing:

1. Have participants access self-directed e-learning, web-based assessments, or pre-recorded video via a web browsing link. The facilitator can provide a specified period of time for the independent activity, and then easily reconvene the class.

2. Instead of re-creating content that already exists, you can use the internet or corporate intranet as a content source. This will be more visually interesting than slides and provides the participants with a place to go later to find more detailed information.

3. One way to allow a participant to share information is to allow that participant to bring the class to a website.

4. The web can be used as the basis for scavenger hunt type games that can be used for icebreakers or contests. Use the web to teach about competitors, current events, or industry news. By using this method instead of preparing slides, you can ensure you always have the most up-to-date information.

Questions to Ask About Web Browsing

Before designing exercises, you need to truly understand what your web browsing tool can do. Every platform (Adobe Connect, WebEx, GoToTraining, etc.) is a bit different. Here are some questions to ask about the web browsing feature in your virtual classroom platform:

- If you would like to have participants watch a video on a website (think YouTube), what is the best way to manage the sound?

- Can hyperlinks be made available to individual participants? If this is the case, once on a site launched by a facilitator, the participants can click through the links independently. To bring the class back together, the facilitator usually needs to launch the next content item in the agenda.

- How are multimedia sites managed? If you want to bring the class to a site that utilizes multimedia, such as Flash, each participant may need to have the appropriate plug-in.

- Can bookmarks be created prior to class? If you can create bookmarks, it eliminates the time it takes to type in complicated URLs and minimizes the chances for typing errors.

Of all the virtual classroom tools I’ve discussed, synchronized web browsing is probably the most under-utilized. You’ll surprise your participants (in a good way) when you start incorporating activities using this tool.
Surveys, Polls and Feedback Tools

Surveys, polls and other feedback tools can easily be inserted into a program to create interactive and collaborative activities.

To offset the absence of eye contact and body language signals facilitators usually rely on in traditional classrooms, virtual classrooms offer surveying, polling, and feedback tools.

These tools help facilitators create engagement and determine whether participants understand the material. Participants can use these tools to tell the facilitator what they think of the pace and clarity of the content.

These tools also function as a means of interaction to keep participants engaged. A survey is a good way to re-engage participants who don’t seem to be participating. And you can use surveys to transition to a new topic, such as asking, “How many of you have had experience with...?” You can ask questions about the new topic and then comment on the results: “Hmmm. This group thinks it has a fair amount of knowledge about the next subject.”

You can survey participants as ice-breaker activities. For example, ask, “How many of you have ever had a dog?” You can also conduct introductory exercises with a survey. And, depending on the content, when you share your survey results with the class, it can help foster a sense of community.

Another useful feature many virtual classrooms feature is an anonymous feedback component that allows participants to be candid and maintain personal privacy.

Here are technical aspects of these features you’ll want to be aware of for your particular platform:

- What survey and/or polling tools are available with the platform?
- Can I share the survey results with the class (individual results and aggregate results)?
- Can I create polls or surveys spontaneously during a class?
- Is the feedback anonymous and confidential?
A Few More Tools to Consider

Let’s quickly become acquainted with some specialized tools you might not even realize are available to you. By being creative, you can find ways to include them in your design to support your instructional goals and your audience. Check with your software provider to see if these are available! Some specialized tools to consider include:

- **Supporting multi-language audiences:** Interface text may be available in languages other than English. As the facilitator speaks in English, a native Mandarin speaker, for example, can read help messages and instructions in Mandarin. For participants who speak English as a second language, text in their first language will make them more comfortable.

- **“Over the shoulder:”** The facilitator may be able to monitor an individual participant’s desktop usage and find out whether the person is following the course – or working on something else. That’s the “sneaky” application of this feature! You can also design an exercise where participants work independently on applications at their desktops, and you can assist them by checking in with them every once in a while and “looking” at what they doing. Tell them first, so you don’t catch them by surprise. Angry participants won’t learn effectively.

- **Supporting the hearing impaired:** Closed captioning lets participants follow spoken communication by reading a text crawl transcribing the live audio. It means hearing impaired people can participate. Closed captioning is also useful for anyone taking your course who wants to keep the sound turned down – perhaps to remove the headset for a few minutes without disturbing others nearby. To use a closed captioning feature, you’ll need a “captioner” – a person who can type very quickly and very accurately.

- **Hands-on lab:** If learners need to learn software that they don’t already have on their computer, they can participate in hands-on labs. The facilitator can create a consistent experience for practice sessions.

- **Instant file transfer:** If participants don’t have their participant guides, or you have additional electronic resources that might be helpful, you may be able to transfer them instantly via this feature.

- **Testing and evaluation:** This feature gives you the ability to create, deliver, manage, and score tests and evaluations. It provides the ability to track each participant’s performance. (If you don’t have this feature built-in, you can use a commercial web-based assessment tool such as Survey Monkey.)
Engagement By Design

So many tools – so many ways to engage! Don’t cross your fingers and rely on lecture to get people to learn. Create engagement by taking advantage of the tools you already have available. The designs you create will help to do more than share information; you’ll actually create learning environments that are as impactful as the traditional classroom setting.

Not only will your learning increase, but your participants will thank you for creating a worthwhile experience.
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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 US (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

InSync Training

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 training teams.

InSync is currently managing Cisco Systems’ 13-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 since 2000, the firm was awarded an Excellence in Practice award by ASTD, the world’s largest organization of training and development professionals.

“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.”

Best-Practices Pioneer in a Booming Industry

For the past 15 years, Hofmann and her team have been the standard bearers of the online classroom experience. Today, with new competitors continuing to enter the marketplace, InSync maintains its thought leadership position and enjoys $10 million in annual revenues. In 2013, the firm ranked #741 among the Inc. 5000 and was the #10 fastest-growing education company in the U.S.

“Our business surged in 2008, when companies hit by the recession needed to take advantage of their existing virtual learning technologies,” Hofmann says.

“We introduced them to the best practices we’d developed for the virtual classroom, which proved just as engaging and effective as traditional classroom training. Companies that work with us recognize the value of live online-training programs immediately.”

Design, Support and Delivery Worldwide

InSync’s instructional designers and professional facilitators—leveraging deep expertise in virtual-learning technologies, cognitive psychology, sales and leadership training, and other key specialties—support clients’ corporate training needs in a variety of ways.

Traditional “train the trainer”—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 there wherever and whenever client training takes place.”