Virtual Classroom Designer
Competency Resources

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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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Virtually Competent – Introduction

Virtual instructional designers manage the development of learning solutions for live, virtual classroom-based instruction. Without the designer there would be no content to deliver. They connect client needs to solutions through analysis and execution of an effective design process. They make the material come alive by adding context to the content through teachable stories and engaging activities.

Virtually Competent – The Big Picture

In a recent Training Magazine Article titled *Virtually There: Developing the Competencies of Virtual Classroom Designers*, I identified the core competencies necessary for this skill. The virtual instructional designer needs to be competent in the following areas in order to create quality virtual lessons. (See the original article for full descriptions of each.)

1. Analytical instructional design
2. Impactful engagement creation
3. Activity creation
4. Accountability design
5. Application of adult learning principles
6. Instructional materials development
7. Cultural intelligence

If you would like your virtual classes to meet, or even exceed, the quality you expect from traditional deliveries, you need to strategically think about how to prepare your team to be successful in the virtual classroom. Prior experience as a designer, facilitator, or learner in a traditional classroom does not guarantee success when moving to a virtual environment. Everyone involved in the learning process needs to acquire the skills they need to master the additional competencies required for the virtual learning environment.

Start with your designers. These are the professionals tasked with creating an impactful and replicable experience for all learners. Task them with the following goal: Create virtual classroom learning experiences that meet or exceed the learning outcomes expected in a traditional face-to-face experience.

Don’t assume that just because someone is experienced as an instructional designer, designing for the virtual environment will come easily. For most of the design team, the virtual environment is new.
Instructional designers will need to participate as learners in the environment and be trained on how to use the technology to its best instructional advantage. The training should also provide opportunities for the instructional designers to become competent in the following areas:

1. **Analytical Instructional Design**: The ability to determine which instructional objectives can be taught in a virtual environment.

The virtual classroom is not a one-size-fits-all teaching environment. Not all content should be taught in this format. Unfortunately, we’ve seen a lot of content force fit; resulting in bad training.

The competent instructional designer will analyze the desired performance outcomes to make a decision about how to treat each individual objective. The trick is to identify the most appropriate assessment technique for each performance objective and then determine the best way to deliver that assessment.

“If you can test it online, you can teach it online.” This means if you can deliver a meaningful assessment of content in a live, online environment, then the content is probably appropriate for the virtual classroom. (For more information download our whitepaper: *Blended Learning Instructional Design: A Modern Approach*.)

2. **Impactful Engagement Creation**: The ability to engage learners with appropriate interaction and collaboration techniques.

The virtual classroom introduces a variety of techniques that potentially can engage learners. But not all engagement is created equal, and not every type of activity is appropriate all of the time.

The competent instructional designer will incorporate engagement every 3 to 5 minutes. Engagement techniques include interaction with the facilitator, other learners, and technology. These types of interactions keep interest alive and provide feedback to the facilitator about how the class is feeling.

Interaction does not equate to learning, however. To ensure that learning is taking place, the instructional designer must ensure that learners are also collaborating with one another. Collaborating occurs via such instructional techniques as role-plays, jigsaw discussions, and the creation of presentations. These longer engagement opportunities ensure that learners have the opportunity to practice skills and apply new knowledge in the learning environment.
**Activity Creation:** The ability to create a variety of instructional activities that utilize whiteboard, chat, application sharing, web browsing, and breakout room activities.

Activities create engagement by keeping learners involved in the instruction. In the virtual classroom, the activities are conducted via a set of tools. Designing for the virtual classroom doesn’t need to be difficult, but designers do need a working knowledge of the features and tools each virtual classroom platform provides.

Often, designers new to the virtual classroom will overlook potentially impactful engagement opportunities simply because they have not seen a particular tool used effectively. This reinforces the need for these professionals to be immersed as virtual learners in well-designed curricula so they are aware of potential activity designs. (For more on how to effectively utilize the tools in the virtual classroom, you can download our whitepaper: Virtual Classroom Tool Design Basics: A Virtual Engagement Primer.)

The competent instructional designer will thoroughly understand what tools are available in the virtual classroom platform, and what each tool potentially can do. For example, a whiteboard can be much more than a flip chart for the facilitator. It can also be a shared workspace used for collecting and organizing contributions from all of the learners.

**Accountability Design:** The ability to hold learners accountable using a variety of assessment and debriefing techniques.

A valid concern of facilitators in the virtual classroom is: “How do I know my audience is learning without being able to utilize eye contact and body language?” The answer lies in having activities that result in meaningful data that can be interpreted by the facilitator.

The competent instructional designer will ensure that no activity is concluded without some type of assessment. This assessment may take the form of a graded quiz, a facilitated debrief in which key points are reinforced, or a simple poll. These assessments provide learner accountability—learners will pay attention to content when they know they are being assessed. By taking advantage of the variety of tools available, creative debriefs and assessments can be easily incorporated without taking too much time.

**Application of Adult Learning Principles:** The ability to analyze a blended learning design to ensure the principles of adult learning are upheld and program objectives are met.

In my February 2015 Virtually There column, I discussed how adult learning theory relates to virtual and blended learning. Ultimately, the learner is the arbiter of what’s important to him or her. Blended and virtual learning make it easy for the learner to make decisions about when to engage or disengage. It’s the job of the training professional to ensure that the adult learner is motivated to participate.

The competent instructional designer will design lessons to maximize engagement and knowledge transfer, providing vast opportunities to incorporate the tenants of adult learning theory.
**Instructional Materials Development:** The ability to develop facilitator and learner materials that specifically support virtual delivery.

When content was beginning to be delivered in the virtual classroom, there was a tendency to eliminate facilitator and participant guides altogether, and rely on PowerPoint slides as the sole set of materials for both teaching and learning. This causes some quality problems. Without documented activity instructions and instructional prompts, facilitators tend to lecture more than is appropriate and minimize opportunities for learners to participate. Learners then tend to rely on slides for all of the content. Without the ability to take notes in context and access to a deeper level of information, learners may not master the content as fully as they would with the participant guide designed to enhance the experience.

The competent instructional designer will create documentation that supports both the facilitator and the learner during virtual classroom events. The facilitator guide will contain timing cues, suggested scripting, activity instructions, and a variety of other components critical to ensure instructional success. And the learner should have a set of materials that is useful not only during a live lesson, but can also be referenced in the future when the learning needs to be reinforced. (For more information on what to include, you can review: *Participant Guides in the Virtual Classroom.*)

**Cultural Intelligence** – the ability to consider the audience and create materials that are inclusive and provide needed support for the global audience.

Creating programs that work globally is not as simple as just putting that material into a virtual classroom. Just because something works “here” doesn’t mean it will work “over there.” Making this assumption can cause issues such as the facilitator may not connect with the audience in an effective way, learners may not actually like the virtual platform and prefer the traditional face-to-face classroom, or perhaps learners are having difficulty with the pace of the session. All of these issues can be avoided when the designer understands the challenges associated when developing content for the global virtual classroom.

As global audiences expand, the competent instructional designer must develop a cultural intelligence competency. The designer needs to identify how their own culture interacts with other cultures and affects how they deliver content, recognize the influence culture plays in the virtual classroom, and adjust their existing instructional design skills to accommodate a global audience.

When it comes down to it, creating meaningful learning in the virtual classroom starts with designers who are capable of utilizing a specialized skill set to ensure that desired performance outcomes are achievable.

Be sure that your design team develops the competencies they need for them to be successful.
Virtually Competent – Day to Day Ownership, Preparation, and Execution

But what does this mean on a day to day basis? How does this impact the job description of an instructional designer responsible for creating virtual lessons? While the high level competencies mentioned above are critical in the creation of new content, there are additional task based competencies that are required for a virtual instructional designer to be successful.

These tasks can be summarized as: Ownership Competencies, Preparation Competencies, and Execution Competencies.

Ownership competencies are demonstrated throughout the design and development process, and are also exhibited through implementation. A virtual instructional designer competent in the area of ownership does the following:

- Plans and monitors training projects including resource allocations, budget and schedule
- Consults clients, project managers, facilitators and producers on the effective use of virtual classroom technologies
- Manages pilot programs for new and revised courses
- Advocates for the client to ensure designs meet identified goals
- Collaborates with clients, project managers, facilitators and producers to ensure program design is executed correctly and meets stated goals

Preparation competencies are demonstrated prior to the development of a virtual lesson. A virtual instructional designer competent in the area of preparation does the following:

- Completes a needs assessment to clearly define a learning solution based on client needs
- Analyzes client needs to isolate the desired behavioral change that includes the tasks, sub-tasks, processes and organizational relationships related to that change
- develops a target audience profile
- Utilizes a Subject Matter Expert where necessary to master technical content of course and individual lessons

Execution competencies are demonstrated during development and throughout the lifetime of the virtual lesson(s). A virtual instructional designer competent in the area of execution does the following:

- Applies adult learning theories to maximize knowledge transfer
- Identifies prerequisite knowledge required of participants
• Develops criterion-referenced, performance-based learning objectives for each lesson
• Maximizes engagement of learners
• Implements a blended learning approach
• Integrates the most appropriate learning platforms to meet instructional goals
• Develops a cohesive set of learning materials and resources for facilitators, producers and learners
• Leverages the producer role in a technical and/or instructional capacity when appropriate
• Designs an evaluation strategy tied to key business indicators and measurements
• Permits for regular course review, evaluation and revision to ensure alignment with current goals, organizational needs and accreditation standards

**Virtually Competent - Getting the Job Done**

Being competent as a virtual instructional designer takes sophisticated expertise in many areas from instructional design to cultural intelligence. But it also takes attention to detail in day to day tasks, including project ownership, preparation, and execution.

Do you have what it takes to get the job done?
Virtually Competent - Resources

1. **Analytical Instructional Design** – the ability to determine which instructional objectives can be taught in a virtual environment.
   - Whitepaper/Blog: *Blended Learning Instructional Design: A Modern Approach*
   - Recording: *3 Questions You Need Answered Before Designing Virtual and Blended Learning*
   - Instructional Program: *Virtual Classroom Instructional Design Certificate*

2. **Impactful Engagement Creation** – the ability to engage learners with appropriate interaction and collaboration techniques.
   - Whitepaper/Blog: *Use Interaction & Collaboration to Maximize Engagement in the Virtual Classroom*
   - Recording: *Best Practices for Developing Content that Maximizes Engagement & Meets Your Learning Goals*
   - Instructional Program: *Designing Effective Application Training for the Virtual Classroom*

3. **Activity Creation** – the ability to create a variety of instructional activities that utilize whiteboard, chat, application sharing, web browsing, and breakout room activities.
   - Whitepaper/Blog: *Virtual Classroom Tool Design Basics: A Virtual Engagement Primer*
   - Instructional Program: *Virtual Classroom Instructional Design Certificate*

4. **Accountability Design** – the ability to hold learners accountable by using a variety of assessment and debriefing techniques.
   - Whitepaper/Blog: *Virtually There: 5 Best Practices for Designing Virtual and Blended Learning*
   - Recording: *5 Best Practices for Designing Virtual and Blended Learning*
   - Instructional Program: *Virtual Classroom Instructional Design Certificate*

5. **Application of Adult Learning Principles** – the ability to analyze a blended learning design to ensure the principles of adult learning are upheld and program objectives are met.
   - Whitepaper/Blog: *Virtually There: Making Virtual and Blended Learning Work for Adult Learners*
   - Recording: *Making Virtual & Blended Learning Work for Adult Learners*
   - Instructional Program: *Virtual Classroom Instructional Design Certificate*

6. **Instructional Materials Development** – the ability to develop facilitator and learner materials that specifically support virtual delivery.
   - Whitepaper/Blog: *Participant Guides in the Virtual Classroom*
   - Instructional Program: *Virtual Classroom Instructional Design Certificate*

7. **Cultural Intelligence** – the ability to consider the audience and create materials that are inclusive and provide needed support for the global audience.
   - Whitepaper/Blog: *Cultural Intelligence for Learning Professionals*
   - Recording: *Tips & Tricks for Multi-Cultural Online Training*
   - Instructional Program: *Cultural Intelligence for Learning Professionals Certificate*
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

Corporations 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.

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.”

InSYNC is a Top 100 Education Company. For more information, please call 860-598-0888 or visit www.insynctraining.com.

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.

“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.”