Creating Order from Chaos
Partnerships that Maximize Instructor Effectiveness in the Virtual Classroom

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Slides for this presentation

• Opening Video Clip

Introduction

Partnerships work. And they work best when they bring to a task complementary abilities, skills and experience. Today I’d like to share with you a partnership that has already achieved best-practice status in the corporate virtual instructor-led training world, but – surprisingly -- it’s uncommon – if not unknown – in academic settings. But first, some context.

I’ve been teaching for a while. I started at the University of Virginia in the Philosophy Department in 1976. Back then the height of technology was a tape recorder. After UVA I spent a number of years helping publishing companies digitally deliver content that previously resided only on very heavy lead plates – a kind of informational alchemy.

The world of information delivery changed dramatically. In ten short years we travelled the digital equivalent of going from the bicycle to the jet plane.

When I returned to UVA in the early nineties I was surprised to find the academic world generally unmoved and uninspired by the information cataclysm. I started blending asynchronous elements into my courses. Having a technology as well as an academic background, I was convinced these tools would enrich the brick and mortar learning experience. But I was also convinced, as the majority of faculty members remain today, that face-to-face interaction was essential to a deep, vibrant and maximally productive learning experience. I was wrong.

I added a synchronous component to my courses and offered my first full distance learning class about 10 years ago. What I’ve come to understand is that a properly designed distance-learning environment can provide a deeper, more engaging and more productive collaborative learning experience than a traditional face-to-face classroom.

1 I’d like to thank Jennifer Withrow, Laura Dominguez and all the others at the Seneca Corporation for invalidating an old saw by teaching this old dog – a confirmed solo flier – a very important trick: the value of a VCA copilot in my virtual classes. I also want to thank Meg Blair, Larry Jameson, Michele Lewski and Heidi Adler-Spinella for not only generously volunteering their time and knowledge, but also providing inspiration for this talk.

2 Allen & Seaman, “Grade Level,” p. 21
But my distance learning curve continued even further when I once again stepped outside the academy – as a consultant -- and discovered a design element that propels virtual learning to an entirely new level.

This is the practice I’d like to share with you this afternoon, a partnership that maximizes instructor effectiveness in the virtual classroom.

This partnership leverages the experience and expertise of the instructor and a tech-savvy associate variously referred to as a virtual classroom “host,” “moderator,” “co-facilitator,” “producer,” “assistant” or “associate.” For convenience I’ll use the abbreviation “VCA” – for “virtual classroom associate” – to refer to this less recognized, but essential, partner in successful online collaborative learning.

**What’s a virtual classroom?**

Before discussing why VCA’s have become a best practice in the corporate training arena, it would be useful to say a bit more what a VCA does and why that role is particularly critical in an academic environment.

In this discussion I’ll focus on just one aspect of distance learning. In the corporate world it’s referred to as “virtual instructor-led training” – VILT. In this learning environment a live instructor interacts with his or her students real time, via a “synchronous” or “virtual classroom.”

By “virtual classroom” I’ll mean an education-oriented web-meeting environment such as Bb Collaborate, Adobe Connect, Saba Meeting, WebEx, GoToTraining or newer contenders such as Zoom or Onstream Webinars. (In my research for this presentation I discovered there are actually over 130 of these platforms now available.³)

As I use the term a “virtual classroom” includes, at a minimum,

- Electronic “whiteboard” with annotation tools
- Real-time discussion via VOIP or teleconferencing
- Participant and instructor video feeds
- Hand raising
- Temperature taking (emoticons)
- Quizzes
- Chat/instant messaging
- Polling
- Breakouts rooms

³ McIntosh, “Vendors,” p. 96
- Presentation of video and audio clips (.mp4, .swf, .mov, .avi, .mp3)
- Application/Screen Sharing

There’s some room to maneuver with this definition. With this – and every other -- emerging technology -- there’s no fixed vocabulary, but this rough description of a “virtual classroom” will serve for now.

As I said, after 20 years of face-to-face teaching I now believe a virtual classroom can enable an even deeper and more vibrant learning experience than a face-to-face classroom. This is because a virtual classroom permits more interactivity and more engagement than a traditional face-to-face environment.

Each one of the virtual classroom components I described a moment ago is designed to enhance student engagement … and they improve on their face-to-face counterparts.

For example, if this had been a virtual session, I would have encouraged you to submit questions, comments, objections or confusions as they occurred to you via the virtual classroom’s chat facility. This allows the presenter to monitor students’ comprehension in the moment and make rapid adjustments in the flow or content.

It also allows students to elaborate on or question points without interrupting the linear conversation enforced by a face-to-face setting. While an instructor converses with a student in a virtual classroom, others in the class can supplement this discussion with chats or tweets for ongoing review and consideration. “Virtual back-channeling” can be a rich and spontaneous source of interesting ideas.

A standard objection is that whatever their benefits, virtual classrooms eliminate an essential element in a fully engaged and vibrant learning environment: facial cues. Even granting that “seeing is necessary – or even beneficial -- for learning” (which I do not), technology has the answer.

Tools like Vantage Point from Refined Data, now used at universities including Georgetown, University of Washington and UC Berkeley, supplement the standard participant video feeds built into these platforms allowing instructors to see all their students at once … and effectively respond to visual cues and diminishing attention as they would in a face-to-face classroom.

In short, virtual classrooms offer presenters more … and more effective … tools to engage participants. Unfortunately, from an instructor’s point of view, this wealth of resources often seems more a curse than a blessing.

**The challenge**

Anyone stepping into a presenter’s role in a virtual classroom for the first time will feel totally overwhelmed. Unlike the ordered linear structure of a face-to-face environment,
it’s virtual chaos.4 There’s just too much going on. Not only does the instructor need to share engaging content, he or she also needs to monitor instant messages or other social media, assess comprehension with real time polls and quizzes, be alert for raised hands, create and monitor breakout sessions and … on top of all of this … deal with the inevitable ongoing technical issues ranging from uncooperative firewalls to recalcitrant headsets. Using the full potential of a virtual classroom pushes the limits of even the most technically adept instructor. For most of us, particularly in the academic setting, technical proficiency is something for which we’re neither trained nor compensated.

A 2012 joint study of 4,500 faculty members conducted by the Babson Research Strategy Group and Inside Higher Ed5 found – not surprisingly – that faculty were “very good at providing well-thought-out and nuanced responses [to the survey questions]. They are less successful at providing unambiguous responses without qualifications.” So the researchers pressed them with a question allowing only two responses: “Does the growth of online education fill you more with excitement or with fear?” Administrators responsible for academic technology were asked the same question. Here are the results.

Nearly 60% of the faculty, as opposed to only 20% of administrators, is more filled by fear than excitement by the growth of online learning.6

More recently the 2015 Babson Group study of “Online Education in the United States” found that, “While the number of students taking distance learning courses has grown by the millions over the past decade … faculty acceptance has lagged, … “Only 28% of academic leaders say … their faculties accept the “value and legitimacy of online education.””7

These results should not be surprising. There are substantial – and often daunting -- challenges that immediately confront any instructor considering the transition to virtual learning. These barriers are technical, pedagogical … and they’re personal.

A number of years ago Chris Argyris, a professor at the Harvard Business School, published a fascinating article called “Teaching Smart People How to Learn.” The problem, he suggests, is smart people reasonably equate achieving success with avoiding failure. This equation is constantly confirmed, so smart people are taught to avoid risk and become adept at deflecting anything that moves them from their comfort zone. I’m sure we all agree academics are smart people. I suggest Argyris’s observation reveals an important factor preventing many faculty from embracing virtual learning environments. These remarks from two of seasoned face-to-face instructors – Larry Jameson and Michele Lewski -- will probably sound familiar.

● Instructor Remarks

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4 In fact, as a virtual classroom instructor, I feel a little like this, but without the partner.
5 Allen & Seaman, “Changing Course,” p. 4
6 Ibid., p. 5
7 Allen & Seaman, “Grade Level,” p. 21
We’ll return to their stories in a moment. For now the point is new technologies create a substantial learning curve well outside an instructor’s comfort zone. We generally adopt a “suck it up” approach to the transition: “This technology gives you new tools for a new world. It will be good for your career. Get on with it.” In the best of circumstances instructors have access to some training – perhaps even a certification, an instructional design person, and, if we’re very lucky, a few extra dollars.

And even for those instructors willing to take a risk and make the leap to new technology, effectively using a virtual classroom requires not only repurposing content; it requires rethinking the way we approach learning. The technology is designed to foster a collaborative, highly interactive, learning experience. Understanding how to reach that goal is a challenge many instructors are still ill-equipped to meet.

Unfamiliar with the mechanics and design goals of virtual classrooms, face-to-face instructors often have no choice but to import into this rich collaborative learning environment the familiar, but minimally effective pedagogical practices, that define face-to-face classrooms. To expand on Edward Tufte’s penetrating metaphor, “death by PowerPoint” is no less painful in a virtual classroom than it is in a brick and mortar one.

Abraham Maslow observed, “To a person who has only a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail.” Our tools define and constrain the way we approach the world … or, in this case, the way we approach the virtual classroom. An instructor who enters a synchronous classroom with only face-to-face tools, is unable to see – much less – realize its potential.

The Partnership

With the virtual stage – or classroom – now set, we can return to our critical partnership. A VCA – a virtual classroom associate -- helps an instructor break through these barriers. A VCA is a “technically adept co-pilot,” who functions as a technology mentor as well as a real time session facilitator. Working in partnership with a VCA, the instructor develops technology mastery

- at his or her own speed,
- to his or her desired level
- with a safety net always in place

It means instructors are no longer thrown into a virtual meeting environment in which they must simultaneously

- resolve technical problems
- monitor chats
- track poll responses
- attend to recordings
- deploy quizzes
- initiate video and audio clips
share applications
manage group breakouts
convey content
create an engaging learning environment

and, most importantly,

- retain their sanity and coherence in the process.

The VCA is a partner skilled in technology and facilitation. This allows the instructor to focus, with minimal distraction, on whatever he or she deems most valuable to the learning experience.

In doing so the VCA transforms the virtual classroom from this

![Diagram showing virtual classroom without a VCA]

to this
In short the VCA brings order to the chaos of the virtual classroom and helps the instructor engage all the benefits of this rich interactive learning environment.

**The Instructor’s Perspective**

As I mentioned earlier, the use of VCA’s has gained significant traction in the corporate training world. In the words of one corporate training professional, “… [VCA’s] are a best practice when delivering live virtual training and I personally would not want to deliver without one.”

Why not? What do instructors have to say about working with a technically adept co-pilot? Over the past few months we interviewed a number of corporate training professionals about the VCA partnership. Meg Blair, Larry Jameson, Michele Lewski and Heidi-Adler Spinella briefly share with you some of their answers.

- The Instructors’ Perspective
As Meg Blair suggests in her interview, it all comes down to quality. She knows. At ESI International she oversees hundreds of synchronous classroom sessions each year. With practice any instructor can manage a virtual classroom. I’ve done so nearly ten years now. But it wasn’t until I actually worked with a VCA that I was able to fully appreciate the enormous impact this partnership has on the quality the virtual learning environment.

In making VCAs a best practice, the corporate world has signaled its willingness to invest in quality. Academia’s reluctance to make a similar investment sends a very different message.

From the VCA’s perspective, in the words of Laura Dominquez, the VCA coordinator for the Seneca corporation:

“in many cases we are not only there to support technology but we function as a TA. We track participation, participate in examples, act as a sounding board for ideas on content as well as how to best utilize the technology, and take on the extra tasks of managing/capturing data, proctoring exams/make up exams, sending communications/materials to participants”

What Next?

When academic institutions consider the transition to online learning, they usually get around to considering instructional design support. The following excerpt, from the 2010 GP Strategies “Delivering Virtual Instructor-Lead Training” survey of over 100 learning professionals, is typical of the received wisdom concerning virtual classrooms:

[the possibilities of this technology] highlight the need for instructional design in creating VILT. Straight lecture and a couple of polling questions will not be enough to keep your audience engaged. Good instructional design can apply the tools to keep the audience engaged, and also apply these tools in ways that reinforce learning.⁸

This is true and many people now acknowledge it, but what’s still unrecognized and unacknowledged is that instructional design is not enough. Although real time presentational support of the kind provided by a VCA is equally critical to successful online learning, it remains a mythical beast, seldom sighted in the hall of academia.

According to the 2015 Babson Research Group Survey mentioned earlier,

• “The proportion of academic leaders who report … online learning is critical to their institution’s long term strategy has grown from 48.8% in 2002 to 70.8% this year.”⁹

⁸ West, Benedicks, Donovan & Carmody, “Studying the Virtual Classroom,” p. 4
⁹ Allen & Seaman, “Grade Level,” p. 15
At the same time

- The percent of academic leaders rating the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face instruction grew from 57.2% in 2003 to 74.1% … for 2014.  

For the vast majority of academic leaders, online learning is both strategically critical and pedagogically desirable. However, things look very different from the faculty perspective.

As mentioned above, “Only 28% of academic leaders say their faculties accept the ‘value and legitimacy of online education.’” This is a serious problem … to which VCA’s provide large part of the solution.

It’s not surprising the vast majority of instructors are skeptical about the benefits of … and their ability to move to … a virtual classroom. Seeing virtual learning as a partnership with a VCA copilot, rather than a solo flight over unfamiliar waters, helps us recalibrate our thinking about pedagogy in this virtual environment.

Without this sort of recalibration our academic institutions will be unable to harness the full power of either the synchronous classroom itself … or the majority of instructors who … as Argyris predicted … will habitually avoid it.

References


Don McIntosh, “Vendors of Learning Management and E-learning Products,” (Trimeritus Learning Solutions, Inc. 2014)


\[\text{Ibid., p 18} \]
William West, Rose Benedicks, Matthew Donovan & Laurie Carmody, “Studying the Virtual Classroom: An Examination of Successful VILT Practices” (General Physics Corporation, 2010)