

# ENTER THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

**Most businesses now routinely use virtual meeting software to enable dispersed teams to meet without the need to travel, enabling more flexible working arrangements and reducing the barriers of time and distance. With this in mind Paul D Jagger, Secretary of the BCS Learning and Development Specialist Group, examines the drivers for and the benefits of the virtual classroom.**

It is perhaps a natural evolution of these flexible working environments that some businesses have leveraged the use of virtual meeting technologies to enable formal learning events to be conducted in a remote/virtual manner. The convergence of virtual meeting technology and instructor-led training is sometimes known as live virtual education, instructor-led online or, more simply, virtual classroom.

Nowhere is the trend toward virtual classroom more evident than in the IT training industry. Companies such as Global Knowledge, Learning Tree, Oracle and IBM all offer virtual classroom as a method of delivery in their portfolio of IT product training.

The scale of the transition to virtual classroom is truly staggering. In the case of just IBM, there are now in excess of 1,400 IT product training courses available to customers around the globe and many of those are scheduled to deliver multiple times in the week, spanning different time zones to accommodate audiences as far apart as New York and Hong Kong.

## What are the drivers for virtual classroom?

Virtual classroom brings many benefits for the employee and their employer including, but not limited to:

- reduced or eliminated travel costs and travel time;
- recording and playback facilities for

formal learning;

- less disruption to the employee's working schedule;
- access to remote/virtual lab environments that enable hands-on exercises to be conducted offline and repeated for reinforcement of learning.

There are also clear benefits to the provider of formal learning when using virtual classroom delivery:

- increased flexibility in scheduling learning events;
- reduced learning infrastructure costs;
- increased viability of courses that have marginal demand when delivered face-to-face;
- access to a global audience.

The combination of cost reduction and increased flexibility provides a compelling business case for virtual classroom adoption; no wonder then that so many of the big name IT training suppliers have embraced this mode of delivery as demanded by their clients. The transition to virtual classroom can be achieved swiftly if a few simple, but vital conditions are met:

## Instructors must be trained in virtual classroom delivery

The instructor remains the single most flexible and important aspect of the virtual

classroom delivery system. As with face-to-face classes, the instructor can make or break the experience for the learners.

All of the teaching skills that an instructor brings from the classroom transfer to the virtual classroom, yet there are new and important skills that must be learned in order to successfully deliver a virtual classroom event. When eye contact is lost and learners are located in different environments it is vital that the instructor sets clear expectations regarding the conduct of the class, explains and demonstrates how to interact virtually using such functions as instant messaging, white boards, break-out rooms, on screen polls, screen markup tools and voice over IP technology.

Instructors must also make a conscious effort to keep the class actively engaged in the learning experience by using feedback tools, inviting discussion, taking plenty of short breaks and putting a greater emphasis on team activities rather than lecture.

So important are the virtual classroom delivery skills to the success of a learning event that the Learning & Performance Institute have championed a certification specifically aimed at instructors working in virtual classrooms.

## Course material must be designed with virtual classroom in mind

Whilst most classroom learning content can be delivered successfully in a virtual classroom there are some important design considerations that must be adopted when creating content for virtual classroom.

The most fundamental design consideration is that of the screen area available for display of any slides or visual images. Font selection and size becomes far more important when the display area is a portion of a 1280 x 1024 desktop rather than an 8' x 6' projector screen. The design of visuals should be uncluttered,

and most definitely not a bullet-pointed script or aide memoir for the instructor to read from.

The flow of a virtual classroom course must give ample time for interaction among students and instructor, with

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the emphasis being on delivering fewer slides and more time spent on discussion, individual and group exercises.

That said, the decision as to whether and when to use a particular virtual classroom interaction should be left to the instructor rather than specified in the course materials.

## Select your virtual classroom delivery platform with care

There is a clear distinction to be drawn between virtual meeting tools and virtual classroom tools, the latter providing a much richer suite of interaction and management facilities than the typical virtual meeting tool.

Whilst it may be possible to use a virtual meeting tool to deliver a short slide presentation, the same tool is unlikely to have the functionality necessary for an extensive suite of virtual classroom courses. As a minimum the virtual classroom must support:

- recording and playback;
- inline chat;
- polling/surveys;
- white boards and screen markup;
- course scheduling;
- learning enrollment;
- tracking/reporting facilities.

An ideal virtual classroom will also support video, voice over IP integration, break-out rooms and the integration of virtual hands on labs where required.

## Remote labs are vital for product training

A significant part of any IT training course will be the hands on lab component, typically with structured exercises to be performed on a pre-configured training system with operating system, application

software and data pre-loaded and ready for the learners to practice upon.

Access to hands-on labs remains important for the virtual classroom and therefore a remote and virtual lab environment must be accessible via the internet from wherever the learners are located. The lab infrastructure should be available 7 x 24 so that learners can conduct labs outside of the taught aspects of the class and must allow group exercises such that learners can collaborate in conducting the lab exercises.

## Here to stay

Virtual classroom is here to stay and will become an increasingly important aspect of workplace learning delivery, bringing, as it does, so many immediate benefits to the learner, their employer and the commercial learning provider. Adhering to a few simple guidelines will ensure that virtual classroom is as successful a learning delivery environment as the very best face-to-face classroom events.

## Notes:

This article is based in part upon a white paper due for publication by IBM in Q2 2013. No material from that paper has been directly copied in the creation of this article.