The USA has as many domestic flights as the rest of the world put together. Customer or supplier visit? Flight. Training course? Flight. Travel budget and carbon footprint? High. So it’s no wonder the Americans have been at the forefront of finding training alternatives. But what can we learn – good and bad – from their experience asks Ron Edwards, Head of Online Learning, QA.

In a rush to launch a recession-ready product some of the initial virtual learning from US providers were terrible: ‘Put a camera up at the back of a classroom’ training course, stream it via WebEx, with recordings available for playback later. For delegates this is as boring as it sounds – the training equivalent of watching the video of a wedding you weren’t invited to.

The backdrop of good traditional training is pretty effective: studies show that lecture-based instruction gives an information retention rate of between 5-10 per cent, while interactive and discussion-based activities improve it to 40-50 per cent. Hence the Holy Grail for virtual is to keep that, then add the ‘learn-anywhere’ benefits of elearning, for the best of both worlds.

More recently successful US providers are offering similar formats: sessions lasting three to four hours, with anything from two to 10 sessions making up a course. These are delivered over anything from a couple of days up to six to eight weeks, so in effect a similar amount of training time as a class-room course, but in smaller chunks. The best providers have really embraced the technology to have really great delegate engagement, through shared whiteboards, polls, games and more. Virtual training has thrown up more challenges for technical training: delegates on an IT course now expect full hands-on labs facilities, something missing from early virtual courses, but thankfully now solved without the need for overly complex virtual private networks (VPNs).

Since the advent of virtual the big benefit for American companies has been the travel saving – both in time and money. In a much smaller country we are never far from a popular course like PRINCE2, so...
the travel saving can be much less. But for more specialist courses that only run in London then there are travel time and money savings for regional organisations.

The time benefit has also been taken up in a different way that is very relevant to us. With training sessions taking only part of a day it is much easier to schedule training alongside business-as-usual – no need to draft in someone to cover a week’s absence.

One small but important lesson we can learn from the early adoption in the US is where to do the learning. Of course the benefit is being able to join the classroom from wherever you want, but that needs to be somewhere conducive to learning. Sitting in the middle of a busy office can be okay, but only if your co-workers know you are on a course and don’t interrupt. Doing the training from home has been a better option for many and something that is just as feasible in the UK now our broadband is comparable to US cable internet.

So as virtual learning matures in the US when is it most often used? As an alternative to popular and specialist classroom-based courses it is proving to be a serious alternative. Virtual is also increasingly being used for short learning ‘nuggets’ – short sessions that couldn’t be justified as a classroom training session.

As an example, imagine you are facing a major project change of scope and you want to refresh yourself on best practice first: attending a two hour virtual training session that allows expert tutor-led discussion of applying theory to real-world situations is so much better than just reading the manual. And could the changes be better communicated with the client if you could jump on a PowerPoint re-fresh session? Not the sort of thing people are booking classroom training and travel for.

Amidst the hype some perspective is needed. The majority of education, including business training, is done face-to-face, something that is unlikely to change much in the future. Where virtual is finding its place is to compliment classroom training. Out-of-hours courses, bite sized learning subscriptions, specialist courses that only run in one location – all have a clear case for being better done virtually.

And, before long, the next generation of project managers, the ‘digital natives’, will just expect it as a continuation of their online education.