

The Virtual Classroom – The Future of Learning has Arrived

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Whether you have been looking to guide your own professional development or your organisation's, you will undoubtedly have noticed the trend away from the traditional classroom learning experience. That tradition is being replaced by a wide range of technology-enabled learning modalities, from podcasts and webinars to formal, one-on-one coaching and a range of e-learning platforms.

What has brought on this shift in the learning landscape? Is it the inevitable change driven by technology? The result of the budget cuts that have reduced our capacity for travel? Or the globalisation of project teams? It is most likely a combination of these factors and more.

A key reason individuals and organisations are embracing technology-driven learning modalities today are the efforts of learning providers to ensure these newer formats deliver strong results. Learning providers that have a solid foot in traditional classroom learning recognise that while the mode of delivery may be different, the commitment to good information, designed for the adult learner and presented in an engaging way is essential to achieving professional development goals.

Regardless of the format, the premise remains the same – learning is vital to any individual or organisation's success – and successful learning requires an environment where students are exposed to new information, can express ideas, practise new skills and interact with classmates and instructors in a safe environment. Most importantly the learning needs to be relevant to students needs and delivered in a way that helps them not just retain it, but apply it in the real world. E-learning delivers all these benefits and in many cases, more.

E-learning courses divide into two approaches: asynchronous, often just called online courses and synchronous, also known as virtual classroom. With the asynchronous, online course approach, students work independently through a set of course objectives. Interaction with other students and the instructor usually occur via email and discussion boards. Students usually have a set timeframe within which they must complete assignments and the course itself.

The virtual classroom is just what it sounds like. You "enter" the classroom using your computer and a headset equipped with a microphone. Since the class takes place in real time, the instructor and all the students attend classes at set times and dates. Students can raise their virtual hand to ask questions

and interact with fellow students. The instructor can show videos, break students into small groups for exercises and conducted facilitated discussions. Just about anything you can do in a traditional classroom you can do in a virtual one.

Benefits of the Virtual Classroom

Flexibility and Convenience

Virtual learning is very flexible and convenient. Classes can take place on any computer, anywhere in the world that has access to the Internet and can accommodate a headset and microphone.

Keeps People On-the-job

Most courses are scheduled over several days or weeks and each module only lasts a few hours. This allows people to devote at least part of their day to their regular duties, providing continuity on-the-job, with less impact on daily business operations.

Cost Saving

Perhaps the number one benefit repeatedly cited is the cost savings presented by not having to pay for travel, hotels and other costs associated with bringing a team to a single location for a course.

Interaction and retention

Well-designed virtual courses embrace the virtual environment using it to create more interaction than in many traditional classroom settings. Instructors engage participants through polling questions, surveys, quizzes and games that spark discussions and reinforce key learning. Students and instructors use intuitive mark-up tools and whiteboards that facilitate brainstorming and other idea and experience sharing.

Teamwork

Well-designed virtual classroom experiences rely heavily on teamwork. Participants are divided into virtual breakout rooms to collaboratively work through case studies, complete exercises, share ideas and practise new skills. Each group holds independent discussions and captures their solutions on virtual whiteboards to share with the class, thereby completing the learning feedback cycle.

Bringing teams together

The virtual classroom has the added benefit of bringing geographically dispersed teams together in one place at the same time to ensure a consistent learning experience and explore cultural and other barriers to success. It also provides virtual teams the opportunity to work in the virtual world as well.

Post-Course Reinforcement

Another component of a well-designed virtual classroom experience is having the ability to review parts of the course once it is over. Most virtual courses record the classroom and make it available to students to review a short exercise or an entire session on-demand.

On-line Reference Materials

Virtual classrooms mean virtual materials too. Students are provided web access to all the materials presented in the course, usually for a year or more after they complete the course.

While virtual learning may not be the solution for everyone, the advances that have been made in the quality and sophistication of this learning platform ensures that it is no longer a technological promise, it is a mainstream reality.

About the Author

Joseph R. Czarnecki, PMP, Senior Advisor, Instructional Systems Design, ESI International, works with European and global clients to leverage ESI's expertise and resources to maximise client investments in improving the performance of project management and business analyst professionals and operations. Joe has been with ESI for over a decade and during that time has played a key role in the development and refinement of a majority of ESI's courses as well as developed several highly tailored project management course suites for ESI's global clients. Prior to joining ESI, he worked with KPMG.



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