Remote Training from Digiquick.

Notes for course facilitators

Challenges

Relatively speaking, online training is a new practice. As such, many students find the transition from traditional classroom instruction difficult. The typical dynamics present in the classroom are conspicuously absent from most online training and this can leave students feeling disengaged, bored, and without any control over their learning experience. Primarily, it is the lack of visual cues and non-verbal interaction that present the largest challenge. Without being able to see the instructor or the other students within the class, students tend to withdraw and not ask questions. Without this critical dialogue between instructor and student, the knowledge transfer process suffers greatly.

Instructors also suffer from the lack of visual prompting they are accustomed to in a classroom environment. Just like students rely on the body language of the instructor and of other students within the class to identify the appropriate time to comment or pose a question – instructors rely on the facial expressions of the students as an indicator of understanding. All too often, the online instructor is oblivious to fact that one or more students are confused (or need additional information) and blindly continues teaching – frustrating or alienating the student(s).

It is important to note that many effective (classroom) instructors and confident public speakers take for granted that they will be as effective when teaching in an online classroom environment. It is a very different experience teaching an 'unseen audience' for the first time, and adjustments must be made. For an instructor, practice sessions are critical.

Successful educators know that 'dialogue' promotes learning much more effectively than 'monologue'. But it's very common for an online training session to become a monologue – and thus not as effective as a classroom environment.

Best Practices, Tools, Techniques

Many of you that may have professional coaching will recognize much of what follows as just simple teaching techniques. So for you experienced presenters/instructors, this may be a reinforcement of what you already know. But if you are just beginning to deliver presentations or actual online classes, I strongly encourage you to study what you see here, seek the advice of experienced instructors, and above all, practice.

Set your goals – then create your content

When developing content for online delivery, determine what information is most critical – and what information is less critical. Then spend your development time accordingly. Knowing your audience is critical to knowing how much detail is required. Don't spend 2 minutes on a critical topic followed by 20 minutes of information that is self explanatory. Do not plan for the same timing as a traditional classroom presentation either, but instead plan for no more than 45 minutes of lecture at a time. The remaining 15 minutes of each hour should be budgeted for breaks, Q&A, polls, or quizzes.

Set expectations

When announcing the event to potential students, make sure you clearly explain what topics are covered and what (if any) the prerequisites are for attending. Consider a list of questions to ask, or a short quiz to assess a student's required knowledge. Of course this must be done tactfully. But don't do the student or the instructor a disservice by putting a student in a class he or she is not ready for.

Once students are registered for an online class, make sure they know what is required of them. As the course date approaches, send them at least two email notifications detailing the course content and any requirements of their computer equipment. If there are requirements for bandwidth, software, or hardware (such as headphones and microphones), make sure you provide ample time for them to verify they meet these requirements and will be able to connect to the online environment. Consider creating a test environment for students to connect to for the purpose of verifying their equipment – such as audio input/output, video, browser plug-ins, etc. This should minimize the chances of having to waste time by troubleshooting student connections at the start of each course.

Know your tools

If you are the instructor, make sure you are familiar with the applications you'll be using. Practice with another person and make sure you know how to use the full feature set of the applications employed during the session. For instance; know how to mute yourself and other participants, show or hide your screen, transfer keyboard and mouse control, etc.

Consider using more than one computer so that you can view notes on a 'private screen'. You might also consider joining the online session from both computers so you can more seamlessly switch between presentations, demos, or white boards. Just transfer control between you primary and secondary computers.

It is absolutely critical that you do a dry run of the course and try to closely simulate the conditions of the actual class and network/ Internet bandwidth available to your audience.

Remove distractions

If the instructor is displaying his or her screen to the students, close any programs that can produce distractions, such as email notifications or instant messaging. Consider creating a clean uncluttered account profile on the instructor's computer for use during presentations.

Know your audience

It's traditional and expected that the beginning of a classroom session include introductions of some type. This is helpful for the students to get to know the instructor, the fellow students, and generally get a little more comfortable in unfamiliar surroundings. It's also a valuable opportunity for the instructor to assess the student's expectations, possible learning style, and establish some level of rapport.

Surprisingly, this valuable opportunity is often neglected in an online setting. But it is even more important in a remote training session. If you are the courseware developer, don't forget to include an introductions slide. If you are the instructor, this is your opportunity to set a very important precedent – that student participation is welcome and expected. If you don't allow people this opportunity at the start of the class, they'll be more likely to not participate later on. At a minimum, collect the following information (and write it down for reference):

- What is your name? – The name they registered with is often different.
- How would you like to be addressed? – Don't assume it's ok to call someone by their first name.
- What is your job function? – Don't assume everyone has a technical or non-technical role.
- Do you have any specific expectations for the course? – This gives you the chance to tailor your presentation.
- What time zone are you in? – Where appropriate, this may be helpful to know regarding lunch breaks.

Also take some time to explain the basic functions of the classroom interface, such as muting controls.

Move it along

Don't bore the students. If using a slide deck, plan on spending less than one minute on each slide (on average). Some slides may take less time – some may take more. But don't plan on delivery of more than 45 slides per hour of presentation time. If you find you have a slide that cannot be explained in less than a minute, reevaluate your delivery strategy, you may find that breaking the slide into multiple slides works better. In addition, try to avoid putting too much text on one slide. Nobody likes to look at a 'wall of words'.

Lastly, if you are the instructor, don't allow yourself to lapse into a mentality of 'getting through the slides' and forget that it's YOU doing the teaching – not the slide deck.

Keep it lively

One sure-fire way to put your students to sleep is to do only one thing – one way. Try to avoid only static slides, and add some animation where appropriate to catch the viewer's eye and illustrate a particular point. It should go without saying – but don't animate all of your slides. The goal here is to keep the student's attention, not overwhelm them. Slide animation does not have to be too complex, just a simple blink or highlight is often enough.

Use a variety of tools

Don't use only one medium. Power Point is a great tool (if used properly) – but it's relied upon too heavily – too often. Consider using other mediums such as polls, quizzes, white-boarding, or videos. But make sure you know how to use these tools before attempting to do so. For instance; don't attempt to show a full motion video via your own screen, but provide the students a link to download it and watch it locally for the best performance.

Never do anything for the first time in front of a live audience! Make sure you've practiced beforehand.

Make sure they hear you clearly

Voice over IP (VoIP) connections can be especially problematic. Using VoIP requires a reliable and stable internet connection. If using VoIP, strongly encourage the use of headphones, and not computer speakers. It is very unnerving to hear yourself (or others) via feedback. Headphones that incorporate a microphone should eliminate the audio feedback issue.

It is very common for one or more students to prefer a telephone for the audio; either because they do not have headphones, their network blocks VoIP traffic, or network performance issues. So always have a backup plan for audio. Providing a toll call number may present a problem as well, consider a toll free service.

Telegraph your actions

If you are the instructor, announce to your students what you are about to do before you do it. It's not necessary to announce every new slide in a presentation, but if you'll be switching to a white board or a live demo, announce it. This can help refocus students if their attention has wandered. If you were in an actual classroom and you picked up a pen and approached the white board, it's obvious what you are about to do. In an online training session, you must compensate for the inability of the students to read your body language.

Make it interactive

Require some performance from the students. Encourage them to 'raise their hands' via their control panel if they have a question and need some further clarification of a topic. Create polls and quizzes and ask them to take a short quiz or vote in a poll. Just get them involved any way that you can. One method is to create a quiz or poll to get feedback for a particular slide, module, or topic and ask the student if it was clearly presented. This is one way to get that shy student who won't speak up and ask a question to let you know you need to revisit a particular topic.

Make it fun

Don't be afraid to joke a little and tell a polite joke here and there. The same techniques for ice-breakers in the classroom will generally work online as well. Consider including a humorous quote, image, or cartoon within your presentation if it bears any relevance to the topic. Don't forget to credit the author or seek permission where necessary. Including the pleasantly unexpected within your presentation can keep the students energized and focused.

Make it profitable

If there is a budget for it, consider giving prizes to the students for some performance on their part. This almost always works wonders in an actual classroom and there no reason it can't be employed in the virtual classroom as well. Gift certificates for online retailers work well and can be emailed to the students.

Ask questions – wait for answers

Of all the tips in this document, this may be the most important! So much is accomplished by dialogue – it's absolutely critical to the learning process. As the instructor, don't simply ask (of no one in particular) "Are there any questions?" Nine times out of ten, you'll get nothing but an awkward silence. Asking a question in this manner is not helpful at all, and in many cases gives the impression you really don't want questions, but want to move ahead in the courseware. How you phrase a question is as important as the question itself. You have to compel the student to respond and you have to do it in a non-threatening way. Most people are anxious about giving an incorrect answer, so make sure you don't 'corner them' with yes/no answers unless you know what they'll say. Consider the following techniques instead:

- So John, did I explain that adequately, is there anything unclear?
- Susan, given your job function, do you have a comments or suggestions regarding this slide?
- Would anyone like to comment on this topic? John? Mary? David? (Calling out names)

Notice in the first example, the instructor takes the responsibility for the student's answer. In the second example you are asking for a professional opinion. And in the third example, you are subtly letting the students know you haven't forgotten about them and desire a dialogue with them. Notice that none of the examples above are direct questions regarding content, but catalysts for dialogue. If you can just get the students talking, a question will usually emerge that you can address.

Once you have asked a question of a particular person- wait for the answer. Remember that students in an online session may be unfamiliar with the user interface and it may take them some time to un-mute themselves, or maybe they have forgotten they are muted and they are speaking but you can't hear them.

Never waste a answer

Whenever a question is asked of the instructor, the instructor should repeat the question for all to hear – before giving an answer. This allows all of the students to benefit from the answer – and not just the student who asked the question. It also gives the instructor an opportunity to make sure the question posed was interpreted correctly.

In a training session with proper dialogue, it's not only the instructor that students learn from. They learn by dialogue with other students as well. Many questions are answered before they need to be asked if proper communication techniques are observed. So when a student has a relevant comment – that should be repeated for all to hear as well.

Additional Technologies in the online classroom

No amount of technology can replace an effective instructor. But an effective instructor can further enhance the student experience by using technology to its fullest potential. If you've read parts one and two, you've probably asked yourself, 'what about video in the online classroom?' Well, here I'll discuss that, and how it's not the panacea you might think when it comes to dealing with the lack of visual stimuli in the online environment. Sure, introducing video can be a great benefit, but all too often it doesn't have the positive effect you want.

Video (many to many)

Video can go a long way toward making a student feel more connected and remain engaged throughout the training session. Quite a few software packages include video, where the instructor uses a web cam and broadcasts video to the students. Some software packages even support multiple video sessions where each student is display on every attendee screen.

Bi-directional (many-to-many) video is typically seen as a teleconferencing / corporate meeting tool (and in my experience rarely beneficial in the online classroom). Ideally the students should be able to see the instructor and each other – just like an actual classroom environment, but many factors make this difficult to achieve.

- Few video applications support 'many-to-many' video.

- There are privacy issues – especially where a mixed group of students not from the same organization are in attendance. Many students will either not have camera equipment – or feel uncomfortable being seen by 'strangers'. Anxiety over appearance, dress and background environment is counterproductive to the learning experience.
- In a worst case scenario, students may display inappropriate behavior that could jeopardize the learning session and even cause legal issues.

Video (one-to-many)

In this format, the instructor uses a camera and that image is displayed to all the students in the session. This is very valuable in that it can give the students a more dynamic, personal experience. There is something in our human nature that can impact our behavior when we have a face to look at – and that face is 'looking' at us. Even though intellectually we know that we cannot really be seen.

The undesirable aspects of this (one-to-many) format are largely the same as the many-to-many format.

Video (one to one)

This is the most commonly used format and many Internet communication applications use it. The most notable applications are free of charge. Applications such as Skype™, Google Talk™, and Microsoft Live™ are just a few and they are well recognized by most Internet savvy users. These rarely support multiple video participants, and are not generally useful for training more than one person at a time. However this can be used quite effectively in a situation where only the instructor is the only remote attendee. An example of this is when the students are all located in a classroom and it is not feasible to send an instructor to them. Here's how you can leverage this technology for little or no cost:

In the classroom, set up a dedicated computer and project its display onto a screen for all students to see. Then use one of these freely available video chat applications to display the instructor's image to all the students via the projector. Individually, the students can join a GoToTraining or GoToMeeting session on their computers to see the presentation. For further benefit, install a web cam on the computer in the classroom so the instructor can see the students in the room.

It should be noted that this technique has been employed with great success by Citrix, where U.S. based instructors have taught course in European countries. This saved many thousands of dollars in travel expenses.

Video (all formats)

The instructor must know how to behave when on camera. This is a new experience for most instructors and it is not uncommon for an instructor to negate the benefit of video by not understanding the student's perspective.
If you were a student in an actual classroom, and the instructor was staring at the floor while lecturing, it wouldn't be very engaging would it?
Looking into the camera has an effect on the students of being 'looked at' and that is generally desirable. Here are a few suggestions for effective use of the camera:

- Since the instructor's computer screen is a natural focal point, position the camera as close to the top or bottom of the instructors monitor as possible. Center the camera on the screen – not off to the side. Then experiment with the up/down angle of the instructors head and eyes as the monitor (or the instructor's chair) is moved up and down. Use books under the monitor if you need to raise it. Most camera software has a self monitoring feature but don't forget to test remotely, with the help of a colleague. Remember the goal here is the same as in any public speaking format, appropriate eye contact.
- Consider a small web-cam that has a gooseneck (or a miniature tripod) mounting system. Then position the web-cam directly in the center of the instructors computer monitor. This will obscure a small portion of the center of the screen, but with practice it can usually be dealt with.

- Most cameras (including webcams) have built-in microphones. Don't use them. While some of these built-in microphones cancel feedback and background noise, none do it perfectly.
- Use 'behind the head' headphones with a built-in microphone. These wrap around the back of the head and are almost unnoticeable to viewers. An integrated microphone will ensure no feedback noise from computer speakers. These are usually inexpensive and reliable when 3.5 mm speaker/microphone plugs are used as the physical connection. Of course wireless, USB, and Bluetooth headphones exist but for nearly 100% compatibility, use the microphone and speaker plugs present on nearly all computers.

Whiteboards

Whiteboards, a fixture in most classrooms, are often omitted from online training for a couple of reasons, but mainly because virtual white boards can be difficult to use. Here are the two primary challenges:
- Many instructors cannot easily make the transition from a pen to a mouse and without a lot of practice, completed materials may look amateurish
- The instructor cannot easily save and distribute whiteboard sessions

  Here is where some additional technology can be really useful. There are hardware and software solutions to address these challenges:
- Mimeo® – This is a hardware and software solution. Mimio makes several products for interactive white boarding. Most notable is the 'Mimio Bar'® that attaches to a standard whiteboard and through the use of specialized pens allows the instructor a natural interaction with the whiteboard and the ability to save to files.
- SMART® interactive – SMART makes specialized interactive whiteboards that allow any whiteboard work to be saved as files.
- Graphic tablets – There are numerous graphics tablets available. While these are primarily used for graphics work they can be displayed through the screen sharing application and allow for the use of a pen. Using any graphics program would then allow you to save the whiteboard sessions as graphics files.
- DabbleBoard® – This is a web based application that has unique handwriting recognition with 'snap-to' functions that with practice can produce nice results. It is also multi-user capable and files can be saved.

Using mulitple technologies

While numerous additional tools have been mentioned, it is important to note that there is a matter of the computer screen 'real estate' that must be taken into account. Asking the students to switch between many applications may 'keep them on their toes' so to speak, but it may also frustrate them. It is usually impossible to know what size monitor students are using, the resolution they are capable of viewing, and what software incompatibilities may exist. Simplicity is always better. You usually don't want the class to be more about how to use 'all these training tools' than about the actual product being taught.