



The Non-Drowsy Virtual Classroom

As in the classroom, so online. Virtual classrooms live by slightly different rules, but the foundation is still facilitating to ensure alert and engaged learners.

By Nanette Miner

We know good facilitation skills: Ask don't tell, and encourage discussion *among* participants, not just between you and the participants. An instructor needs to play devil's advocate to challenge people's thinking.

Yet when they move from the traditional classroom to the virtual classroom, many facilitators revert to lecture and presentation mode. If you think that a straightforward lecture is a snoozer in the classroom, it's 10 times worse in the virtual classroom when the only element participants rely on to keep them engaged is the sound of your voice.

To deliver online classes that are engaging, consider these five keys to better facilitation in the virtual classroom.

1| Facilitate, facilitate, facilitate

A common complaint of new online facilitators is that the participants aren't paying attention and are frequently multitasking. That is only true if you are not facilitating. If you are facilitating, your participants would be too involved with the learning process to have the time or the inclination to multitask.

A facilitator is someone who helps a group of people understand their common objectives and develops a plan to achieve them. An important theme here is that the facilitator is not the focus of the learning event.

The facilitator brings about the learning through the training participants. The best virtual classroom learning experiences put the dialogue and the learning process firmly in the hands of the participants.

If you're bringing people together online to make a presentation, try recording the presentation, and letting your participants view it on demand.

As a general rule, all open-ended questions need to be rephrased as closed questions to keep the dialogue flowing and keep the class moving along.



Achieve the most meaningful interactive and collaborative outcomes possible.

2| Use people's names

A television actor commented on his profession by saying that one of the hardest things to adjust to was how often one referred to other characters in the first person. For instance, "Well Bob, I think what Juan says is something that we should consider. Especially in light of what Lucy has now brought to the table."

He also stated that in a simple dialogue, you might call Bob by his name three or four times while speaking to him. You may find this phenomenon to be similar in the virtual classroom. Since you've lost the ability to use body language or make eye contact, the only way to engage people in conversation is to call on them specifically.

Rather than asking, "Who would like to comment on the case study?" you'll need to adjust your style and say, "I'd like to hear what you think of the case study, Alison."

You'll also find that you call on people randomly, usually based on whether you've heard from them recently or not, much more so than you would in the classroom. In the classroom, there is typically an eager volunteer. In the virtual classroom, participants should expect to be called on randomly.

3| Be direct

Your language in the virtual classroom needs to be much more direct. It's impossible to ask an open-ended question and not confuse your participants. To that end, the question, "Who would like to comment on the case study?" should be rephrased as, "Bob, would you like to comment on the case study?"

In the classroom, an open-ended question invites volunteers, but in the virtual classroom an open-ended question invites confusion. Participants will think to themselves, "Should I raise my

hand? Should I just speak up? How does she want me to respond?"

While your participants are thinking through all these options, you are listening to dead air and wondering if they've understood the question, if no one has an answer, or if they just don't want to participate. As a general rule, all open-ended questions need to be rephrased as closed questions to keep the dialogue flowing and keep the class moving along.

4| Write down all instructions

The least preferred way for Americans to absorb knowledge is in an auditory manner; yet, the virtual classroom forces 90 percent of our communication to be entirely auditory. This heightens the possibility that participants will get confused, especially when they are asked to complete some type of activity.

To assist your participants, give written instructions for activities, preferably both on the screen and in a handout or workbook that you have provided for them. If you have not provided a written guide to correspond to your online class, then at the very minimum, post activity instructions on the screen, and give participants adequate time to copy them so that they can refer back to them while completing the activity.

5| Keep the energy up

Jennifer Hofmann, a synchronous learning expert, says that teaching online is like teaching after lunch all the time. In the classroom, there is a natural flow of energy from the comingling of participants.

But in an online class, most of the participants are isolated, and it is up to you, the facilitator, to keep the energy up. You don't want to be super-caffeinated—that's the wrong kind of energy—but you do want to put on your presenter's voice and mannerisms.

If possible, stand up and move the way you would if you were standing in front of the class. Using natural body

language and mannerisms keeps your energy high and translates quite successfully through the telephone lines.

In general, the skills you have as a classroom trainer translate well to the online classroom. Don't approach online training like a telephone conversation or radio broadcast. Your participants are still out there and are desperately hoping to be engaged in your class—it's up to you to lead the way to their success.

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