Migrating to Virtual Delivery? Beware.

In the current global situation, Learning and Development teams are seeing the need to quickly move all corporate training to a virtual delivery mode, for the time being at least. But there are some huge risks and challenges associated with this mandate. It isn't as simple as "move it all to virtual as-is and everything will be fine".

Trying to deliver an eight-hour classroom session effectively in a virtual environment is just not going to be as easy as that, for two main reasons:

Problem 1: Classroom Materials are Rarely Ready to be Delivered Virtually Without Adaption

Firstly, the training materials themselves are not ready to be delivered virtually. The tools and strategies used to maintain attention and focus in the classroom are very different to what is required in the virtual delivery mode. At the heart of the problem is the fact that no learner can realistically be expected to sit through eight hours of virtual delivery. It simply isn't possible to sustain attention for the same length of time as you can in a classroom setting, with physical proximity. Even if the materials are supposedly designed for virtual delivery, our guess is that they aren't great at maintaining attention!

Questions, and lots of them are a key to engagement

When you deliver a virtual session, you need considerably more emphasis on engagement to maintain similar levels of attention. Very basically,

In a general sense, the Facilitator has to adopt a more Socratic approach, asking more questions of the learner group, direct questions and even simple rhetorical questions – the mantra is always ASK, ASK, ASK as a means to get better engagement, versus TELL TELL TELL- but in the case of virtual learning, think in terms of factor 10X.

Facilitators have to add in lots more questions and prompts to draw learners in and keep them engaged. The instructions to do so need to be written into Facilitator Notes- because frankly, you can't rely on Facilitators to do it naturally. Time and time again Facilitators they will tend to revert to "this is how I do it the classroom and it works OK" mode. You have to intentionally design engagement into the virtual materials.

Learner Engagement tools are built into Virtual Delivery Platforms

Moreover, the kinds of engagement you need to design into virtual delivery are quite different to what you might use in the classroom. In the virtual environment, most of the platforms available (and there are several) will share similar engagement techniques such as:

- Polling
- Chat
- Voting
- Quizzing
- Whiteboards

Facilitator Notes need to incorporate these techniques

Facilitator Notes need to build-in these techniques specifically into the materials, and the facilitator, rather than saying, 'Here are the three important factors to consider here" will have to turn it around and ask, rather than tell. For example, the facilitator might engage the learner by:

Polling: "Which of the following three things do you think is the most important?"

Chat: "What things do you think are important- use the chat function to suggest your ideas"

Voting: "How many of you think this (thing) is the most important- vote YES or No?"

Quizzing: "What are the three most important things here?

Whiteboards: "Suggest what you think is important by writing on the whiteboard"

Direct Question: "Pedro; Will you share one principle your group discussed in this activity?"

To make these things happen, the facilitator needs things spelled out in their Facilitator Notes document.

Best practice suggests a meaningful interaction or engagement every four minutes at least- that's a lot for the Facilitator to manage unless it's in their Facilitator Notes document. You quite simply have to plan in this interaction or else, in our experience it doesn't happen - and certainly not after the first hour!

Problem 2: Facilitators Aren't Ready to Delivery Virtually

Many Facilitators who are excellent face-to-face trainers' approach virtual training with the attitude of "how hard can it be?" However, delivery in the virtual classroom is completely different from face-to-face training and requires simultaneously mastering the new technology and the content, as well as learning a quite different delivery style. The fact is that delivering virtually is different, and it's more demanding on the facilitator, than delivering in a classroom environment. You don't have the benefit of eye contact or reading body language to get engagement feedback. Without the social feedback cues we're used to, Facilitators often will revert to "presentation mode" or "lecture mode."

This happens when designers and instructors do not know how to leverage the tools and features of the virtual classroom platform—or even know what is possible.

Facilitators have to constantly work to engage the learners

Ideally it should be written into Facilitator Notes, but whether it is or it isn't, Facilitators need to push the limits to ensure learners are engaged in the learning process. The simplest way to do that? Facilitators need to add more questions! They shouldn't tell, they should ask. They have to adopt a more Socratic approach to helping people learn and posing questions, whether those questions are direct, indirect, open, closed or rhetorical. The more the better and it is the simplest means to ensure people are engaged.

Facilitators need to speak a new language

Delivering in a virtual environment requires Facilitators to learn a new "learning language" and be able to explain to learners how to behave in the new environment.

This can mean constantly prompting learners with specific instructions. Facilitators will have to learn a new language or way of getting feedback. Rather than asking "What experience do you have with XYZ? The facilitator may have to prompt for feedback by saying, 'If you have experience with this concept, please change your status to Agree by clicking the green checkmark icon. No experience? Change your status to red X or Disagree.'

Initially this awkward, and it is most certainly a different way of communicating and not all Facilitators are going to able to make this transition.

There is often too much for one Facilitator to do

Delivery generally requires more preparation than in-person teaching. In many courses with high engagement, facilitating becomes a "two-person job"- there is simply too much new stuff for the Facilitator to do alone. Running polls, setting up questions, monitoring the chat function and all the technical considerations, if heaped on the Facilitator can be overwhelming tasks. The Facilitator is acting a new mode, they are concentrating on flexing their own style and what they need is someone who can assist them by taking part of the load. The role of the Virtual Producer is born, with responsibility for:

- Setting up and running polls
- Monitoring voting
- Monitoring and feeding back on chat conversations
- Setting up and monitoring whiteboards
- Assigning breakout rooms, allocating learners to rooms, monitoring rooms and bringing people back to main rooms
- Assuming responsibility for all technical aspects of the workshop

Is This All Really Necessary? Can't We Just Hope It Goes OK?

Hope is not a plan! Based on our experience of running hundreds of classes in a virtual format, the short answer is no, don't hope for the best because it won't happen. The reality is that an OK in-person class dumped online becomes a terrible virtual learning experience.

The good news, however, is that it isn't quite as difficult as it may seem, if you follow some specific advice and some basic principles. In fact, you can make this shift very quickly and very successfully if you have the resources available.

A 1-2-3 Blueprint for Success

Here is a 1, 2, 3 Blueprint for Success in rapidly migrating to a virtual format.

1. *Modify Existing Facilitator Note Documents*

   Our suggested approach is to take existing Facilitator Note documentation, leave existing content exactly as is, but quickly do three things:

   Add considerably more questions (and answers!)

   Weave in carefully designed examples of Polling, Voting, Chat, Quizzing and Whiteboard interactions

   Write careful technical instructions in the Facilitator Notes (which will usually be followed by the Virtual Producer).

2. *Modify Slide Decks with Instructions*

   Virtual learning typically requires more slides than does traditional classroom learning. And the general drive should be towards less words and more pictures on slides. In the virtual mode, a slide should never be read, so removing words off slides is a very easy way to ensure this isn't an option!

   In addition, the new engagement steps will frequently require additional slides to be created and added to the slide decks, giving learners clear instructions on using the engagement tools, where required.

   Our experience, based on years of experience, is that this effort, in Steps 1 and 2, is not as time consuming as it may appear. Because we are using existing formats, we can usually convert existing classroom materials in approximately the same time as the module takes to deliver. What this means for you is that we can convert a four-hour module in approximately four hours of work effort. We are leaving content as it is, so we don't need Subject Matter Expertise, we simply use our experience to insert, where applicable, additional questions, Polling, Voting, Chat Response and Whiteboarding notes.

3. Train Your Facilitators and Virtual Producers

   Our Virtual Facilitator Workshop and our Virtual Producer Workshops are three/four-hour modules which equip people with the necessary skills, and understanding, to be able to follow the new materials effectively. What's more, if you don't have the resource, we can also help in providing skills virtual producers who can sit alongside your own facilitator, to make a powerful combination to help you quickly get to grips with virtual delivery.

Call us at Blue Consulting and Resourcing to find out more or to reserve your FREE seat in our next webinar.

https://www.blueconsultingandresourcing.com/