

# Developing excellence in virtual training

Proven techniques to maximise engagement and guarantee impact



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## What is excellence in the Virtual Classroom?

Excellence is not perfection. It is the best possible approach for a specific problem, in a defined environment. There is no one size fits all solution. However, when facilitating a live experience using a digital environment there are some keys to success.

- Making it a human experience
- Making technology disappear

To explore best practices in this whitepaper, we will learn from real life examples and evidence it with some recent surveys and reports.

## What does research say about Virtual classrooms?

### Effectiveness of the virtual classroom demonstrated

In the past decade, a large number of high-quality studies have been published on the attributes of effective online learning. These studies consistently demonstrate that good-quality virtual classroom learning is equally effective as traditional in-person classroom learning.

Although there are several factors that moderate the effectiveness of virtual classroom teaching, these factors can also be used as a lever to enhance effectiveness – for example, by reducing cognitive load, increasing interactivity, enhancing social presence, and building social cohesion and trust.

**“Effective Virtual Classrooms : an evidence review”**  
CIPD Oct 2021

### Digital learning fatigue is not going away

With 53% of organisations highlighting digital learning fatigue as an issue, adoption continues to create challenges. As a consequence, delivering more human-centred blended experiences will become a major differentiator for learning providers and internal teams alike.

**2021 Fosway 9-Grid for Digital Learning**



**Contradictions of corporate training 2021 – Gamelearn**

# Marco, 38 Sales Director EMEA in personal care industry



Marco was invited to join a virtual leadership programme together with 11 other senior executives in his company from across the globe. As he joined, one of his colleagues experienced difficulties with the audio.

The trainer spent the first 10 minutes of the programme trying to help his colleague to connect to the audio. The other 11 participants were waiting, left to their own devices.

Marco felt a pang of frustration. It was a busy week again and he felt his time was not valued. So whilst waiting, he opened his email and became absorbed into his teams current challenges.

Eventually the training began but Marco was no longer focused. He was partly annoyed because of the delay and partly his mind was on one of the emails he had just read.

As they went through the programme orientation and introduction, Marco remained distracted, reading through a previous email in his inbox.

A while later, they were moved into groups. It took a while, and by the time the breakout activity started, Marco had no idea what the activity was about. The other two participants in the group had different views on the tasks and they spent the first 5 minutes of the activity piecing it together. It was a short activity where they had to list their challenges on a whiteboard but Marco felt that they only had time to scratch the surface.

His mind was made up: this programme was run by amateurs, a waste of his time and irrelevant.

## Poor learner experience

Late start was critical in Marco quickly making his decision that it was not a professional experience.



## Distraction

Marco became absorbed in dealing with urgent matters in his email and struggled to refocus.



## Mindset

Marco's opinion was formed quickly, this programme was unlikely to be worth it.



# Signs of excellence



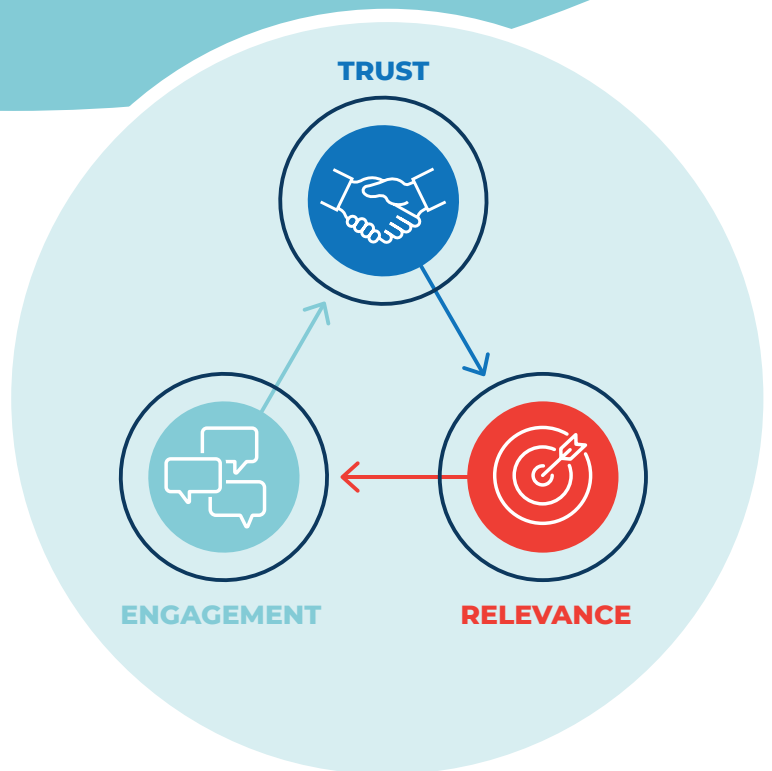
## Pillars of Excellence

Marco's experience illustrates how things can quickly derail from a probably good experience to very poor. Digital learning often suffers from mis-trust: many participants have previously experienced poorly run webinars or mandatory e-learning. They are likely to have a negative mindset. Establishing trust in the professionalism of the experience is key to lead to learner active engagement and relevance.

By relevance we don't mean of the overall goals or topics (which should have been established prior to the start) but of situations and cases. It is a two way process where participants trust the environment and are prepared to share personal experience and challenges with the group in order to find their own solution or path.

In Marco's case, he lost trust in the ability of the trainer to run the training at the right level of professionalism. The delays and technical issues unrelated to expertise on leadership actually made Marco doubt the trainers competence on the topic. Marco's engagement became minimal and because he was not engaged, he chose not to share some of his key challenges with the trainer and the group. The trainer could not tap into his story or bring relevant examples for Marco to relate to.

What was a slight 10 min glitch at the beginning has ballooned into a complete failure. What could be done to prevent this happening to your programmes and your trainers? This is what we are going to explore in this "Best Practice for Virtual & Hybrid" learning.





# Creating a trusted environment

Managing technology  
Establishing the rules of the game

## The secret to technology mastery

Having a producer supporting the trainer provides a guarantee that all technical issues will be managed:

- Supporting participants with technical issues in the chat, through emails or potentially over the phone.
- Create breakout rooms, allocate groups, share instructions for activities, visit rooms to ensure all is working as it should.
- Set up whiteboards, save them, bring them back to evaluate progress.
- Save admin overheads: take attendance, manage recording AND (where needed) also monitor individual engagement throughout the activities, being able to report who seems to be distracted to the trainer.
- In hybrid experiences: the producer will check who are in the rooms and set up activities which can be undertaken by both in-person and remote participants, especially if in-person participants don't have a computer.
- If the trainer has a technical issue, the producer will be able to launch a substitute activity keeping the group moving.

### Designing for interactions

The goal is to manage a group of learners so that they become so absorbed that they forget they are online and connect with the rest of the group.

This starts with design and a strategy focusing on the group, their challenges and their personal goals.

It means designing and planning less slides AND allocating ABOUT 75% of the programme to be activities:

- Reflection
  - Practice
  - Simulation
- ... Leveraging Breakout functionalities

## Top tips for setting up the Virtual Classroom

- 👍 Open the session at least 30 minutes prior to the start.
- 👍 The person in charge of technology should join with a second device as an attendee in order to follow and monitor the attendee path.
- 👍 Prepare breakout rooms including timers and other options in advance.
- 👍 Ensure the set up allows for participants to write on whiteboards and share their screens if necessary.
- 👍 Check external activities are ready: external whiteboards, online community, simulation software etc.

## Key tips for setting up hybrid events

### There are multiple ways to set up for hybrid scenarios:

1. Trainer is in the room with some of the participants whilst other participants join online
2. Trainer is online but groups of participants are in a room

### In both cases, the producer will need to:

- Check that there is one person to help each in-person group.
- Validate that virtual participants can see the room and vice versa.
- Check that the room streaming service feeds into virtual classroom software.
- Find out if participants in the room have individual laptops, otherwise whiteboards and chat will have to be replaced with interactive technology that is usable on smartphones.







## Establishing the rules of the game

### When

From the initial marketing through to the welcome information, it is vital to communicate that engagement will be expected. Focus on differentiating a VILT (Virtual Instructor Led Training) from a webinar and explain to participants that they are expected to be present and active during the session.

### What are your expectations for the group?

- Be on time / Absence policy
- Webcam / no webcam
- Be called upon
- Preparation
- Respect everyone's views and opinion
- Don't interrupt, direct users to the raised hand icon

## Key tips for getting buy-in from learners for the rules of the game.

After the facilitator or producer has gone through the rules, the facilitator should ask participants to commit to the rules. It can be by typing in the chat or using one of the icons such as green tick or thumbs up.

Once this contract is established, it is best to have a short activity, perhaps to understand participants goals or their challenges. This will serve 2 purposes:

- 👍 Gets all participants engaged
- 👍 Re-enforces the rules that they have agreed to just a moment ago.

# Venka, 52 Manager in the aerospace industry Germany



Venka initially joined the conflict management programme online to deal with a situation in her team. It seemed a practical option to fit with her current workload and her family commitments. She dreaded the technology though.

On the first day, she tried to join early as recommended. She struggled with some of the audio settings but the producer contacted her in the chat and in less than 5 minutes everything was sorted and she was even able to set her own virtual background.

She loved the format of a small group focused on practices. The facilitator was very clear from the start that she was expecting everyone on webcam, that they will call on everyone and there will be frequent group activities with clear instructions. Everything runs smoothly and every time she had a question about content, resources or activities, the producer quickly responded in the chat.

The producer and trainer were often checking in on the group activities making sure everyone was comfortable with the instructions. She felt well looked after which enabled her to focus on her learning. The programme helped her managed the conflict in her team and a few months later she chose to join a different programme in the virtual classroom.

She has chosen to do all her training in this format since.

## Trust

In both the technology and the support. She was made to feel safe and supported without any disruption to the group.



## Connected

The numerous and meaningful group reflections and practices have really help Venka in gaining a deeper understanding of the techniques.



## Engaged

Because the programme was relevant, she knew she could trust the facilitation team and she connected with the group. Venka was confident in sharing her stories and work on her own behaviour.





# Engagement
















According to Dr Ina Weinbauer-Heidel, creating frequent opportunities to discuss, reflect, apply and practice in a safe environment is key to learning transfer\*. The challenge in the virtual classroom is to design and facilitate meaningful activities.

\* "What makes training really work, 12 Levers of transfer effectiveness"  
by Dr Ina Weinbauer-Heidel 2018 published by Institute for Transfer Effectiveness

# The Data about engagement and activities in the virtual classroom

CIPD, Effective Virtual Classrooms: an evidence review, 28 Oct 2021

Table 1: Some key factors in effective learning

	Effect size (S/M/L)	Effect size (d)
Classroom discussion 		.82
Scaffolding or mastery learning		.82/.61
Feedback		.73
Reciprocal learning or peer tutoring		.74/.51
Learning goals and objectives		.68
Spaced practice 		.65
Direct instruction		.59
Meta-cognitive strategies		.58
Worked examples		.57
Formative evaluation		.48
Test-enchanted learning		.46
Co-operative or social-collaborative learning 		.40/.55


### Type of activities best suited for breakout groups

Notes: The rule of thumb for effect sizes is:

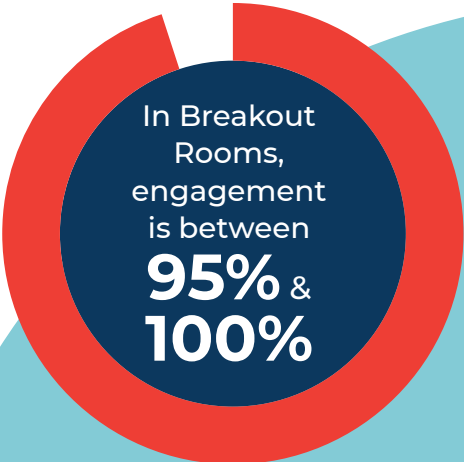
**Very large** 

**Large**, anybody can easily see the difference 

**Moderate**, visible to the naked eye of an expert or careful observer 

**Small**, the difference probably needs to be measured to be detected 

**Very small** 



SyncSkills engagement monitoring survey 2021/2022

# What does engagement look like ?

## Brainstorming / Discussion / Comparing / Sharing

- Whiteboards are always available in all virtual classroom solutions. However, they are often temporary (notes disappear at the end of the activity or session) and sometimes too simplistic for the task required. For advanced features and permanent whiteboards, tools like Mural, and Miro can really add value, but participants will have to be taught and shown how to use them.
- Always remove slides during a discussion: it is much nicer to see people than facing the same slide for 10 minutes or longer!



**TOP TIP:** for hybrid groups use Slido or Mentimeter instead of chat or whiteboards. It makes all participants equal if they use the same tool

## Practice/ Application

- Simulation
- Role Play
- Time challenge (Serious game)
- Case study
- Small group breakout groups with supporting material



**TOP TIP:**

- Allocate sufficient time for a meaningful activity
- Always debrief at the end





## Sam Country manager, Industrial equipment. Hungary.

Sam has climbed the organisational ladder, starting first in sales before becoming a country manager last year. Sam has been managing people for a while and is pretty good at it. On the other hand, she struggles with the financial aspect of the role.

Sam joins a virtual programme, intermediate finance for non-financial leaders, with global colleagues. It is a blended programme combining self-study with VILT.

The VILT sessions are split between a simulation and group coaching sessions. Sam loved working with her group of 4, trying to beat the other two groups.

The financial simulation showed her the impact of decisions or the lack of decision, growing her confidence and enabling her to lead conversations with key stakeholders in various areas of the organisation.

### Relevance and convenience

With a demanding job, Sam really needed the programme to deliver on specific skills.



### Accessible knowledge

All knowledge was accessible in an interactive self-study format with self-evaluations and in-built nudges.



### Practice, Practice

The simulation in small groups helped to evaluate the decision making. The online platform had been designed to look exactly like the company's financial report. They could change different variables and discuss the outcomes. The game element of one of the groups winning, really motivated the whole group.



## Designing “engagement”

1 - Let's start with the goal in mind.

- Is it about new skills?
- A new behaviour?
- How specific and how critical is it?

2 - Design the main activities first

Ditch the slides and focus on what they should be doing. Be creative: think about using virtual cards for values, interactive whiteboards for processes, role plays, simulations or writing checklists together, there are endless possibilities.

3 - Content and information in a blended format

Once the activities are in place, like large stones in a jar, content like pebbles will have to fit around them. Content does not have to be a lecture in a slide format: short practical job aids, home made or curated videos, tutorials, articles or even podcasts are all powerful ways of giving access to information without taking time away from practice and active learning activities.

New to curation? Here is a quick overview of strategies and their benefits:

<https://elearningindustry.com/content-curation-strategies-corporate-training>

## Tech: simple but clever design always win

### Maximising virtual classroom tools for a novel and creative activity

A facilitator for a leadership programme designed an activity about communicating and analysing information where each participant in a group received individually different information through private chat. Participants in a group could not re-share the information using the chat. They could only talk and use the whiteboard. The first group to collect and order the information in a meaningful way won the game. It was very clever, very easy to implement, there were some superb learning outcomes in terms of asking the right questions and working as a team. And it was genuinely complex and challenging.

## Monitoring engagement

For sessions of more than 6 participants, it becomes harder for the facilitator to keep track of everyone's level of engagement.

A simple table helps ensure everyone is active. The producer adds a sign for every contribution and can easily keep track of it and report to the facilitator when and if needed.



Name	Chat	Whiteboard	Breakout	Discussion
Sam	●●●●	●●●●	●●●	●●●●
Marco	●●	●●●	●●●	●
Venka	●	●	●●●	●
Jo	●●●●	●●	●●●	●●●

## Facilitating engagement

**Clarity is key, especially with small group activities where participants may need to wait to get assistance:**

### KEY TIPS:

- 👍 Announce and remind frequently about the timing of the activity.
- 👍 Keep supporting documents accessible and clear: Downloadable whiteboards and scripts.
- 👍 Instruction can be posted in the chat or broadcasted to ensure participants can review and avoid any misunderstanding.
- 👍 Producer to visit within minutes of the start to ensure everyone is connected.
- 👍 Facilitator to visit if needed or as an observer to evaluate the activity.
- 👍 Debrief is important, it is an opportunity for participants to receive feedback and evaluate their work.





## Evaluating success

Measuring the impact of learning is important for any programme but probably even more relevant for virtual classrooms (programmes) because negative stigma are often still attached to it.

\* "What makes training really work, 12 Levers of transfer effectiveness"  
by Dr Ina Weinbauer-Heidel 2018 published by Institute for Transfer Effectiveness

## Developing transfer effectiveness

Dr Ina Weinbauer-Heidel explains in her book\* that 5 out of 12 Levers of transfer effectiveness lay within the organisation after the training has taken place. She adds, it is important for successful transfer to reserve 10% of the training time for transfer planning as a group but also individually. Don't expect busy professionals to allocate time for transfer when they get back to work, such as after-training-action-plan, diarising specific tasks and so on.

The beauty of virtual training lays in its intrinsic ability to spread over a period of time and organising a progression meeting for a couple of weeks after the end of the programme is not unrealistic but should be planned out from the beginning to ensure it is in everyone's diary.

\*What makes training really works,  
12 levers of transfer effectiveness  
by Ina Weinbauer-Heidel, 2018



## Building blocks of excellence

Excellence in virtual training in 2022 is very different from 2019 and will be different again in 2025. Often, virtual training assumes a one size fits all approach but plant workers or nursing teams needs vary significantly from office based professionals.

With this in mind, it is essential to start with specific skill(s) and behaviour(s) and more importantly to be realistic about the number of objectives in relation to the time available.

- Less content allows for more practice.
- Plan, practice and rehearse all activities and transitions.
- Script activity instructions.
- Allow time for debriefs and feedback after all activities.
- Create accessible job aids.
- **Get a dedicated person (producer) to look after the technology during the live sessions.**

# SyncSkills' expertise



SyncSkills has been supporting virtual learning since 2014



We have a team of international producers, many of whom have over 10 years experience in managing virtual events.



Everything from training, design and consultancy is totally bespoke to your needs.



Nigel exudes calmness, confidence and humour. This enables everyone to relax as they know that any problems will be resolved.

*Ann Coats, Chair, Naval Dockyards Society*

Always appreciate the cheerful atmosphere created by Gaelle who gives a lot of confidence that all will go well, and it does.

*Laurence Mickalonis, Director, Life Science Praxis*



**SyncSkills**  
Production

Contact us at [hello@syncskills.net](mailto:hello@syncskills.net) for a complimentary evaluation of your virtual and hybrid programme level of excellence.