

The Virtual Training Room – use it;
use it now; but for heaven's sake
use it properly



Change behaviour. Change results.

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Huthwaite International's David Freedman, Business Director for IT, asks how does the Virtual Training Room, or the more complete Virtual Training Campus, add a new dimension to professional learning in the 21st century?

Type "virtual classroom" into your Internet search engine and you can expect to find roughly 2,800,000 results, and not all of these will be for online poker lessons. The sheer number of references is a testament to the interest, not to say hype, which the idea of the virtual classroom, or virtual training room, has evoked in almost no time. Why might this be? And how far has the hype travelled in the direction of reality?

There are some obvious, and superficially valid, explanations for the hurricane of name checks. Even before corporate budgets for travel and training were being strangled at birth, as so many now are, there was regulatory and moral pressure on organisations to cut the amount of carbon-emitting transport undertaken by their employees. Sales directors have long issued the siren cry of "time off the road" to resist any training programme that occupied 16 or 24 hours (that's two or three working days) of their expensive sales force's time. And now that the CFO has clamped down on "discretionary" spending,

the demand to deliver learning to people, rather than the other way around, has mushroomed. Nor should we forget that scares about global contagion (SARS, bird flu, swine flu) have made large gatherings unattractive to some. So people have begun to talk about, and to deliver, a virtual training experience.

The idea of people doing some learning outside the traditional classroom has, of course, been valid for decades. Correspondence courses were a staple part of previous generations' adult education in everything from Pitman shorthand to intermediate Serbo-Croat. In Britain, the Open University was set up with enormous success nearly 50 years ago, using TV and radio, and then the Internet as the key delivery media. More recently, corporate audiences have become familiar and comfortable with various forms of e-learning, blended learning, webinars and webcasts.

But these have all been limited in a critical way. They are all channels for imparting information in a more or less "push" style. The only way instructors could elicit a response from the unknown, unseen, unheard multitudes of a potentially infinite audience was in the form of completed exercises or, at best nowadays, instant messaging. We might call this response "reverse push". But as any trainer knows, learning requires the facilitator to draw answers out of the student and

to construct a convincing and lasting model that actually works, rather than just to cram students' heads full of facts or theories. In modern business training we use the word "pull" as a term of convenience to describe, however inadequately, this Socratic method.

True "pull" style training was never really possible without the physical co-location of trainer and learner until the advent of the virtual training room. And even since its arrival, the evidence we have seen suggests that trainers, unaware of its true potential and mired in a webcast mindset, are tending to use it as another glorified conduit for the force-feeding of information to an unwilling, bored and distracted receiving cohort. Make no mistake: the opportunities and temptations for non-attendance and non-cooperation are magnified in the virtual world if the delivery team is not highly skilled and if the design is not the right one.

At its best, we have no doubt that the virtual training room, in which companies like Adobe, Cisco and HP as well as smaller specialists are investing heavy R&D resources, will assume a prominent place. These companies are producing systems with not just text and audio communication – that has been available for years. What we have now is a select few solutions that are truly fit for purpose and moving into the mainstream: with interactive trainers, plenary sessions, virtual

syndicate rooms, private and public messaging, freehand whiteboards and flip charts that can be "carried" from room to room. Almost everything, in fact, that you'd have in a normal training environment except the high cost and the boiled sweets.

Indeed, the term "virtual training room" is not really adequate to describe what is actually possible today or looming over the horizon for tomorrow. We are increasingly thinking, and talking, in terms of the Virtual Training Campus, in which the training room itself is just one – albeit a central – component. This is rather like a campus in the real world. Just as there are seminars, one-on-one tutorials, lectures, libraries, formal symposia and informal late night intellectualising on a real campus, these each have their virtual equivalents: small webinars, online coaching, large webcasts and podcasts, online resource centres filled with written or multimedia content, massive e-learning content, moderated forums and un-moderated chat rooms, blogs, and extracts from YouTube.

But focus for the moment is strictly upon the training room component. To make that environment work well, the leader of any virtual session must still – as in the traditional setting – be able to demonstrate total familiarity and competence with the subject matter content under instruction. This should, as in the old world, be backed up by an engaging and

interesting delivery style. It may seem obvious to restate these traditional skills, but the danger is that in jumping aboard the unusually fast-moving wagon that the virtual training room has become, these eternal truths get forgotten. Facilitators must not become seduced by new technology that edges out the need to fascinate and astound their audience with whatever it is they are there to learn, and to integrate it into a delegate's real world.

This is not to deny that among the completely new skills now required is that very ability to master the technology. While it must be the servant of the content, it must also always work flawlessly. There should always be two people running the event in real time: a lead trainer and a producer. Between them, the lead trainer and the producer must be able to switch between delegates on different continents; bring up flipcharts from yesterday on three out of six screens while putting something different on three others; ensure that the (physically remote) role-play pairings are correctly dialled-in while the other pairs are silently doing their preparation off-line; spot random delegates who wish to say something either privately or publicly; line up a PowerPoint slide set for the next session; and so on.

All of this, it must be remembered, must happen while simultaneously keeping the learning and responses

rattling along at a good pace and in an attractive style.

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These are new skills. So is the ability to adapt the traditional habits of the classroom trainer, particularly the trick of including all delegates in the discussion, to a setting where the participants are visible neither to the trainer nor to each other, and where they are only audible if they choose to be. Making sure that they are not quietly doing their emails, nipping outside for a cigarette, or (worse) sitting there feeling left out and bored, is a distinct and totally new skill. When you can't actually see someone gazing into space or reading the paper, how can you tell? This isn't intuition, it is skill, and it can be learned.

In this connection, one observation that we have made from the virtual training we have done or seen others do, is that class sizes should be no bigger, and arguably they should be *smaller*, in the virtual world than in the face-to-face. That way individual attention is easier to guarantee. This may be counter-intuitive to anybody used to thinking about virtual learning in the "push"

Webinar style we discussed earlier, where ostensibly the audience size could be infinite. But the more truly interactive a training programme seeks to be and – because of better technology – can be, the smaller the class becomes.

To Huthwaite International, the ideal non-virtual face-to-face class size is 12: small enough for the trainer(s) to give individual attention to everyone's views and roleplay sessions, but large enough to create a dynamic environment in which ideas can crackle and develop within the group.

But in the virtual world, where there are no non-verbal clues to catch the trainer's eye (we advise against widespread use of live video because it is very hungry of bandwidth and often unreliable), what we might call the "span of inclusion" is necessarily limited. There are icons on the screen to indicate somebody wishing to contribute (as well as live audio and instant messaging as well) so the producer can always spot pro-activity on the part of delegates. But nobody can see a delegate yawn, shake a head in violent disagreement, or start staring distractedly out of the window. In a small virtual class, the training team can avoid this by constantly firing questions and seeking views from each of the delegates, *by name*, ensuring that nobody's attention can wander too far for too long. That's why the ideal class size might be as few as eight.

So, the virtual training room, and with it the Virtual Training Campus, is advancing. Best practice is clearly emerging. And as this evolution progresses, the arguments assembled to resist it start to roll over the horizon, which is no surprise. They are certainly worthy of examination.

First, what about the notion that, "you cannot achieve true skill or behaviour change, particularly where the skill or behaviour you are trying to shape is essentially interactive in nature?" Well, a significant amount of Huthwaite International's core intellectual property, on which it has built its multi-million pound/dollar global business over 35 years, is based around highly interactive, behavioural improvements in selling and negotiating skills, involving a high degree of iterative and thoroughly analysed role-play. So if anyone should know whether this can work well in a virtual training room, it is us.....and it does.

Indeed, in some ways it actually works better this way. How can this be? Because the very behaviours that we study in such detail and seek to improve among the delegates are *verbal* behaviours – the use of language in the pursuit of persuasiveness – that can be best studied when all we have is the detached audio in real time or via recording. This audio is easy to collect across the globe, as long as the conference line is robust and clear. And concentration on words

alone allows the analyst or trainer to discount any additional consideration of influences such as "body language" – a concept whose real value or meaning is still awaiting genuine scientific consensus many decades after the phrase was coined.

Secondly, there are many who believe that the whole point of classroom training, particularly where disparate sales organisations are involved, is in the physical bringing together of people with different roles, backgrounds, technical specialities, market challenges and personalities. This is undoubtedly a bonus, not least for the hotel's bar receipts, and there is always something to be said for the value of the social bonding and exchange of business ideas that results. Moreover, in the team-based, competitive case study work that often forms an integral part of the kind of training that we do, the ability for a team to brainstorm late into the night as the coffee gets regularly replenished is certainly an attraction. But are these the primary aims of a training event? We would argue that while this is a welcome ancillary outcome of gathering a dozen people together for a training event, it isn't usually the primary purpose, and does not, in itself, justify the cost.

The main business is to focus on the learning inputs, verbal roleplays and practice exercises, and outputs. It could even be argued that the

bonhomie and gossip of such get-togethers detract from the primary – and expensive – matter in hand. To go further, there are certain employees for whom the freedom of an anonymous hotel and the absence of a manager may be a distraction from the necessary atmosphere of study and reflection that should accompany any lasting learning activity.

Thirdly, people object that doing training remotely and on their own, in the office rather than a hotel or dedicated training centre makes them prey to interruptions. In fact, in relative terms, the opposite is true. Most of our traditional classroom programmes span an intensive two or three days. This is the only way all delegates can cover the same content simultaneously. And these days we can no longer realistically expect people to ignore laptops, mobiles, Blackberry devices and so forth. Trainers try to agree set times for people to deal with the urgent business issues, but we all know that people come back late from coffee breaks, or use what should be syndicate preparation time, to place a call with that important customer. Sometimes they skip whole sessions. This is disruptive to the class, and a waste of their employer's money.



But it doesn't have to be this way. We have found that the same learning that takes three solid days in the physical classroom can be covered in five or so early morning 3½ hour chunks over a week in the virtual training room. So the delegate has almost the whole working day left to do the "day job", having concentrated intently for those few hours on the learning, without interruption.

Fourthly, it is sometimes asked, how can companies selling training make any money in this frightening, new, virtual world? To which the counter question is: what has changed? The training organisation is still selling its intellectual property to its clients and still using its precious resource of skilled and highly prized trainers to deliver it for the same amount of time in total. Indeed, as we have just seen, the choice of trainers is probably widened by this medium because the trainers are not constrained by being physically present, maybe the expert trainer in Module 1 content on Monday is not the same as the brilliant exponent of Module 4 subject matter on Thursday, so they swap, and the delegates always get the best trainer. So why should the training provider charge less? Arguably, it should charge a premium for offering the client the privilege of obtaining the learning without the inconvenience of leaving home, and for the involvement of a separate, specialist producer.

Where the client *does* gain financially from the absence of the traditional classroom is by not having to move people around the country (or world), nor house them and feed them; and by not having to employ people to organise all of those essentially unproductive activities. In many cases, the cost of those elements is greater than the cost of the training itself. The only real losers are the taxi drivers.

So, which is it to be – bricks or clicks? The marker pen or the mouse?

If there were an original way of saying "horses for courses" we'd say it here. The truth is though that it really does depend on whether, for a given piece of training at a given time, the value of having a real physical community of learning justifies the cost and hassle of creating it. Some highly visual content, what we might call "three dimensional disciplines", will require it – first aid training for example, or a cookery course. More technical or academic content – such as advanced accounting or Java programming – probably does not. And then, as we discussed, there is the desire to get people together just because it feels right; and there's nothing wrong with that if it's affordable.

In Huthwaite International's world, although our content is highly behavioural in nature, it isn't very physical. We'll be equally happy with a foot in both camps for the

foreseeable future, offering both solutions – and maybe even a blend of the two. There is nothing to say that virtual training could not be followed up with good, locally based, face-to-face coaching, for example. That, after all, is what helps to build the true Virtual Training Campus. But what we'll always do is make sure that the content and people involved are totally appropriate to whichever medium our clients select.

In ten or twenty years' time, people will still be gathering in seminar rooms to learn, discuss and practise new skills. The difference will be that they will have thought through carefully the merits of being there, safe in the knowledge that there is a viable, no less effective and no less real, virtual alternative.



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