Creating Order from Chaos
How to Run a Successful Virtual Meeting

Opening Video Clip

Introduction

Partnerships work. And they work best when they bring to a task complementary abilities, skills and experience. This post discusses a partnership that has already achieved best-practice status in the corporate virtual facilitator-led training world. It blends the expertise of the facilitator (or meeting facilitator) with the experience of a tech-savvy associate variously referred to as a virtual classroom "host," "moderator," "co-facilitator," "producer," "assistant" or "associate." For convenience I'll use "producer" to refer to this less recognized, but essential, partner in successful online meeting and collaboration.

A typical virtual meeting room may support any (or all) of the following:

- Electronic "whiteboard" with annotation tools
- Real-time discussion via VOIP or teleconferencing
- Participant and facilitator video feeds
- Hand raising
- Temperature taking (emoticons)
- Quizzes
- Chat/instant messaging
- Polling
- Breakouts rooms
- Presentation of video and audio clips (.mp4, .swf, .mov, .avi, .mp3)
- Application/Screen Sharing

There has been a wealth of discussion about the relative strengths of virtual versus face-to-face learning and meeting environments. After 20 years of face-to-face teaching and facilitation I believe a virtual meeting environment can enable an even deeper and more

vibrant collaborative experience than its face-to-face counterpart. This is because a virtual meeting room permits more interactivity and more engagement than a traditional face-to-face environment.

Each one of the virtual components listed above is designed to enhance participant engagement … and they improve on their face-to-face counterparts.

It also allows participants to elaborate on or question points without interrupting the linear conversation enforced by a face-to-face setting. While a facilitator converses with an attendee in a virtual meeting room, others in the meeting can supplement this discussion with chats or tweets for ongoing review and consideration. "Virtual back-channeling" can be a rich and spontaneous source of interesting ideas.

In short, virtual meeting rooms offer presenters more … and more effective … tools to engage participants. Unfortunately, from a facilitator's point of view, this wealth of resources often seems more a curse than a blessing.

The challenge

Anyone stepping into a presenter's role in a virtual classroom for the first time will feel overwhelmed. Unlike the ordered linear structure of a face-to-face environment, it's virtual chaos. There's just too much going on. Not only does the facilitator need to share engaging content, he or she also needs to monitor instant messages or other social media, assess comprehension with real time polls and quizzes, be alert for raised hands, create and monitor breakout sessions and … on top of all of this … deal with the inevitable ongoing technical issues ranging from uncooperative firewalls to recalcitrant headsets. Using the full potential of the virtual environment pushes the limits of even the most technically adept facilitator.

And even for those facilitators willing to take a risk and make the leap to new technology, effectively using a virtual classroom requires not only repurposing **content**; it requires rethinking the way we approach communication and learning. The technology is designed to foster a collaborative, highly interactive, learning experience. Understanding how to reach that goal is a challenge many facilitators remain ill-equipped to meet.

Unfamiliar with the mechanics and design goals of virtual meeting rooms, face-to-face facilitators often have no choice but to import **into** this rich collaborative learning environment the familiar, but minimally effective pedagogical practices, that define face-to-face meeting rooms. To expand on Edward Tufte's penetrating metaphor, "death by PowerPoint" is no less painful in a virtual meeting room than it is in a brick and mortar one.

The Partnership

A producer helps a facilitator break through these barriers. A producer is a "technically adept co-pilot." Working in partnership with a producer, the facilitator develops technology mastery

- at his or her own speed,
- to his or her desired level
- with a safety net always in place

It means facilitators are no longer thrown into a virtual meeting environment in which they must simultaneously

- resolve technical problems
- monitor chats
- track poll responses
- attend to recordings
- deploy quizzes
- initiate video and audio clips
- share applications
- manage group breakouts
- convey content
- create an engaging learning environment

and, most importantly,

- retain their sanity and coherence in the process.

The producer is a partner skilled in technology and facilitation. This allows the facilitator to focus, with minimal distraction, on whatever he or she deems most valuable to the learning experience. A producer brings order to the chaos of the virtual meeting room and helps the facilitator engage **all** the benefits of this rich interactive meeting environment.

The Facilitator's Perspective

As I mentioned earlier, the use of producers has gained significant traction in the corporate training world. In the words of one corporate training professional, "**…** [producers] are a best practice when delivering live virtual training and I personally would not want to deliver without one."

Why not? What do facilitators have to say about working with a technically adept co-pilot? Over the past few months we interviewed a number of corporate training professionals about the producer partnership. Meg Blair, Larry Jameson, Michele Lewski and Heidi-Adler Spinella briefly share with you some of their answers.

- The Facilitators' Perspective

As Meg Blair suggests in her interview, it all comes down to quality. She knows. At ESI International she oversees over 800 synchronous classroom sessions each year.

With practice any facilitator can competently manage a virtual classroom. But "competent management" falls far short of "excellence." If virtual meeting quality is critical to the way your organization presents itself, using a producer is a simple step that yields enormous benefits.

Contact **Align Virtual Learning Solutions** for more information.

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