



Align Virtual Learning Solutions

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Going Virtual? Beware the Virtual Sage on the Stage



Two familiar pedagogical approaches are often referred to as the “sage on the stage” (with apologies to Robin Williams) and the “guide on the side.”¹ These approaches are not mutually exclusive; successful learning often involves both. But they are distinctly different.

The traditional “sage on the stage” approach assumes a centralized “knowledge base.” It’s up to the instructor to dispense the knowledge to the students.² This passive

¹ These labels come from Alison King, Professor of Education at California State University, San Marcos. They’re used in a chapter she wrote for **Changing College Classrooms: New Teaching and Learning Strategies for an Increasingly Complex World** (Chapter 2, *Inquiry as a Tool in Critical Thinking*, D.F. Halpern editor, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass 1994). In that chapter she cites them as coming from her article *From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side* in **College Teaching**, Volume 41 #1, 1993, pages 30-35. In this article Dr. King presents several effective strategies for hunting for acceptable ways to engage students as active learners.

² The knowledge (or, more properly, information) need not reside *only* with the instructor. We sometimes use a variant – the “sage-in-training’ on the stage” – deputizing individuals or groups to dispense the prescribed knowledge.

learning approach reflects what has been referred to as the “conduit” (or “reservoir”) model of communication. The instructor is the conduit through which information flows, from a reservoir of accepted truths into students’ minds. The model is asymmetrical. The instructor teaches; students learn (if all goes according to plan). When people talk about a “standard classroom format,” this approach is probably what first comes to mind.

Something like the “sage on the stage” approach is presupposed by familiar talk of content “delivery methods.” Teaching is seen as *delivering* information to students. For this reason using the “delivery method” vocabulary is seriously misleading. Talk about “delivery methods” tacitly presupposes and enforces our tendency to think of pedagogy as a “sage on the stage” enterprise.

The alternative “guide on the side” is a collaborative learning approach that assumes a distributed base of knowledge, skills and talents. It places responsibility for *teaching*, as well as learning, on *all* members of the learning community. It replaces an all-knowing sage with an informed coach.

Over the past two decades e-learning technologies have offered a host of new and exciting opportunities for collaboration among students and instructors. Synchronous virtual classrooms in particular offer instructors more ... and more effective ... tools with which to engage and guide participants. These include

- Electronic “whiteboard” with annotation tools
- Real-time discussion via VOIP or teleconferencing
- Participant and instructor 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

But better technology doesn’t ensure more engaging classes. By a wide margin the most frequent use of synchronous virtual meeting technology simply resurrects the sage on the stage. The sage on the stage is the core of the familiar webinar format. The standard webinar is a traditional, albeit virtual, classroom with an *electronic* – rather than a live – talking head. Not surprisingly, it often degrades this vibrant interactive medium for active learning into the sort of “death by webinar” lecture experience frequently associated with face-to-face learning. Making available more powerful tools doesn’t ensure they’re used, or used effectively.

A productive synchronous learning environment (be it face-to-face or virtual) is all about engagement and interactivity. Research confirms the interactive (or “constructivist”) model is particularly suited to adult learners. It allows participants to integrate their personal experiences into the learning environment creating a rich collaborative dialogue. The issue is not how content is *delivered* (virtually or face-to-face); it’s how learners are *engaged*. Virtual classrooms and other online learning tools, if used effectively, can provide unprecedented levels of participant engagement. The first step is banishing the ubiquitous sage on the stage. In the next post we’ll consider an approach to content, teaching and technology that facilitates this transition.