Virtual Instructor-led Training:
Live Interaction Engages Learners
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vILT may soon jump to the head of the eLearning class thanks to advanced software that provides learners with much higher levels of live interaction.

There are solid reasons why virtual instructor-led training (vILT) and technology-enabled learning methods are steadily capturing the attention of workforce and customer training professionals everywhere. Properly designed and executed vILT initiatives combine the best features of live classroom training with the convenience and ubiquity of the internet. They eliminate travel requirements, address time constraints of busy workers, and keep learners engaged.

Training professionals throughout the world are discovering the benefits of virtual meeting software as a learning tool, especially those that allow learners to interact with their instructors and classmates. Unlike some basic meeting programs that restrict learner interactions, the learning profession hails these high-end products as “game changers” in the learning profession.

That is because simply delivering information in a web-meeting format is not training. Allow individuals to interact with their live instructor, as well as their peers, within a live virtual environment just as they would in person and you’ll achieve true attentive learning. Failure to meet this goal is why many vILT corporate initiatives do not achieve their learning objectives.

If your company is not using this effective training tool, or if you haven’t succeeded with it, you are missing out.

However, launching a successful vILT program is no simple undertaking. Unless technology, content, and virtual instruction are managed with the learner in mind – including careful planning and a proven process – the full potential of vILT cannot be realized.

A holistic program ensures success

Within companies large and small, training professionals and their superiors are carefully weighing the advantages of augmenting their learning programs with vILT (often referred to as virtual classroom training or VCT). They need to know that effective vILT training rests on its integration within a clearly defined overall learning strategy:

Infrastructure. Selection of technologies best suited for an organization’s training needs and its learners is the essential first step to implementing vILT content and delivery capabilities.

Learning content design. Virtual instructor-led content must be designed and delivered around an effective learning strategy in order to capture the learner’s interest and create an environment for performance.

Train the trainer for virtual instruction. It is vital to win the allegiance of veteran classroom-based instructors to vILT, and to have them adapt successfully to new teaching methods.

Virtual learning production. Every learner has a preference in how she or he interacts with content and other elements of the virtual classroom. Unless these interests are considered, individuals may “tune out” the learning experience, perhaps by multi-tasking their way through learning events.
We shall examine each of these four areas in detail below. First, a few quick facts:

The delivery of instructor-led training online has risen from a scant 2.92% of all training in 2003 to 6.39% in 2008, a less significant growth rate than one might expect given the dynamic pace of evolution occurring within the training industry overall. Indeed, only 20% of companies consider themselves to be “very effective” at using vILT.²

We at Xerox Learning Services believe usage of vILT is poised to make a dramatic leap. That is because the word is out: the training profession is quickly discovering that “the new era” of vILT offers distinct technological advances over the “knowledge push” delivery of non-interactive e-learning instruction, primitive collaboration tools, and non-interactive webinars.

It has even been hailed by contented training professionals as a richer learning experience than live classroom instruction when systematically delivered to full potential.

Meanwhile, the numbers speak for themselves. Companies that have switched from traditional classroom learning to vILT are able to slash entire travel budgets for offsite student training, while still meeting training compliance demands. In addition, they report consistently favorable feedback from learners.

Here is our method:

Infrastructure – select the right technology
When selecting from among web conferencing providers, it is important to recognize that your technology choices have large implications. Make certain you understand the limitations of the software you select, and then ask the questions: How robust do we want our vILT solution to be, both now and in the future? If we select a technology with limited features, will we outgrow that solution as our vILT training program advances? What types of content will we want to deliver via vILT? What types of learning support activities and interactions with the audience do we want to provide? What measurement or outcomes, including certifications, will we want to achieve? What about the alternative of a mobile virtual class – how would that enable your employees, partners, and customers to get the right information at the right time?

There are many technology providers currently serving the learning marketplace with web conferencing products suitable for vILT, and new entrants to this market frequently. These products range from basic desktop sharing/phone conferencing software to highly interactive applications that enable multiple levels of discussion among students and the instructor.

The most versatile of these products include web conferencing tools such as Flash that enable users to create, deploy, and manage live virtual classrooms and self-paced training. Trainers can deliver courses with interactive simulations while tailoring layout to match their presentation style and audience needs. They can also track participation and course effectiveness, and can integrate the tool seamlessly with many existing learning management systems.

Many of these products also include features that enable classroom management techniques such as group breakout sessions, audio conferencing, video, and the ability to reach out to learners before and after events.

If any of your learners are seeking certifications, for example, you will want your vILT tool to mesh seamlessly with your learning management system. That helps justify selecting a higher end product. Selection of an appropriate delivery tool is critical and may involve a detailed analysis of desired business outcomes, new vILT program requirements, and existing technology, including any constraints. Once you understand where you want to go, then you can map out the technology implementation and integration paths to get there. Xerox Learning Services can help you with the evaluation and implementation needs of your organization.

Design – tailor content for maximum engagement
For many organizations, it makes sense to begin by repurposing existing classroom training content to digital format. After all, the content was designed by subject matter experts for your target audience, it conforms to quality design standards, and instructors are comfortable with it. Plus you own it.

But beware. Training professionals tasked with building a vILT curriculum are faced with numerous design considerations and other challenges that must be carefully considered. Among them: What types of content are best suited for vILT? How long should a virtual instructor-led session last? What is the formula to determine how much content to include for a specific time period, allowing for interactivity? What is the optimum class size for live virtual instruction? How should I use graphics, audio, and video for maximum impact? How should interactivity be used for global audiences, factoring in cultural differences? The list goes on.

In order to be effective, virtual instructor-led content must be designed to be relevant, focused, and engaging. Interaction among learners and instructors is a critical element of virtual content and ideally should happen every few minutes. These interactions can range from short and simple, to longer and more complex. For example, participants can begin by responding to a polling question about skills they are hoping to improve by the end of the course. Soon after, they can brainstorm responses to an open-ended question by writing on a white board. Later, they can break out into small groups and work through a scenario-based exercise.

The design will greatly affect the outcomes of the program, including whether or not your learners will be satisfied with their experience.

Train the trainer – turn instructors into virtual facilitators
Even though distance-learning programs have been sprouting up within academic institutions and businesses for some time, many instructors still resist taking on virtual facilitation duties. For many, it is perceived as an isolating experience that robs them of the personal relationship opportunities that attracted them to the profession.
It does not have to be.

Today’s virtual training technologies offer opportunities for a more human, real time interaction between instructor and learner than ever before. Learners gain a sense of intimacy with their instructors and with fellow learners, while instructors can provide immediate support and counseling. Learning professionals can build extensive interactivity into their sessions, including remote use of SMEs to heighten the experience.

At Xerox Learning Services, we have discovered that resistance by veteran classroom instructors can invariably be overcome by today’s robust vILT tools. We help our clients instill an appreciation among their instructors that by broadening their skills, they can become “facilitators of learning.”

The process begins with acceptance of the value of virtual learning as equal to the traditional model. It includes focused training for instructors that involves a rich collection of assessment tools, best practices, and guidance on virtual teaching techniques. Materials include case studies that illustrate the necessary skills, online “readiness” checklists, and training materials for the 21st Century teacher.

Instructors also learn to inspire critical thinking among students, which capitalizes on virtual learning’s abilities to transform theory into application. After all, today’s learners enjoy thinking critically, and they demand knowledge and skills that can be readily implemented in their jobs. Xerox has found that the right training for virtual facilitators can enable classroom trainers for expert delivery, virtually.

Xerox produces vILT that makes use of such things as engaging visuals, frequent learner-facilitator interaction, and meaningful and relevant activities with multiple opportunities for collaboration.

Production – connect with virtual learners, effortlessly

Often, the difference between success and failure in virtual instructor-led training comes down to a basic understanding of how your learners prefer to interact with the content and other elements of the virtual classroom. That insight is gained from measuring each learner’s overall satisfaction with their vILT experience, and acting on those preferences.

Obviously, there is nothing unique about surveying learner responses. Yet many learning organizations continue to ignore the vast differences in learner populations when considering courseware and instruction methods.

Research indicates that ignoring learner preferences can sink virtual instructor-led training before it is launched. Are your learners uncomfortable using a computer to attend a virtual training session? Do they find computer interaction too impersonal or complicated? Conversely, will millennial learners “zone out” at the sight of a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation and instead hop onto Facebook?

To answer these and other questions, virtual training designers have a variety of 21st Century tools at their disposal. They can gather data in advance from the learner community about preferences. Designers can also tie learning, customer support, and marketing activities together in ways that benefit both the learner and the organization as it seeks to refine its solution.

In the traditional classroom environment, learners experience fewer distractions as their facilitator is right in front of them. Learning in the virtual environment, however, makes the learner more susceptible to distractions (such as phone calls, other Internet sites, etc.). Effective vILT must not only address the content needs of the virtual learner, but must also be engaging in such a way as to lessen the likelihood of the learners “checking out.” Xerox produces virtual instructor-led training that makes use of such things as engaging visuals (as graphical as possible), frequent learner/facilitator interaction (e.g., with polls, knowledge checks, etc.), and meaningful and relevant activities with multiple opportunities for collaboration. For example, vILT learners could be asked to break into small groups, discuss a series of topics or respond to a series of questions, and collaborate on a Microsoft PowerPoint slide that they would then present to the larger group. The Xerox production team can manage the class environment effortlessly, enabling perfect orchestration of any virtual event.
How Xerox Learning helped autodesk launch vILT

While this can be a lot to consider, with the right help you can shorten your time to impact and achieve your particular goals related to customer education more quickly. Xerox Learning Services specializes in helping clients develop holistic educational marketing and customer education strategies, and executing these strategies as a trusted operational partner. Our specific services and solutions include the following:

**Develop.** Since Autodesk was already using Adobe Connect Pro for occasional training of niche products, it favored this useful tool. We selected Autodesk’s core content, much of it in the form of PowerPoint presentations and product demos, and inserted a variety of interactions to make the content more engaging. To prepare instructors for their first vILT assignments, we applied our tested methodology for design of the virtual learning environment, use of interactive tools, and virtual delivery. We also created session maps for instructors to use as guidance on facilitation, pace, and interactions.

**Drill.** Professional technical and production support is just as important for vILT sessions with hundreds of learners as it is for a traditional ILT event. Along with one or more presenters, each session had an assigned crew of producer, host, and moderator, which enabled instructors to focus entirely on content. Production teams also held practice sessions to help instructors master rhythm and timing.

**Deliver.** The sessions drew immediate praise from learners who were able to meet interactively with their peers and experts, while enjoying the benefit of reduced time commitments. Autodesk’s gain included elimination of travel expenses, reduction of their carbon footprint, and increased productivity from engaged learners.

With that success as a springboard, Autodesk regularly conducts vILT events for product training, as well as team collaboration and partner support.

References
2. Training Industry, Inc. 2010

There is no reason to wait

If virtual instructor-led training makes sense for your organization and you have not yet considered it, now is the time. vILT technology is advanced and readily available, while the array of economic and other justifications has never been more convincing.

Look around at your employees, partners, and customers. They are probably savvier about computers and hand-held communications devices than you think. Odds are they would welcome an opportunity for interactive virtual learning to benefit their careers, as they may have already experienced this in academia.

A trusted and experienced advisor who is familiar with the best practices and pitfalls of vILT is an indispensable asset in today’s specialized world. That advisor will help you develop, launch, and administer a comprehensive vILT initiative that complements your overall learning program, and will help you demonstrate that engaged learners can be workers that are more productive.

About Xerox Learning Services

Xerox Learning Services is a trusted provider of technology-enabled learning solutions that improve business productivity. Since 1999, we have advised senior learning, marketing, and sales executives on how to design, deliver, and measure the effectiveness of their education and training programs.

Because learners’ needs are multi-faceted, we believe learning should be too. That means delivering the right information, in the right format, at the right time. Xerox can help you harness new technologies to deliver award-winning learning solutions across multiple platforms – from the classroom to the web to mobile devices.

But technology is just one enabler of success. That is why our consultants combine technology savvy with expertise in strategy, instructional design, development, operations, and measurement. Our consultants are dedicated learning practitioners, many having led or managed large-scale learning initiatives themselves prior to joining Xerox.

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