

Best Practices for Delivering Virtual Classroom Training

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Is Anyone Out There Actually Listening?

Anyone who has taught an online class, or given a remote presentation of any sort, has had this thought pop up at least once. Most of us can admit we've asked that question far more times than that while sitting in a room alone, effectively talking to ourselves. So how can you encourage people to listen, and even better, absorb your presentation? How will you know your audience is engaged?

This paper provides suggestions and pitfalls that I hope will help you feel a lot less alone when you are training a remote audience. While this paper refers to many tools provided by Adobe Acrobat Connect Pro virtual classrooms, there are plenty of general principles you can apply no matter your tool or the objective of your online session.

Suggestions are divided into five sections so you can skip to the one that best matches your current challenges:

The Usual Suspects

A quick review of some basics that are key to any type of training and even more pertinent for an online class.

Be More of Yourself, with Less

Developing your online teaching style, and making yourself and your learners comfortable in the online environment.

Engage People, Often

Specific suggestions for how to encourage and hold attention and active student interaction in your online classroom.

Be Aware

Now that everyone is interacting with you, some tips on how to deal with all that information.

Deliver Meaningful Fun

Tips and tricks for how to use multimedia in online environment to make training form follow function.

The Usual Suspects

Let's start by assuming you are at least ready to move beyond survival-teaching an online class. This means you have a bit of familiarity with web conferencing or virtual classrooms, and



Ensuring Your Class Goes Smoothly

When preparing for your virtual classroom session, there are three basic areas to consider: Qualifying Your Audience, Delivering Great Content, and Holding a Rehearsal.

hopefully have most of the general fundamentals of training covered. To offer up a quick reminder, and because I believe the directives below are critical to any successful class – online or delivered in-person in a physical room – here are a few key practices you will want to handle first:

Qualify Your Audience

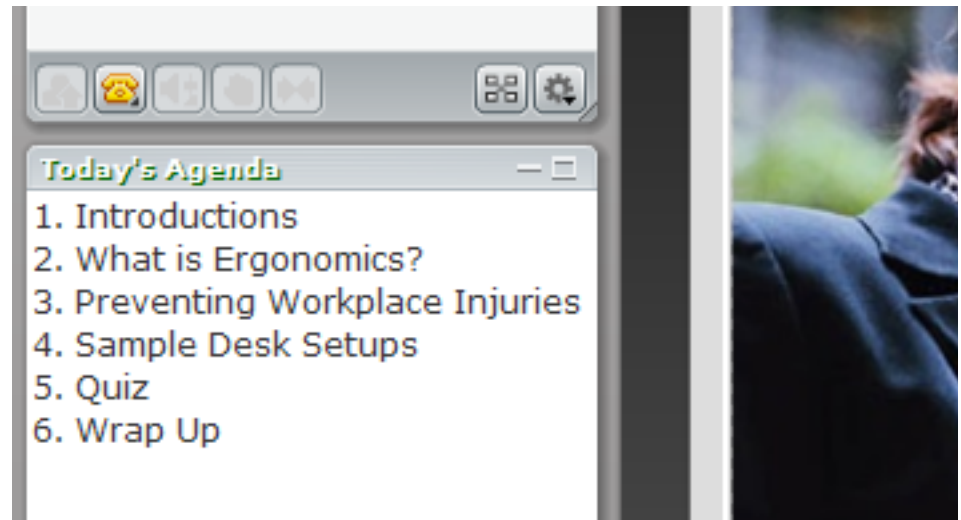
The more you know about your learners the more effective you are going to be at giving them just what they need, which is all you have time for in an online class. Define pre-requisites for your training, and if you have the tools and time to do so, verify they have been completed by your audience members. We’ve all attended classes where the one person who didn’t know what they should have known is permitted to reroute the entire session. Even the best trainers fall prey to the squeaky wheel; we want everyone to ‘get it’ after all.

Pre-Class Best Practices	
Good	Provide a list of pre-requisites
Better	Provide a pre-test
Best	Confirm the requisite knowledge has been attained by reviewing pre-test scores

Deliver Great, Organized Content

Make sure the content you plan to deliver is relevant, organized, clear, and to the point. Once you think it is organized, make it better. You won’t have the time to ‘page flip’ and look for what you need in an online class. If you confuse your learners with too much topic-jumping, recovery from confusion in an online environment will be exponentially more challenging.

Class Delivery Best Practices	
Good	Prepare an agenda and stick to it.
Better	Prepare and post an agenda in your room. Have demonstration application windows open and ready. Print a copy of the agenda and have it in front of you with cues for <i>demo</i> and <i>slides</i> or <i>video</i> .
Best	All of ‘Better’ plus pretend you are a pilot, and you run through your checklist to verify everything is where it should be and functioning. Do this at least 30 minutes before takeoff. Use Layouts to organize groups of tasks.

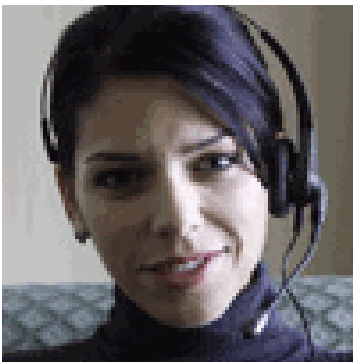


Including an agenda in a Note Pod provides a great way to set attendee expectations and get everyone on the same page. In this example, we’ve also renamed the Note Pod to explicitly indicate that the note content is the agenda for the class.

Hold a Rehearsal

With any new course, especially if you are a new instructor, run through a rehearsal of your presentation – with an audience of more than one. You don't need to ask your colleagues to join you for two hours if that is the planned duration of your session. Just run through each topic and presentation element to 'mark' each move you plan to make. Definitely use all the tools and launch all your content and demonstrations – every page of it – at least once, and in order. You don't have to give your presentation live, word for word. If you are an experienced trainer, the words that come out of your mouth will be the easiest part. The goal here is to build confidence in using the tool with your chosen content and resources.

Class Rehearsal Best Practices	
Good	By yourself, run through each piece of content and each demonstration item in order, speaking using the medium you plan to use in your live class (VoIP or telephony). Record your run-through for self-evaluation and improvement.
Better	Have other people attend, listen, and give feedback after you do your run-through.
Best	With other people present, run through your presentation, and have your attendees interrupt you while you are talking, just as your students will. Record the run-through. This scenario will be the closest one to the live experience, and will help you find unexpected issues – like overlapping audio if you allow your students to ask questions over VOIP while the class is watching a video – that you can prepare for and work to mitigate (generally through instruction and/or control) in advance.



Developing an Online Teaching Style

Teaching in a virtual environment differs greatly from instructing students in person. When you are teaching online it is very important to tailor your personal style and pacing for the specificities of virtual classrooms.

Be More of Yourself, With Less

The majority of trainers are comfortable with their personal style in the classroom. The trick is to also develop an online style. The tool you use can help, particularly if you provide your audience with some suggestions and ground rules for how to interact in your classroom (to be discussed in the next section). Beyond buttons and dialog boxes, think about what entertains you and holds your interest. What do you find enjoyable when watching television commentators and professional speakers, or while listening to radio shows? Try to bring some of those appealing elements into your online delivery, while staying true to your own teaching style.

The next step is critical. Once you start to have a sense of this style, abbreviate it. That's right: now that you are so entertaining, stop showboating. Assume you are not as interesting as you think you are, and keep it succinct. Languishing in a classroom all day, telling lengthy anecdotal stories and radiating stage presence is an experience you may relish, but save it for the physical classroom stage (or even better, your community theatre). In an online forum, jokes aren't quite as funny, pregnant pauses last an eternity, and lengthy anecdotes are a license for your students to check their email.

Consider how long you would wait, listening to dead air on a radio station, or watching a fuzzy TV screen, before changing channels and moving on. What can you do about this, since you don't have to time to rehearse for weeks before you go live? Add a layer of disclosure. Communicate those bits of behind-the-scenes information that would often be redundant in a physical classroom: let your students in on what you are doing if you need to pause for a moment.









Inform the class in two ways: first, tell them you will be taking approximately 30 seconds, or 1 minute, or the duration you need (but keep it under a minute) and tell them they will hear no audio during that time, or they may see a series of changes in the slide show, or whatever glitch is about to occur. Second, assume that half of them were not listening, and put the same information in a chat window, or better yet in a note window that you place prominently in view so those who decide to pay attention 10 seconds later also know what is happening. Although it may feel as though you look unprepared (and let's face it, if you have to do this, maybe you are), this action will actually put your students at ease, and help them feel like you are in control, and everything is moving along as expected.

Tips: Projecting a Personal Style



Practice Makes Perfect

As is the case with in-person training, the better you know your material, the better you will be able to get the important points across and focus on the needs of your specific audience. Just because you aren't in the same physical space as your students, does not mean that you'll need to prepare any less.

-  **Do** tell brief anecdotal stories or use analogies to demonstrate a point.
-  **Don't** tell stories that aren't related to the core learning topics. Keep it relevant and keep it brief
-  **Do** practice until you are comfortable with your material and your online classroom, as mentioned in the 'Usual Suspects' above, so that your delivery can be clear and succinct. Come up with analogies, diagrams, and other visual ways to get your point across and have them ready whether you need to use them or not.
-  **Don't** confuse clarity and organization with dullness. You can bring life to dry topics with relevant examples, brief anecdotes, and visuals while also maintaining clarity in your delivery
-  **Do** let people know if you need a minute to prepare something. Announce what is about to occur and post the information on the screen.
-  **Don't** allow silences to last long, or speak haltingly while multitasking. This will confuse your audience and decrease their confidence in you, and potentially lessen their comfort with the technology you are using to deliver your training.
-  **Do** become comfortable using your web camera. Use it briefly to introduce yourself, and to bring a personal feel to the room.
-  **Don't** spend 20 minutes asking everyone to introduce themselves with their cameras. None of you have time for this in an online class. If you want users to 'introduce' themselves, post a slide asking for specific information such as name, title, and reason for being here, or topic of interest today, and ask everyone to post this information in a public chat for all to scan. That will only take about 2 minutes, and will serve as a nice multi-purpose resource for later when you may wish to review and assess stated goals mid-way through, or at the end of class. You may take this information to the personnel manager or instructional designer to determine whether the class needs to be refined to meet commonly-stated goals that have been missed within the materials.

Engage People Often

Have you ever played the children's game 'Duck, Duck, Goose'? Everyone sits on the ground in a circle facing in, except the person who is 'It'. 'It' walks around the circle, touches each person on the head and simultaneously says 'duck'. At random, a 'goose' is selected and tapped on the head with the cry 'goose!' The selected goose must jump up and run around the circle as quickly as possible. 'Goose' must beat 'It' back to the only empty seat in the circle or else become 'It' himself. Everyone in the circle must pay close attention every round, because no one knows when his moment to run will arrive.


Consider the participant state in 'Duck, Duck, Goose' one that you might recreate in your virtual classroom. How can you make it feel as though everyone is an important contributor within your classroom, and could be called upon at any time to actively participate?


First, the motivating self-interest for a student to attend at all is important. This was discussed as a fundamental practice in the 'Usual Suspects' above. Make sure the goals of your class match the learning objectives of the students. If the information is either too simple or too complicated for an attendee, you are going to have a more difficult time keeping that person interested and engaged. This is where the pre-test can come in handy: don't force competent people to take a class just to meet a requirement. Give them an efficient way to prove their knowledge without wasting an hour or more of their time sitting in a class that teaches them very little.


A second way to make everyone feel an important part of the learning community in your class is to encourage and direct hands-on activities. Every now and then each duck needs to have a turn at being the goose, and sometimes even take a turn at being 'It'. Your students need to know that they too have an opportunity to play an active role in the class. The virtual classroom environment should provide many options to facilitate an interactive community of learners, and to leverage the power of group experience and expertise. The goal is to take the class beyond just a lecture style environment. Provide guidelines for student interaction and behavior, and follow up with specific requests for action to call out your 'geese' during class, and you will find success. Learners will be more engaged, and will quickly become more likely to frequently interact without direction, which in turn helps add interest – and usually learning value and perspective – to a class.

The trick is to figure out the best way to keep a particular audience involved and engaged. This is where your experience as a teacher or with the topic of study needs to come into play. Not all the examples that follow are appropriate every time, but they serve as a starting point, and this is a great area to apply your own creativity.

Tips: Keeping Learners Engaged

 **Do** show users where to find emoticons and feedback tools provided in the virtual classroom. For example, show them where to find the laughter, applause, agree and disagree icons, and encourage their use. Give everyone a chance to try them out (so you are assured they have found the tools) and use them often yourself. Outline examples of when learners might decide to use an emoticon. You might ask that everyone use the laughter emotion when something is funny, and the applause button when they find a statement particularly prudent or exciting.

 **Don't** just assume people will find and use emoticons. Don't become rattled when you tell a joke and hear only silence; that is all you ever hear in an online class (unless students have open mic's, which I do not recommend). If possible, solicit feedback from students you know after the class and ask for honest opinions on your delivery style

 **Do** solicit specific, regular interaction from the entire class. A rule of thumb, but one that I encourage you modify based on what works for you, is to request some form of interaction every 3-5 minutes, or as you round off a topic or theme. Ask a specific question, and include in your direction a clear description of how you want students to respond – how you want all of them to respond.


Here are a few examples of how you can gather feedback from students:

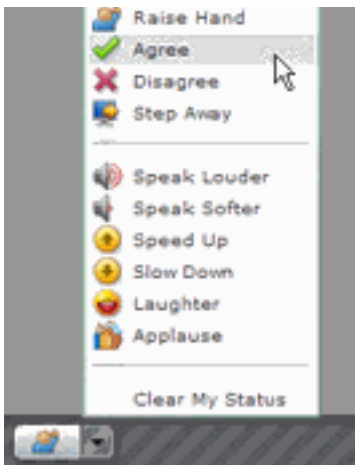
Example A

Ask the students to indicate whether or not they have had a personal ergonomic assessment performed at their desk. Specifically indicate a 'Agree' response, or a green check mark if they have, and a 'Disagree' or red X if they have not. In this way, every student has a task to perform, however minimally. This feedback may provide important information to inform the direction you'll take next within your presentation. If this is true, let people know how important their feedback is right now, in this session.

Example B

When asking for volunteers to take control of an application-sharing task, or to respond to a question, specify that you want to see a 'raised hand' from anyone who would like to join in. Again, you may ask for a red 'X' for those who don't want to answer or test drive the application at this time.

 **Don't** throw "overhead" questions out into the audience. This is an even worse practice in a virtual classroom than it is in a physical room. (Examples of overhead questions are 'what do you think?', 'does everyone get it?', 'do you agree?')



Using Status Options

A great way to keep learners engaged is by utilizing Status Options accessible to all students via the Status Options dropdown. You can use this to allow students to raise their hand or interact with one another in a non-intrusive manner.



Facilitating Collaborative Learning

Using Breakout Rooms are a great way to facilitate collaborative learning by allowing students to work through exercises as a small group. When using Breakout Rooms it's always a good idea to move freely between Breakout Rooms to answer questions or provide guidance, just as you would move from group to group in an in-person setting.

- ✔ **Do** set specific guidelines indicating how to 'step away' from the room. If you want to foster a highly interactive learning space in your class, and people appear to have simply fallen asleep because they are present but not responding, this detracts from the beneficial impact of group participation. Request that students use the 'Stepped Away' emoticon when they have to leave the computer or change focus momentarily, and that they step back in when they are paying attention once again.
- ✘ **Don't** assume that students will find the Stepped Away icon on their own, or will use it without such a guideline
- ✔ **Do** use Breakout Rooms to leverage group member expertise and experience, particularly when brainstorming, role-playing, or tackling a complex problem. Breakout Rooms themselves have a set of best practices some of which are listed below.
- ✘ **Don't** distribute students to small groups without preparing them for the assigned activity, or without telling them what is about to happen.

Breakout Room Best Practices
Provide instructions and a framework for breakout activities and leverage these with a rich mix of students such as mentor pairs, or the jigsaw model of mixing heterogeneous users across skill types.
Prepare the students for breakout rooms before you send them off on their own. Tell them how they can expect their screens to change.
Depending on the activity, you may assign someone as the facilitator in each breakout room.
Outline whether the groups will need to wait for you to enter each sub-room to get things started, or if they can dive in on their own.
Indicate the expected duration of the breakouts
Provide a way for students to contact you if you are outside their room and assistance is needed

Be Aware


Good teachers pay attention to their students. Questions and comments do not necessarily need to be addressed immediately, but a trainer should set respectful ground rules to outline how questions will be handled. As questions arise, each will receive acknowledgement but the trainer will not permit student feedback to route the class off track.


In an online class, this ability to respond to questions and feedback is even more important. If you have taken my preceding suggestions, then you have encouraged your students to actively participate; so you need to react to their participation. When students raise their hands, send chat messages, or provide other forms of feedback, you need to first be aware that something needs your attention. An online classroom environment should notify you when new feedback and requests come in from your attendees. You need to recognize these and become capable and comfortable with the tool, so that interacting with your students is as easy online as it is in the classroom.


In Connect Pro, yellow notifications appear briefly and then transform into subtle reminder icons until they are addressed. Text indicators may also appear, or while you are screen sharing, a 'toast' window may briefly emerge and slink away.


Begin by training yourself to notice when feedback and request messages appear. As this becomes easier, move toward developing a system that lets you to consistently acknowledge and respond to the different requests and feedback. Align the level of interaction you encourage with the amount you – or you and a moderator – can handle.


Tips: Staying Aware of Students


 **Do** keep your eye on the room – the whole room. Scan the pods or windows to see if any new indicators have appeared. If it is appropriate, acknowledge a question or comment or even answer it right away. Simple acknowledgement helps the room feel alive, and the attendee feel like he isn't alone either; just like making eye contact or giving a '1 minute' hand signal to a student who has her hand raised in a physical classroom.


 **Don't** give your students the impression you are ignoring them. New instructors – whether new to the virtual classroom or new to the instructional topic – are often overwhelmed or singularly focused, causing them to miss student feedback. Try to avoid looking down at notes for a long time, or staring at the wall. You will lose many opportunities to interact with your students.


 **Do** use a moderator or co-instructor if the group is large, the topic is complex, or if you are new to the online classroom or teaching a new topic for the first time. This will help you with the tip above (staying aware), and allow you to focus on one challenge at a time.


 **Don't** let questions and feedback go completely without acknowledgement for very long in a training scenario.


 **Do** use a 'parking lot' or other area to hold complicated or tangential questions for later. The Note Pod is a great tool for this. In Connect Pro, give students enhanced rights to a Note Pod so they can 'park' their own questions as they come up. Students then have a visual indication that the question has been saved to be answered later. If students use this so much it is distracting, opt for Moderated Chat which pulls the questions behind the scenes and gives the hosts control over which are addressed with the entire group.

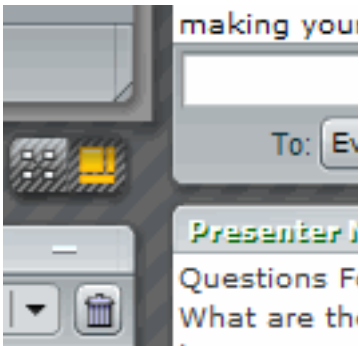
 **Don't** take a complicated question in the middle of getting your point across, and don't allow questions to reroute your class. A common complaint from students is the dissatisfaction with rushing through substantial topics later in the class because 'we've run out of time', when often the time used earlier was poorly managed.

 **Do** explain the difference between private and public messaging options for your online classroom, and respond to private questions privately. Students generally use private communication options because they do not feel comfortable asking the question in front of the whole class.

 **Don't** mention the name of the student who asked a question if it was asked through a private medium.

 **Do** practice with a second monitor or machine, and use a dual-monitor setup often when delivering your training. Log into the second machine as a 'student'. With visual awareness of both the host and the participant view, you can verify that behind the scenes actions – those in Presenter-only mode or in windows that are not actively shared – are truly private. If you don't have two monitors, ask students whether or not the share is visible only the first and second time you begin screen sharing.

 **Don't** work on confidential documents or email while screen sharing. Turn off email and instant messaging notifications that could contain unexpected comments from anyone you know. Once you have verified that students are seeing your screen share in a reasonable amount of time, don't keep asking them if they see the share every time you change your view.

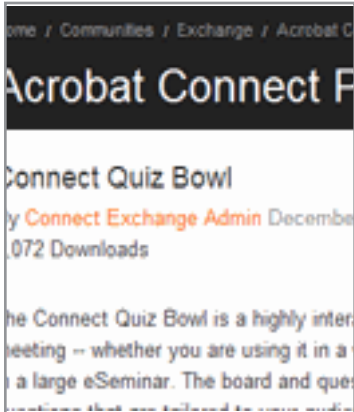


Presenter Only Area

The Presenter Only area allows you and other hosts and presenters to communicate with one another out of view from meeting participants. Use the Presenter Chat to communicate about things like timing or to tell someone to turn up their microphone volume. Use Presenter Notes to keep track of questions or issues you want to address later in the class.

Deliver Meaningful Fun

We would all be so entertained if all the training we needed was presented as part of our favorite game or tv show, wouldn't we? Because of this, and because of all the excellent technology options out there to make training more interesting and thus dubiously more effective, many trainers and instructional designers are tempted by games and all things animated. Some expensive and highly produced training content comes as a veritable rumpus room of learner delights. Fun training could in fact be the best training ever, or it could be completely ineffective.



Collaboration Builder SDK and Connect Pro Exchange

You can build your own multi-user learning games using the Collaboration Builder SDK, a special programmatic interface that allows you to turn any Flash-based learning object into something learners can jointly interact with in a Connect Pro meeting. At the Connect Pro Exchange, many Collaboration Builder SDK applications are available for download. Visit www.adobe.com/go/connectpro_exchange to see what applications are available.

An instructionally sound game or video can meet the learning goals of your training class, ready your learners for more advanced topics, place them in simulated 'real work' scenarios, or simply draw their interest into a topic you are about to cover. (For more on this see the [Serious Games whitepaper](#) on adobe.com.) If you intend to include games or other advanced media, work with a skilled instructional designer to clarify your learning goals first. These can then be aligned with available media resources. Your game format and characteristics will follow from sound learning goals. In this way, you can offer the best possible experience for your learners, while obtaining a true return on investment.

Tips: Keeping the Class Fun



Do invest in multimedia and games that are specifically designed to augment the learning experience and help meet the goals of your class.



Don't use just any multimedia just because it is 'cool', or looks interesting.



Do break the rule above sparingly and indulge in something for pure fun during 'off-teaching' times. For example, an icebreaker game could be useful while you are waiting for a few people to arrive in class, and a non-topical quiz game could be a way to draw people back from a break – but start it before your stated return time, and be sure to start back on time or this could backfire with any students not interested in playing.



Don't choose games that take a lot of time to explain or learn. The game should be simple enough to be a relatively transparent delivery medium to get at your main goal of providing or reinforcing meaningful information

Summary

Many suggestions have been made above for how you can use your own style to draw in your audience, manage two-way communications in class, and eliminate concerns that you may just be talking to yourself rather than a captive audience. Try the suggestions that work for you, your organizational culture, and your learning goals and dismiss the ones that don't. Be creative, and remember that the extra effort to practice and prepare will go a long way toward improving your online teaching skills, and hopefully student enjoyment.

I encourage you to visit www.connectusers.com and use the forums to provide feedback regarding this paper, whether or not the suggestions worked for you, and to provide your peers with other ideas and solutions of your own.



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