

The Virtual Trainer's Guide to Content Delivery:

5 TECHNIQUES TO DELIVER AN EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL CLASS

A white paper by Cindy Huggett, CPLP

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What do master trainers do when delivering online classes? What techniques do they use? What skills do they have? And most importantly, how can you do the same?

THE FIVE TECHNIQUES:

1. Prepare Relentlessly
2. Engage an Unseen Audience
3. Multi-task Effectively
4. Make the Most of Your Voice
5. Handle Unexpected Challenges

There are 5 things that master virtual trainers do to deliver effective virtual classes. This white paper outlines each one of them, as well as offers suggestions on how you can immediately apply the techniques to your own virtual training delivery.

By preparing relentlessly, engaging an unseen audience, multi-tasking effectively, making the most of your voice, and handling unexpected challenges, you can be a rock star in the virtual classroom (or at least be a better online facilitator).

Technique #1: Prepare

Think of how an Olympic athlete prepares for the games. They go to extreme measures to get ready for their main event. Through disciplined measures of diet, exercise, and sport-specific routines, they prepare themselves to win a medal and stand upon the podium.

In the same way, master virtual trainers prepare relentlessly for their online events. Some may even think they go to extreme measures to ensure success. However, the saying “proper preparation prevents poor performance” is just as true in the virtual classroom as it is in the athletic arena.

Master virtual trainers not only prepare to deliver content, they also prepare for contingencies and unusual situations. They divide their preparation into three distinct parts:

- **Standard**
- **Technical**
- **Backup**

Remember that virtual training is still training. Apply what you already know about effective in-person delivery to the virtual classroom.

Standard Preparation

The first part of preparing for a virtual class is no different than preparing to facilitate any instructor-led class. It's important to learn the class content and familiarize yourself with the design. (Hopefully there is a facilitator guide to help you with this task.) Some facilitators will read through the guide several times, some like to observe the class as a participant, while others will practice facilitating to an "empty" classroom. Whatever your preferred method, make sure it adequately readies you to deliver the content without reading a script.

In addition to mastering the content and class design, standard preparation includes getting to know the audience. Trainers find out the answers to questions such as:

- Who are the participants? What are their names, roles, locations and other relevant demographic information?
- Do the participants know one another or are they meeting for the first time? If they know one another, what's their relationship? (i.e. Manager/Employee? Peers? Other?)
- What's the reason they are taking this class? What do they hope to gain from it?
- What are their experience levels? Will the content be brand new information? Or are they knowledgeable enough to teach it? Or somewhere in between?
- What types of questions might they have about the material? What concerns will they have? What challenges will they have in applying the content?

Technical Preparation

The second part of preparing for a virtual class is all about the technology. Master virtual trainers are masters of the virtual platform. This means that they know the software and its features in-depth. They know what every menu command means and what every button does. They know how the program works from the host or presenter view, and they know how it works from the

participant view. They are able to use all of the tools available and help participants use them as well. Master virtual trainers don't stumble around trying to find a command, but instead move with ease from one virtual tool to the next.

How do master trainers learn the software? Mostly through practice, by clicking on every button and trying everything out. They set up virtual sessions with multiple computers and practice using the tools. They may also attend webinars offered by the vendor which teach the tool. And they learn tips from other facilitators by sharing ideas and resources online.

In addition to learning the software tools used during a virtual class, master trainers also take steps to prepare their hardware. They have a computer setup that's appropriate for facilitating, with a quality hands-free headset that allows them to easily type and talk at the same time. Their audio is crystal clear because they have tested it in advance and use a reliable connection.

Backup Preparation

The third part of preparing for a virtual class is to make plans for contingencies or unusual situations. Since virtual classes rely on technology and the Internet, master trainers create redundancies and backup plans as a "just in case."

Usually online training tools function normally, and usually Internet connections are strong and steady. With the reliability of the platform, you never expect anything to go wrong during a virtual class. However, that's exactly the reason it's important for virtual trainers to prepare for the unexpected. By taking the extra step to think about and prepare a back-up plan, any unforeseen challenges will just be a temporary nuisance.

For example, if the trainer works from home and their Internet connection were to unexpectedly go down during a session, what could they do in order to keep the class moving along? A master trainer would have thought about this contingency ahead of time and had a backup plan.

Or, what if the trainer's headset loses battery power during a virtual class? A master trainer would have a second headset readily available to switch, or a mobile phone nearby that could be used.

"The biggest failure of online trainers is just not knowing the tools," said Mike Abrams, Co-Author of [The Big Book of Virtual Team Building Games](#)

Backup plans could include:

- Knowing where the nearest public Internet connection is, and having a quick way to get there (such as walking across the street to your neighbor's house, or driving down the road to a coffee shop with free wi-fi)
- Having a backup Internet connection device, such as a mobile device with a data plan that could be tethered to the trainer's computer
- Using a producer or co-facilitator, and ensuring they would be able to keep the class moving along

By taking just a few extra steps to plan technology backups, a master virtual trainer will always be prepared.

Technique #2: Engage an Unseen Audience

One distinguishing factor of a virtual class is that participants come together without eye-to-eye connections. Therefore, a skilled master virtual trainer has to engage with an audience that can't see one another.

Using Webcams

Webcams are frequently used for online meetings so that a live connection can be created between participants. However, many trainers are now using video conferencing in online training too. Video can personalize the participant's experience and help them connect to the trainer. Video also offers trainers the added benefit of being able to show instead of tell.

A virtual trainer might briefly turn on their webcam so that participants can see what they look like and put a voice to a face, and then the trainer might turn it off once class begins. This keeps the focus on participants (instead of a lecturing presenter), and conserves bandwidth for other activities (in cases of limited connectivity).

Visit
www.cindyhuggett.com
for a copy of
*The Extra-Prepared
Virtual Trainer's
Checklist.*

Encourage frequent interaction throughout a class, at least every 4 minutes, to keep learners engaged and focused on the training.

Of course “always-on” webcams might be a useful addition to a virtual training class when there are multiple presenters or when demonstrating a physical product. These visual aids can help the audience comprehend the lesson, but for most virtual classes, the audience will be invisible to one another.

Participants should frequently interact within the class, at least every 4 minutes, so that they remain focused on the learning. Skilled master trainers make this happen by using the following interactive facilitation techniques:

- **Using platform tools**
- **Saying participant names**
- **Setting expectations**
- **Sharing only relevant examples**

Ideally the virtual class is designed with high interactivity and a focus on participants. However, even if it is not, a master virtual trainer will create interactivity using the techniques described in this section.

Use Platform Tools

According to Ruth Colvin Clark and Ann Kwinn, “virtual classroom software tools actually offer instructors more opportunities for frequent learner interaction than do most traditional classroom settings.”¹ Master virtual trainers know this fact, and use the tools to their advantage. They frequently ask participants to respond by poll, chat, raising hands, and any other available feature. Trainers help keep participants engaged by putting the tools to use.

¹ Clark, Ruth Colvin and Ann Kwinn, *The New Virtual Classroom*, Pfeiffer, San Francisco, CA 2007. Page 107.

Here is a sampling of the most common platform tools and their use:

Tool	Use
Poll	<i>Ask challenging questions</i>
Chat	<i>Encourage dialogue</i>
Raise Hand	<i>Ask yes/no or agree/disagree questions</i>
Screen sharing	<i>Share software programs or websites with participants</i>
Material distribution	<i>Offer handouts and other paper-based resources</i>
Tests	<i>Check for knowledge transfer and comprehension</i>
Audio	<i>Allow verbal responses from participants and encourage open dialogue</i>

Say Participant Names

Have you ever heard your name mentioned from across the room? Your ears perk up and you become a little more interested in that part of the conversation. It happens in the virtual classroom as well!

Master trainers say participant names frequently. They acknowledge people by name as much as possible (i.e. “Julio, thanks for adding your thoughts to the chat. You’ve got a great point.”) And they make connections between the content and participant comments (i.e. “Earlier, Sophia asked about challenges using this technique. Here’s one solution that can be used.”). When participants hear their own names during a session, they pay closer attention.

Call on participants by name?

Some trainers have been taught not to directly call on participants by name because this can create an uncomfortable learning environment by putting people “on the spot.” The solution to this dilemma is an easy fix. Trainers can use direct questions on occasion during a virtual class by using these three guidelines:

- Let participants know at the beginning of class to expect direct questions
- Ask direct questions that do not have one single correct answer (i.e. “Adam, what’s your thought about this topic?”);
- When possible, take turns with the direct questions. (i.e. “I’d like to hear from at least three of you on this next question. Let’s start with Emma first, and then Jose”)

Most importantly, if you call on participants by name, be sure to make it easy for them to respond. The point of a direct question is not to make someone uncomfortable, but instead to encourage involvement.

Set Expectations

Master virtual trainers strive to create a comfortable learning environment for participants. One way they do this is by setting expectations at the beginning of a session. They let learners know that the class will be interactive and their full participation is requested. They invite participants to get involved in the learning.

To help set expectations, a facilitator will:

- Help the group establish ground rules at the beginning of class
- Let participants know it will be an interactive class
- Give specific instructions on how to engage (i.e. “if you can answer ‘yes’ to this following question, please click on the ‘raise hand’ button.”)

Share only Relevant Examples

Another reason that participants stay engaged during a virtual class is that the content is relevant to their needs. If it's a skill they need to learn or a gap in their current knowledge, then they will be more apt to focus on the learning. Master virtual trainers can keep the class relevant by sharing stories and using examples that make sense in context.

For instance, if it's a class of experienced managers and directors, then any stories told by the trainer should appeal to that population. If it's an audience of brand new interns who are just entering the workforce then any shared examples should make sense to them. And, if it's a global class full of international participants, the trainer should use culturally relevant analogies that everyone can understand.

Technique #3: Multi-task Effectively

A skilled trainer is like a duck gliding across a pond. An outside observer sees just smooth sailing on the water, yet underneath the duck is paddling furiously to propel itself forward. And like the paddling duck, a master virtual trainer juggles many tasks with ease.

While most experts say that multi-tasking cannot be done well by anyone, it's a necessary skill for facilitating in the virtual classroom. There's a lot going on at once, and trainers must pay attention to content, activities, timing, participant comments, and everything going on in the software platform.

Effective multi-tasking comes from a combination of preparation and speed. Virtual trainers who do it well are prepared, practiced, and proficient.

Prepared

Master virtual trainers are prepared. One benefit to preparing relentlessly (see technique #1) is how it contributes to effective multi-tasking. Master trainers prepare their workspace for the virtual class. They remove any unnecessary documents from their desktop, so that they can give sole attention to the screen. They have fully prepared for the class so they are not using extra energy to remember what comes next.

Advance preparation goes a long way to help a trainer multi-task effectively.

Practiced

Master virtual trainers practice their craft. They practice interacting with all of the tools, and practice their facilitation techniques. Just like a world-class musician who plays a song over and over again until it sounds perfect, an effective virtual trainer practices as much as possible to improve their skills. The more practice a trainer gets with multi-tasking, the better they will be.

Proficient

Master virtual trainers are proficient in what they do. By knowing the tools in-depth, they do not have to hunt for menu commands or stop to think about where to find something. They are skilled typists who do not need to hunt and peck at every key on the keyboard. This proficiency comes from practice, and leads to easier multi-tasking.

Technique #4: Make the Most of your Voice

Master virtual trainers make the most of their voice in order to connect with participants in the virtual classroom. Their voice should be engaging enough to keep participants attention during the entire session. Trainers make the most of their voice's:

- **Tone**
- **Volume**
- **Rate**
- **Pitch**

According to a recent study, the ideal voice speaks around 164 words per minute, and pauses for 0.48 seconds between sentences. And at the end of a sentence, the tone should fall instead of rise.²

While your own voice may not match this ideal, it's a good measure to strive for when seeking to improve your delivery style. Virtual trainers should have an energetic voice that conveys enthusiasm for the class topic.

² BBC News. "Formula 'Secret of Perfect Voice.'" [news.bbc.co.uk. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk/7426923.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk/7426923.stm) (accessed 1/15/13).

When was the last time you heard a recording of your own voice? Try it, and hear how you sound to others!

One way to measure the overall effectiveness of your voice is to record a session and listen to the playback. Consider how it sounds to the ear. Does it capture your own interest? Is it clear and easy to hear? Is it too fast or too slow? Also, listen in for any extraneous filler words (“um”, “ah”, “y’know”, and so on).

Master virtual trainers will listen to their voices and make adjustments as necessary. They seek feedback and apply it to make the most of their voices.

Technique #5: Handle Unexpected Challenges

Unforeseen challenges can occur during virtual classes – a participant may disconnect, an activity might not pan out as planned, or a distraction in the workspace might need to be addressed (such as a co-worker interruption or a barking dog in the audio background).

Master virtual trainers expect one or more of these challenges to arise during class; it’s part of the territory in virtual training. Handled gracefully, challenges are an opportunity for trainers to stay calm, take care of the issue, and return their focus to the learning as quickly as possible.

Of course, master trainers who apply the first technique, prepare relentlessly, will be able to quickly rely on their backup plans for any unexpected technology challenges. If they lose Internet connectivity, they switch to their backup provider. If they disconnect from the audio, they quickly reconnect. If an activity doesn’t work exactly as they had planned, they respond with flexibility and switch to something else. Their backup preparation pays off in these situations.

When it’s a different type of challenge, one that occurs unexpectedly or one that would not be prevented with preparation, then a master virtual trainer will still respond with ease.

When unforeseen challenges arise during a virtual class, you can do one or more of the following:³

- **Stay calm and take a deep breath**
- **Let participants know what's going on (if appropriate)**
- **Use backup plans**
- **Spend just a moment or two troubleshooting**
- **Take a short break to deal with the situation**

If you have a producer or co-facilitator on board, then you could assign them to the task of troubleshooting or handling any unexpected challenges that arise during class. That way, you can stay focused on the participants and their learning while the producer works with the individual who needs extra care.

If it's a situation that affects the entire class and it's not possible to continue, then keep participants informed, take a short break if necessary, and regroup when possible. Most challenges are temporary and can be easily overcome.

In Summary

Apply the five techniques outlined in this paper and you'll be on your way to being a master trainer who delivers more effective virtual learning experiences. To recap, master virtual trainers should:

- 1. Prepare relentlessly**
- 2. Engage an unseen audience**
- 3. Multi-task effectively**
- 4. Make the most of your voice**
- 5. Handle unexpected challenges**

³ This list is adapted from my book, [Virtual Training Basics](#), ©ASTD Press, 2010.

About Cindy Huggett, CPLP

Cindy is the author of *Virtual Training Basics*, and the soon-to-be-released *The Virtual Training Guidebook: How to Design, Deliver, and Implement Live Online Learning*. She has been delivering synchronous online classes for a variety of audiences for over 12 years.

Her favorite passion is to help trainers deliver effective and engaging live online classes. She also assists clients on their transition to blended solutions and conversion to virtual training.

Cindy served on the national ASTD Board of Directors in 2009-2010, and was one of the first to earn the Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP) designation.

You can find Cindy sharing training tips via twitter at @cindyhugg, or contact her via her website www.cindyhuggett.com.



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