

virtual facilitation gone wrong

Technology has allowed the business world to expand geographically, but economic challenges have caused our travel budgets to compact. This presents challenges for educators. They can't always get participants in the same room, or even the same country. Webinars hold promise as a replacement for the physical classroom. Simply package up your product. Eliminate the classroom interaction since that's not possible in a virtual setting. Present your material, intact, over the Internet. Problem solved, right?

Wrong. Effective learning transfer requires participant engagement and collaboration. No matter how modulated, a disembodied voice presenting one-way to participants on PCs is a recipe for turn-off. A tedious, non-interactive presentation breeds boredom in the participants. Associating the webinar environment with boredom diminishes expectations. Diminished expectations cause your students to come into the training session ready to give it only half their attention.

It's a vicious cycle. My purpose behind writing this book is to help you break that cycle. There is a science and an art to facilitation in the virtual classroom. This book will explain those scientific and artistic techniques. And it will begin by examining why webinars have a bad reputation.

(Don't be concerned about the somewhat gloomy start to our study of webinars. We'll get it out of our system in this chapter, then

go on to explore tools, tips and strategies for building powerful presentations that are captivating, informative and fun.)

In the article *What Stinks About Webinars*ⁱ, co-author Allison Rossett encouraged her students at the time – co-authors Antonia Chan and Colleen Cunningham – to feed her their positive and negative impressions of webinars that they attended. The majority of impressions turned out to be on the negative side.

We carry out the same exercise at NetSpeed Learning Solutions. Before the first session of our *Virtual Facilitator Trainer Certification*ⁱⁱ (VFTC) course, I ask the class participants to sit in on as many webinars as they can. It's very helpful to see things from the side of your audience. The pain you may suffer as a participant is a great motivator to raise the bar of quality on your own presentations. And it helps you understand how your audience will perceive your webinar: why they might dread showing up, and why they might be tempted to multi-task.

NetSpeed Note

Our mission at NetSpeed Learning Solutions is to develop better leaders and more engaged employees through both face-to-face and virtual learning. Our Virtual Facilitator Trainer Certification (VFTC) course is intended for anyone who wants to design and deliver engaging, highly interactive web conference training. It's a four-week intensive workshop, delivered through facilitated webinars and self-paced online content.

The student assessments reveal certain common mistakes of webinar presentation. See how many of these mistakes you can recognize from your own experience on either side of the podium.

Putting up with poor preparation and content

If you take an already bad training presentation, poor content and organization, throw in terrible and boring slides, add a weak,

talking-head facilitator, what would you get? Answer – the one hour webinar I just watched. Honestly, I could not get through all of it – too painful.

~ Jackie

Poor preparation and content are a devastating combination in any training setting, whether traditional or virtual. Ho-hum slide decks are more the rule than the exception. In many companies, the terms PowerPoint presentation and snoozer are synonymous.

The reasons for this are well catalogued. Too often slides are crammed with bullet points holding too much information (and too few graphics with emotional or visual impact), and presenters who vocalize from them verbatim, often in a monotone. When slides are presented in this way, you may as well email the slide deck – people can read more quickly than they can hear.

As learners, we empathize with the struggle it requires to sit through a poor presentation. As instructors, we must learn to pinpoint the reasons for it. So, applying the basics of good slide design is your first, and perhaps easiest, step.

NetSpeed Note

Too often the sequence of slides in the deck, their volume, and the use of graphics, graphs, and lettering break every rule in the book.

We'll present some tips for design and delivery in Chapter 5. We'd also recommend checking out Dave Jakes' informative and entertaining web site:

<http://jakes.editme.com/onehourppt>

Besides telling you that sloppy slides are a bad thing, here's another duh: poor delivery of those sloppy slides adds insult to injury. The consequence of not fixing basic PowerPoint design and delivery mistakes is that your audience will zone out.

Here are some more basic presentation mistakes that you don't want to repeat, chronicled by my webinar students.

I would like to have seen some learning objectives at the beginning and perhaps a review of the learning objectives at the end. I generally got the most important intent but wasn't sure what other objectives the instructor had in mind. ~ Fred

It was hard to follow the presenter, as he went through some very complex steps very quickly. He didn't pause to explain terms that some of the participants might not have understood. He also tried to cover too much in the session. ~ Mary

Yearning for something to watch, I started focusing on the questions coming in the chat box, rather than the talk. Ooops! ~Sue

A good portion of the beginning of the session was used to talk about the three presenters' job titles and levels of experience. Although I appreciate knowing a bit of relevant information about the presenters, I started to lose interest as the minutes ticked away. Remind me, why am I here again...? ~ Carole

The facilitator would display a slide with about 4-5 points. Then she would talk about the points for what seemed like several minutes without necessarily referring to them specifically or using a pointer. As a visual rather than an auditory learner, I found her approach challenging. ~ Lynn

There was nothing for the kinesthetic learner. I really struggled to stay engaged. ~ Sue

I was reminded of the importance of keeping promises, when the Q&A period was significantly shorter than the presenter had promised. I am sure that had I been in a traditional classroom, I would have seen frustration on faces when there was little time for their questions. ~ Lynn

As you'd expect, the one-to-one conversion of flawed slide design and inferior presentation techniques from a classroom setting to a virtual one doesn't magically improve or eliminate any of the above issues. As a matter of fact, just rehashing a less than superior speech in a webinar format makes the experience worse. The participant is not held as strongly to the social pressure of paying attention, or even of acting like they are paying attention.

This is probably the major consequence of poor presentation in the virtual arena: participants have more ways to tune out. Unlike the physical classroom setting, they are sitting in front of their primary tool for getting work done: their computer. The temptation to multi-task takes over, and who can blame them? They may rightfully consider that catching up on work adds more value than listening to text they can easily read later. Of course, since we are all very busy, that later reading never takes place.

As one of my students wrote in her assessment:

I think this is why people end up multi-tasking. I'm writing the critique now while she talks because I'm not missing anything on the visuals. If she would only engage me and make it hard for me NOT to participate, I would not be able to do this.

I've got one ear open for something that catches my attention, but meanwhile, I have seen how this works, and it doesn't require me to be fully present. ~ Michelle

If your presentation suffers from poor slide design and poor delivery in the physical classroom, you've got a problem. If you merely transfer that presentation to the web, your problems are compounded.

People don't want to fall asleep. They want to be engaged. Which brings us to the next observation gleaned from an analysis of webinars.

Looking for interaction and collaboration

I was appalled at the lack of interactive content. The first few minutes gave me great hope: A host gave clear instructions on how to use all kinds of participant tools and then introduced the presenter. But once she got on, it was a one-woman show. At one point the host even tried to interject an observation, and she actually plowed right over him and continued talking. I had felt RELIEF that another voice had introduced a discussion point, but then felt horror when she ignored him and doggedly went on with her agenda. ~ Michelle

Educators can do a creditable job of trying to be conversational, using an animated and well-paced delivery. But without real involvement of your learners, you're disregarding one of the critical findings of adult learning theory: that your audience wants and needs to bring their experience to the table.

Interaction between the facilitator and participants promotes interest and engagement; collaboration among the participants promotes sharing and provides the basis for learning activities. The

days of having students passively sitting and listening should be long gone.

All good web platform tools contain interactivity tools that allow interaction and collaboration. They all make use of conference calling that allow all parties to speak. They all provide streaming media so you can see the presenter. So what gives? Why aren't these tools used effectively, so that educators can put good learning practices into place as they do in the physical classroom?

Part of the answer may be that it's simply easier not to. With webinars there is, without a doubt, an additional challenge of managing the technology while managing the presentation. But there may be another answer. One that has to do with a lack of belief.

In my facilitator training classes, I start out by asking my learners to explore their own attitude about web training. Like some of them, your experience of learning in cyberspace may be scant. The overriding negative belief is that webinar environments don't encourage participant involvement because they can't. Since webinars provide one-way communication, webinar instruction contains challenges that can't be overcome.

Here is some of the thinking that lies behind negative notions about webinars when it comes to collaboration and interaction.

- It's difficult to facilitate virtually because I can't see the learners' body language or facial expressions.
- I want learners to engage with each other, not just with me. But that's not technically possible in a webinar.
- I think web conferencing is a one-way communication tool. It does little to foster a sense of community.
- Most learners prefer to attend virtual classes because they can multi-task while the facilitator lectures. This is actually an advantage of this type of learning.

- Virtual training is a more efficient use of time because you can give learners the information quickly and they can get back to work.

What these negative beliefs have in common is the assumption that when addressing interaction and collaboration, web instruction is a brave new world; you can't use interactive techniques, tools, and exercises in the virtual environment.

Of course, I don't believe it, or I wouldn't have written this book. But let's keep the conversation going about why most webinars have a bad name, since knowing what *not* to do can be very useful.

Getting instructional materials and class size wrong

In the previous section, we discussed the widespread belief that webinar environments don't encourage participant involvement because they simply can't. You won't be surprised to hear that facilitators hold misconceptions about instructional materials and class size related to webinars. Here are a few.

- Instructional materials are used differently for web workshops.
- Learners, in a virtual setting, do not need handouts.
- Learners should receive a copy of the slide deck prior to the session so they can follow along.

I'm going to suggest that these negative notions about classroom materials, as well as the misunderstanding of the potential for interaction and collaboration discussed previously, are in large part based on this single underlying belief:

- Webinar technology can reach many more participants, so you can educate hundreds just as effectively as twenty.

In other words, because web conferencing technology allows us to speak to hundreds of listeners in a one-way monologue, then it's a good idea to do so.

If you accept this as the de facto webinar model, then pessimistic opinions about webinars will definitely prove to be correct! If you have a hundred listeners on the call, you're constrained on all sides – by the technology, by time management, and by people management.

You simply don't have time to solicit audience contributions, or even their feedback. You can't open up phone lines or you'll cause havoc. (Not to mention that there will be no phone lines to open, since you're probably using VoIP technology for an audience that large.)

NetSpeed Note

VoIP stands for Voice over Internet Protocol. It provides audio that is heard over the learners' computer speakers. It's very cost-effective for large audiences, but not as practical as using a standard teleconferencing solution for small audiences.

You'll find a glossary of terms in the back of the book.

You can't manage logistics of breaking people into groups. You also can't have them use the whiteboard. Collaboration among your audience is a non-starter.

Speaking of logistics, you can't hope to have everyone in the audience receive handouts and be pointing to the same page. You might as well give up on handouts.

You also lose an essential tool for holding attention: streaming video. With large audiences, using both VoIP and streaming video will cause a rough audio transmission that's out of sync with the video. So streaming video of your animated, excited face is replaced by a photograph of your animated, excited face. Not the same thing at all.

Having large numbers of webinar attendees is fine for marketing webinars, one-time information-packed presentations. For the standard learning session, large numbers of participants are as problematic in virtual training environments as they are in the classroom. We'll talk more about that later.

Encountering trouble with technology

To err is human, but to really foul things up requires a computer.

~Farmer's Almanac, 1978

The traditional classroom may leverage technology, but the virtual classroom depends on it. A technology hiccup in the virtual world promises an unpleasant learning environment at the least; at the worst it can shut down the class completely.

Stuff happens. It happens to different components (like software, hardware, and network) at different locations along the line, from facilitator to web platform company to participant. Moreover, the symptom of the problem being suffered by party A may have a root cause that has party B to blame. Yes, technology tribulations can be one big happy party.

Bandwidth issues are the most ubiquitous. Bandwidth refers to the amount of data that can be passed over the network in a given amount of time. It's synonymous with "connection speed." Do you connect to the Internet over your phone line? Slow. Too slow to run a webinar. Thankfully, most of our workplaces provide sufficient bandwidth for streaming video and using VoIP. But because your participants have access to fast connection speeds, it doesn't mean that they've set their software properly to experience fast connection speeds. When they do it incorrectly, their problem becomes your problem.

It's starting to sound like you have to add "Technical Guru" to your resume. The good news is you're not expected to singlehandedly solve all issues. The bad news is that even if you're not enamored with

bits and bytes, you should at least be on speaking terms with them. That translates as being able to quickly identify symptoms and causes, knowing whether they can be resolved, and knowing how they can be resolved.

And unfortunately, you do have to (and will) experience the rite of passage known as glitch initiation. After that, you have the right to tell your war stories to anyone who will listen.

Okay, I know you're dying to hear mine, so here goes.

NetSpeed Note

Actually, there is a way to escape glitch initiation. Facilitators often have a co-anchor, or host, who introduces them and has the responsibility of all things technological. We'll discuss that option more in Chapter 8.

My company has a 100-seat license for our web platform tool, which is Adobe Connect Pro. Over a hundred eager learners signed up for a marketing webinar. I was unavoidably running late (never mind why) so by the time I arrived, my panicked associate had opened the room for participants to join. The session quickly reached the 100 member capacity. We were delighted with the attendance. But there was one problem. I couldn't log in to my own webinar.

Some hardware and software problems haven't been my fault, I swear. Another time the conference call line for our large public webinar with thousands of participants was joined by a different meeting with 20 people. Somehow their group had been assigned the same teleconference number as ours. Their group leader had to send out another email to correct the problem. Unfortunately, for the remainder of our session we were sporadically joined by new visitors wondering why we weren't teaching *How to Make Millions in Credit Default Swaps!*

I've had PowerPoint slides freeze so that they refused to advance. I've had cameras go out (in VoIP, having the camera go off disconnects my audio). On one occasion two of the three servers on the web platform failed, which made the performance really slo-o-ow for everyone considerably.

Other times, I'll admit, the fault was my own. On a high volume call, I switched off my camera to conserve bandwidth, so that the audio could be heard clearly. I forgot that if you're using VoIP, turning the camera off also turns off the audio. I was happily talking to myself for at least a minute before I received a chat message from a kind (and bored) participant. Another time I didn't replace my phone's headset on its recharging cradle the night before, so it was out of juice when I ran the webinar. I had to hold the phone to my mouth the entire time, a constant reminder to those watching the video of my incompetence. (I won't even mention how hard it is to manage a webinar with one hand.)

Urban legends abound. One facilitator I know used web platform software that closes a meeting after the facilitator signs off. A few minutes into the session, my friend was somehow dumped. They couldn't get in again. Webinar over.

Web servers can go down (hey, it happens). There are latency issues. Everyone – the entire cadre of participants and facilitators – can get kicked off of an event. The screen resolution is different for different users, so that some can't see parts of the screen that others can. Some platforms make the participants download software, so the number of potential mishaps extends to their firewall, spam filters, popup blockers. Not to mention that they have trouble loading the software itself.

Isn't this fun? And I haven't even mentioned the web platform feature that reduces even large, grown facilitator men to tears: breakout rooms.

Breakout rooms offer the promise of easily placing participants into small groups. In their cones of isolation the teams can then collaborate amongst themselves, while the facilitator pops in and out of each room, offering wisdom as needed.

What the fine print in the software neglects to mention is that there are numerous ways, some of them quite creative, that breakout rooms can break down. In some cases your students, whom you have come to know and love, are lost in cyberspace, never to be heard from again (at least in that session).

And while you're desperately seeking your students, guess what happens if you're recording your session for future playback? Yes, that's right. The recorder stays right with you in the room, capturing for posterity your frantic calls, curses, pleas and appeals to a greater power.

Yup, I've been there.

Offering hope

Whooo! We've examined poorly done webinars and have diagnosed their weaknesses in a number of areas, including poor presentation, interaction, collaboration, instructional materials, class size and technology. But don't worry, there is hope.

In the next chapter, we'll touch on ways to improve this sad state of affairs. We'll step through a simulated webinar that gives you a taste for how to immediately engage students in interaction and keep them from tuning out. You may begin to see how beliefs about the inadequacy of webinars are less "correct" than they are self-fulfilling prophecies.

In following chapters, we'll delve more deeply into how to deliver great webinars. Chapter 3 addresses how to get to know your audience and your objectives. I'll model how to promote effective interaction and collaboration in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5 I'll present tips and techniques for using PowerPoint slide presentations on the web.

Within that conversation, we'll touch on when not to follow standard PowerPoint practices in a virtual setting. We'll go over how to repurpose your traditional classroom exercises to the virtual classroom in Chapter 6. In Chapter 7, we'll discuss adult learning theory and how learning transfer takes place in the virtual setting. In Chapter 8, we'll offer some pointers on how to prepare yourself for addressing the inevitable technology snafus. Chapter 9 illustrates how to prepare and present a dry run of your web training.

As we step through these tips and techniques, I'll continue to bring in student comments and present best practices gleaned from the community of virtual facilitators.

NetSpeed Note

Speaking of the community of virtual facilitators: there are several national associations that can help you improve your skills in both the virtual and traditional learning environments.

American Society for Training & Development (<http://www.astd.org/>)

National Speakers Association (<http://www.nsaspeaker.org/>)

United States Distance Learning Association (www.usdla.org)

The International E-Learning Association (www.ielassoc.org)

The Masie Center (Learning Lab & Think Tank) (www.masie.com)

Society for Applied Learning Technology (www.salt.org)

The e-learning Guild (www.elearningguild.com)

Homework

We learn better by doing than by reading. At the end of each chapter, I'll offer some options for self-study and practice. By the end of this book, you'll have developed the basic skills necessary to deliver interactive online training using any web conferencing platform. You'll be able to:

- Design effective virtual classroom exercises using web conference interactivity tools
- Engage learner attention and participation in online learning
- Repurpose traditional classroom exercises for collaborative online learning
- Describe best practices for online facilitation
- Develop a comprehensive plan, including a simple facilitator guide, PowerPoint presentation, and participant materials for a 20-minute online learning session.
- Increase learning transfer after the facilitated session

Assignment 1-1: The Virtual Facilitator Self-Assessment

Read and fill out the Virtual Facilitator Self-Assessment in Appendix A. After completing it; write a one-page response on the advantages and disadvantages of synchronous (i.e. two-way, real-time) web conference training.

Assignment 1-2: Article: "What Stinks About Webinars?"

Read this article from Chief Learning Officer magazine to explore the common problems with webinar training delivery. You'll find it at <http://www.clomedia.com/features/2008/August/2317/index.php>

- ⁱ Rossett, Allison. "What Stinks About Webinars." Chief Learning Officer August, 2008:
<http://www.clomedia.com/features/2008/August/2317/index.php>
- ⁱⁱ NetSpeed Learning Solution's *Virtual Facilitator Trainer Certification* course is designed for experienced classroom trainers who want to become experts at designing and delivering engaging, highly interactive web conference training. Read more about the class and the certification here:
<http://www.netspeedlearning.com/interactive/vftc/>