

Virtual or Physically Present--Does it Matter When it Comes to Learning Outcomes?

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I have the good fortune of being a technical and end user instructor for a major vendor of contact center technologies and for ICMI courses for the past 24 years. I say good fortune, because it is an incredible joy to see the “light bulbs flash” in someone’s eyes when they have wrestled with a difficult concept and then all the sudden they realize how the learning all fits together; they suddenly “get it.” For most of those years the environment has been in a classroom setting, meaning we were all physically present in the same location in the same room and I facilitated the course. I thought I should clarify that, since with all the new technology that abounds, we could be in different locations, sharing our workstations and whiteboards, seeing one another through video all in a “classroom setting” done in the virtual realm. Furthermore, with all the advances in E-Learning, having an instructor - a warm blooded human being who is a subject matter expert - leading the course is also becoming a novelty. I also teach virtual seminars and classes, yet to a lesser extent.

The drive for virtual classrooms and e-learning has grown for many reasons:

- cost of instructor led courses,
- cost of travel for employees and the instructor to the course location,
- extra time and inconveniences required to travel when flying due to security requirements post September 2001, all for good reasons, but they add to the drawbacks of traveling for a course or seminar,
- down turn in the economy after September 2001 and again in 2007 / 2008 from which we have still not fully recovered has squeezed our educational budgets,
- flexibility of scheduling virtual learning,
- the enhancements in technologies to support virtual classrooms,
- and a plethora of other items could be added to this list.

The following are just some of the advantages to having virtual leader led instruction:

- no travel time to the course so more time can be spent on the learning,
- courses can be split into smaller segments over a greater span of time since the travel and expenses are reduced,
- courses can be completed during less traditional non-work hours meaning flexibility in scheduling and convenience for the students,
- class can consist of a wider audience, literally global, which can enhance the different ideas and examples that students share,
- a larger pool of expertise for instructors; once again that global pool is easier to tap into without all the travel time, visas, work permits and other factors that are required with bricks and mortar classroom instruction,
- and again, the list is much greater than I have mentioned above.

The types of courses that lend itself to virtual leader led over traditional classroom setting:

- Update courses, such as when a new release of software comes out and the review of the new feature functionality is required. Usually these are a few hours in length and require just a quick overview of the

enhancements. Q&A from the group and dialogue can easily be conducted through chat or opening up the conference bridge to facilitate interaction.

- Introductory courses, where the topic or information can be covered in a half day to a day overview. If the topic is quite complex and the student is new to the material, this may not be the best way to provide the education.
- Follow up information and related topics to courses taken in a bricks and mortar setting is perfect for continuing education. Often when students and instructors have been in a traditional classroom environment together, the virtual classroom setting is a great way to facilitate the ongoing learning and exchanging of ideas. The class has already connected in person and has established a rapport, so the instruction and conversation in the virtual realm is made easier due to prior in person collaboration.

The benefits of physically present leader led or the “traditional” classroom style education:

- More bi-directional interactive learning occurs. As an instructor, I can see and observe a person’s action and better gauge my instructional style when I believe the ideas or concepts are not being grasped. I can see when someone is lost or tuning out – both in their participation and their body language; furthermore I have observed other students step in and assist when they believe their fellow student may not be grasping the information. I have changed my approach when a majority of the people understand a particular concept, yet one person is struggling to grasp it; I will sit down and ask another student to go to the whiteboard and explain it in another way. The student becomes the teacher and this change in roles is easier to hand off in the traditional setting than in the virtual world. I have observed that when students are put into groups to do their exercises, where they have to work together to solve a problem, that direct one to one interaction is better enabled in person, than through a chat room or even a telephone call.
 - *Last week ICMI held its Symposium in Nashville for 4 days. I was a student this time and not the instructor. The course was ICMI’s 4 day WorkForce Management Bootcamp. With all the exercises, amount of material that was covered and the exchange of information and dialogue that occurred in those 4 days, I would find it difficult to put this course into the Virtual Classroom setting. However, that being said, I can easily imagine people in this group continuing on with the learning through a virtual classroom setting. Now that they have developed the relationships and shared so much in person, the virtual environment will be conducive for further Q&A, exploration of new materials related to this topic and overall facilitating future exchange of ideas and information.*
- **Access to the instructor and other students at the time you need the information.** It is not impossible, yet, it is more difficult when conducting virtual learning to engage the group, it can be done, yet it is not as fully interactive online as it is in person.
- **Less opportunity to get side tracked back into other work**, especially if you are in your company office and can be interrupted by others walking in or needing you in an “emergency” or “just for a minute”. I have found that off-site learning environments (or at least away from the main area of activity) provides for less distractions and interruptions. In a virtual setting I have found students will often multi-task; we will answer emails or do other work while we are half listening to the instructor. Though I have had individuals doing similar things in the traditional classroom, it is much less pervasive in that setting. To illustrate this point in a light humoured way, I suggest you watch the following presentations. (*links below*). It is a good illustration related to productivity of conference calls and the concepts can be applied to virtual learning environment also.
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JMOOG7rWTPg>
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_tiq1BFjbk

The traditional classroom setting, with a great facilitator and populated with students ready to learn, can be an environment more conducive to sharing ideas and information. This setting enhances the learning experience because it can provide access to all the learning styles at once – auditory, visual and

kinesthetic at once. It also allows people to meet others from different departments and organizations and share information; this environment can breakdown silos in organizations that have been built overtime – just by being in the same room and not having “conversations” over the telephone or worse yet, only through endless emails or instant messaging or chat.

The effectiveness of leader led virtual or classroom education is dependent on a multitude of factors, including the individual and his or her commitment to the learning, the adaptability of the instructor to the different learning styles of the students, the interaction and exchange of ideas among participants, to name a few; it is not just about a bricks and mortar facility with a good instructor. It has been documented that a combined method of e-learning, instructor led virtual and classroom education are the most effective for positive learning outcomes. (Reference 1)

Reference 1: Ambient Insight Research (2009) US Self-paced e-Learning Market Monroe WA: Ambient Insight Research.



Cheryl Helm is a contact center/telecommunications consultant and educational instructor. Cheryl has worked with and instructed clients all over Europe, Australia, Japan, the Caribbean, US and Canada. She brings a wealth of experience to her clients as a result of the broad range of businesses with which she worked - insurance, health care, airlines, hotels, automobile associations, software developers, helpdesks, manufacturers, telephony and mobility, utilities both gas and hydro (electric), along with governmental agencies. To develop a well-rounded and in-depth perspective of contact centers, Cheryl teamed up with ICMI in 1997 and has instructed courses, web seminars and engaged in consulting projects with ICMI ever since.

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