



Virtual Learning Fuses Quality Content with Convenient Delivery

Driving Forces Behind the Move to Online Learning

ASTD and the Institute for Corporate Productivity recently conducted a survey titled “*Organizational Learning in Tough Economic Times*”, which observed the ways in which organizations manage their learning programs in a down economy. The study found that most organizational leaders realize the need for increased training during crisis, particularly within leadership roles. And more than 75% of those surveyed responded that the effectiveness of their learning functions hasn’t changed over the past year.

But, in order to keep costs down as well as accommodate global expansion, a growing number of organizations are turning to online learning options; including virtual instructor led training (VILT) classrooms, which offers high-quality training for teams without incurring travel, lodging, and living expenses. One significant finding from The ASTD *State of the Industry Report* cites “the consistent upward trend of technology-based delivery methods”. In fact, e-learning now accounts for nearly one-third of learning content made available.”

Still, over 82% of respondents of a recent ESI International survey responded that they’re still using traditional, instructor-led classroom training solutions for their learning programs. Despite the obvious benefits, there are a number of reasons that organizations may have shied away from committing to VILT learning options; beginning with the fact that many earlier online learning programs were often problematic or somewhat unreliable, leaving organizations and students discouraged with the experience. These connectivity and related tech issues have been nixed for the most part with the advent of high-speed internet and improved quality program and platform designs. Also, a majority of employees are increasingly tech-savvy and even crave a highly interactive online environment. ESI’s recent survey shows that over 57% of organizations have leveraged technology or have had employees request it as a part of their learning solution.

Another misconception that holds some organizations back from taking the plunge into the world of VILT is an underlying fear of losing the “high touch”, creative, and interactive engagement offered by on-site, classroom-based learning to what they perceive to be a mechanical, high-tech, online check-list. So what are the realities; and can two seemingly polar methods of learning really provide the ultimate classroom solution when combined?



High-Tech Versus High-Touch, and Finding Common Ground

VILT remains at the forefront of an expanding, online learning trend. And its popularity certainly lies in its ability to provide an effective, economical global training option, while promoting a content rich, interactive, learning environment in which remote teams can directly engage each other, as well as the course instructor. When broken into their basic parts, you'll find that the goals of high-tech and high-touch methods are surprisingly similar; and they fit together like clock-work.

The high-tech approach aims to create a repeatable experience for course participants, and instructors typically follow a script when presenting this type of content. Thus, a student who attends a course in the VILT setting would be taught the same information as students attending e-training and traditional classroom versions of the course. The high-tech method also incorporates sharp technology, a detailed instructor guide, and such direction as periodic polling, surveys, or turning the whiteboard over to students at intervals.

Furthermore, with the addition of audio and video clips that present specific scenarios and expert advice, as well as scripted PowerPoint presentations and tools that can easily be customized, VILT may be tailored to organizational needs. Application sharing is yet another means of expanding the technical capacity of the high-tech medium. The instructor can even link participants to a single personal computer directly, thus allowing interactive applications, such as games for test review, to be shared among the group.

The high-touch approach is often less scripted and involves maintaining participant interest through a shift in pace of the session. Because course participants can't be monitored in VILT as they would be in the conventional classroom, instructors can choose to encourage active student participation with polling and surveys using interactive, selectable icons. Instructors may regularly ask students to answer questions using icons such as *yes*, *no*, *applause*, *raise-your-hand*, and so-on. For example, the instructor might poll the class by asking, "How many of you are currently using a project charter? Please answer by raising your hand using the icon." To recognize students for correct or insightful responses, the facilitator may choose a sound effect such as a cheering crowd, etc.



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Breakout sessions are another beneficial technique utilized with this type of learning. Using this method online, participants from countries all over the globe are given the opportunity to interact with each other in real-time and communicate using their headsets and microphones. Students are divided into small groups to work on case studies and then reconvene to present to the rest of the class. The virtual classroom is designed to be interactive (for example, participants can mark-up whiteboards as they would flipcharts in the classroom) while encouraging participants to absorb vital information from the class' scripted PowerPoint presentation. Students can also chat directly with class facilitators and other students via the text chat feature.

With a deeper understanding of high-tech versus high-touch and the ways in which the two methods can be introduced in an online format, it's clear that the virtual classroom does an excellent job of blending the two capabilities to realistically meet the educational needs of course participants – possibly more effectively than traditional classroom learning can.

The Future of the Virtual Classroom

As we expand the realm of possibilities for VILT, it's important to determine with input from participants what delivery medium is best for them. Discovering an opportune blend of high-tech and high-touch aspects, and discovering how participants best respond to the characteristics of both customization methods, will become the key to success.

Instructor Led Training (ILT) offers the tremendous benefit of the physical presence of an instructor in the classroom, and a large number of business professionals still prefer to learn in this more traditional way. However, with dependence upon a specific time and location, comes the need for class participants to travel for training. As an alternative, online learning is reusable, limitless, timeless, (in that it can be completed anytime, anywhere), and offers the greatest amount of personalization – and the option in many cases for the student to determine the pace of the course.

Many organizations are turning to VILT for its combination of the benefits of ILT and e-learning, particularly the flexibility of working from home or attending class while at work, with the assurance of having an expert instructor teaching the class in real-time. It also becomes a valuable solution for those companies whose travel and training budgets have been cut, as students retain live instructor access and a precise schedule but can learn from home without incurring travel expenses. In addition, the same subject matter is demonstrated, but perhaps in an even more engaging way; using graphics, video, and virtual games. Plus, participants have the chance to make valuable connections with students across the globe.

As a convenient, economical and forward-thinking medium, VILT gives participants all the information they need in a creative, enriching format that aligns with the digital age.

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References: *Learning in a Down Economy* by Andrew Paradise and Jennifer Mosely, ASTD Learning Circuits 2009. *Virtual Classroom Instruction: Strategies for Keeping Participants Engaged* © The GMarie Group ASTD TechKnowledge 2009 Conference Concurrent Session. *Playing 20 Questions* by Margaret Driscoll and Michael Dennehy. *E-Learning, A Key Strategy for Maximizing Human Capital in the Knowledge Economy* A Whitepaper by PrimeLearning.com. © 2001.

Details of ESI's "Value of Training" survey can be found at www.esi-intl.com/ValueSurvey.