Tips for First Time Virtual Classroom Trainers
By Rick Darby

There has been a rapid rise in the use of virtual classroom tools. A live instructor can deliver a classroom presentation and truly manage a class that is spread across several cities and thousands of miles using Internet technology to connect them. An e-Learning innovation, virtual classroom tools straddle the divide between traditional classroom instructor-led training and the 24/7 fully automated self-serve eLearning course. Virtual classroom instruction simplifies the eLearning content issue because the preparation for a virtual class is very similar to preparation for an instructor-led course.

However, there are differences. Preparing for the inaugural virtual classroom session includes many additional tasks. There are a number of content and technical details to confirm. Here is a checklist of the basics.

Rehearse. Remember It is a live broadcast. Rehearsal is important. Rehearse such things as presentation of the content, switching to other presenters, visiting other web sites, and all of the mechanics of the classroom tools.

Get IT support. Your Information Technology department will have the best chance of determining the user locations that have and do not have the capability to support a virtual classroom event. IT will also know the bandwidth of the network connections serving each remote location and their percent utilization and factors that will affect performance.

Choose Vo/IP or Audio Teleconference. If you are planning to use the Voice over Internet Protocol (VO/IP) feature of your virtual classroom tool, support of digital audio, including having a properly configured soundcard, soundcard driver, and access to headphones is a must. If these items aren't available to significant numbers of the target population, then plan on using an audio conferencing service instead of relying on the VO/IP feature. It's more expensive because the pricing is typically by the minute per connection, but simpler to use than VO/IP. Audio conferencing also provides an audio only option for those users without workstations available. It is also possible to bridge an audio conference into a VO/IP connection so that all options are available.

Learn your moderator interface. Make sure that your co-presenters learn it as well. Live broadcasting in front of 100 learners is a terrible time to realize you don't know how to switch resources or adjust the microphone gain to stop feedback squeal.

Invest in good microphones. Test them out. Have someone talk through the system while you listen to it across the Internet. Audio quality has a major affect on the overall perceived quality of the session.

Test your sound level setting twice or more. Check the local speaker volume ahead of time and then again just before starting the session. This is especially true if someone has used your computer ahead of you for another application. Sound levels are often different for other applications and the user ahead of you may have adjusted your settings and cranked the volume to ear splitting levels for your application.

Test all representative locations. If it is the first time the virtual classroom tool has been used in the organization, have someone from each location try connecting to your synchronous server and viewing samples of all content. Test all of the variations you can identify: dial-in locations, DSL locations, cable modem locations, and various company sites behind and outside of the firewall. **Do this a week or more ahead of time.** It will take your IT organization time to react to firewall and other connectivity problems.

Have learners test ahead of time. Most virtual classroom products have a system check routine that tells the user whether or not the machine is capable of acting as a virtual classroom workstation. **Urge all participants to go to the virtual classroom at least the day before the event** and do the system check and install, especially if they are going to be co-presenters. If you are going to use content that requires plug-ins such as Macromedia Flash or Real Audio, this is the time to have them download the plug-ins.

Be conscious of time zone issues. Scheduling at 9:00 AM US west coast time starts the session at lunchtime on the east coast. Likewise a late session in one time zone is unbearably late in another. Good scheduling increases audience size and participation.

Be interactive. Include frequent chances for interactivity. The choices are many: Q&A hand raising, round robin, exercises, web research, and on-location reporting by others.

Make it a team effort. You don't have to take on the whole session yourself. Team up with subject matter experts, managers, and other moderators. Make sure they know the mechanics or have an assistant standing by who can help them. Include them in a rehearsal so that they know their cues and questions.

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Because a virtual class is a one-time event, planning is important. Preparation and testing help reduce the risk of something going wrong. Following the tips provided here will help ensure a successful rollout.

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