



TRAINING MEDIA REVIEW *by trainers, for trainers*

VIRTUAL CLASSROOM SERIES

Training Media Review is conducting a series of hands-on evaluations of virtual classroom and collaboration products from leading vendors. The products reviewed or planned for review are:

- Interwise
- Centra
- LearnLinc
- WebEx
- HorizonLive
- IBM Lotus LearningSpace Virtual Classroom
- Placeware

Each evaluation provides a detailed description of the product, an evaluation of essential product characteristics such as ease of use, and a comparative rating. Barbara Fillicaro, the author of this introduction to virtual classrooms, is the principal reviewer.

The TMR research report series also includes evaluations of leading learning management systems and authoring tools. For more information about the series, see page 4.

TRAINING MEDIA REVIEW Training Media Review provides objective reviews of training content and supporting technologies, advice on media-related training issues, research reports, and consulting.

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RESEARCH REPORTS:

VIRTUAL CLASSROOM AND COLLABORATION SYSTEMS

Virtual Classrooms

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INTRODUCTION

BY BARBARA FILLICARO

High touch, high tech. The idea does not seem credible. It seems like a catchy oxymoron suitable for an ad, not the real world. Yet, that is exactly what the virtual classroom seeks to accomplish: give the learner the essence of the classroom experience at a distance.

A virtual classroom is unlike its physical predecessor because it is indifferent to geography, space, or time:

- Geography because the instructor and students can be in different rooms, cities, countries, or continents;
- Space because the classroom can accommodate one-on-one coaching or an address to thousands of people; and
- Time because people in different time zones can participate in the same live event or, long after the event, view a recording of it (although, in the latter case, they will not be able to interact with the instructor or other participants).

The economic argument for the virtual classroom is attractive. It can

- Eliminate most of the costs of bringing together a group of people (e.g., travel, accommodations, meals, facilities),
- Increase the productivity of instructors and subject matter experts who can reach a larger group of people in a shorter period of time than possible in a live classroom,
- Cut training “time to market” by disseminating information and ideas to more people in a short time than possible in a live classroom, and
- Capture knowledge that might otherwise be lost by recording classes.

It is no wonder that virtual collaboration software has been a relative success amid the gloom of the e-learning industry. Not only is it easier to understand than some other types of software, but it also has an easy-to-grasp value proposition.

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WHERE DOES THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM FIT AS A LEARNING OPTION?

The idea behind a virtual classroom is that a learner or participant can enjoy the same experience as being there without being there. It's a noble concept. It's a great idea. Still, everything has a cost of one kind or another.

Just as the cost of live, face-to-face learning escalates quickly as you reduce the number of students per instructor, so too does the high contact experience of the participant. Conversely, drive down the cost of bringing people together by connecting them virtually, and you drive down the face-to-face contact, camaraderie, "feeling of family," and the energies that "coming together" generate.

Exhibit 1 expresses the simple relationship that as the teacher-student ratio increases, the less attention, or contact, each student receives on average. (We all know that some students will always receive more than their fair share of attention because they work hard to obtain it.)

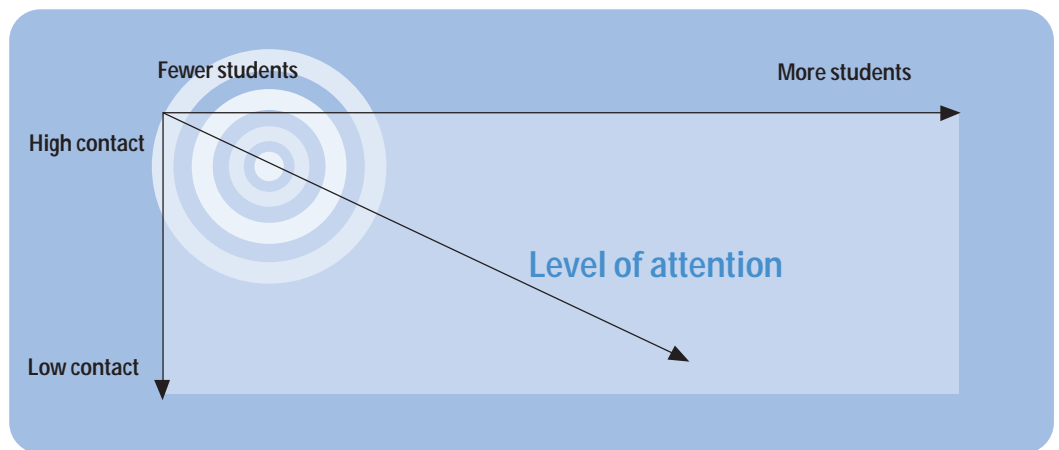


Exhibit 1
The larger the class, the less the contact.

The circled area of the Exhibit shows high contact may be possible when using a virtual classroom. Although the participants are not physically sitting next to each other in the virtual classroom, the software has the capability to simulate a face-to-face experience when the number of participants ranges between, say, two to 20. In a virtual classroom, just as in a physical classroom, as the number of participants grows, the potential for interaction decreases. Trainers should be sensitive to the fact that a virtual classroom may not offer the same level of interaction as a live classroom with exactly the same number of students.

A way to decide which learning activities are appropriate at various points on the interaction continuum is to use Bloom's Taxonomy. As you move up the ladder of the taxonomy, the complexity of the competency increases. At the highest levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, learners need the opportunity for "high contact" communication. At the levels of Evaluation and Synthesis, we ask such questions as:

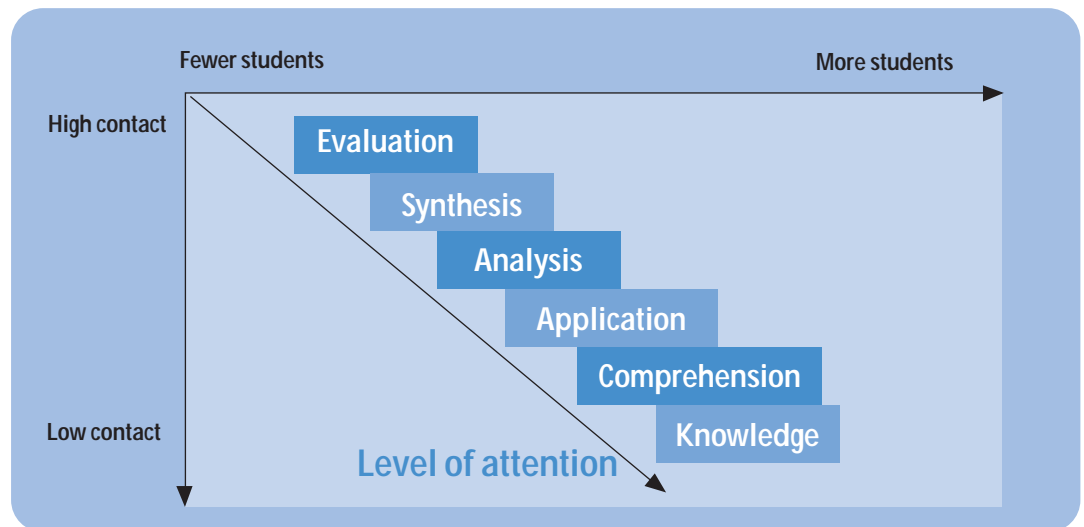
- What would happen if...?
- Can you propose an alternative for...?
- What would you recommend...?
- How would you justify...?



Exhibit 2
Learning goals can be mapped against the level of interaction.

BLOOM'S TAXONOMY DESCRIBES THE LEVELS OF KNOWLEDGE.

If you are addressing a cast of hundreds or thousands, these types of questions can be asked, but there is no reasonable expectation of interaction between the moderator and the learner. As Exhibit 2 shows, this type of questioning is effective at the high contact end of the continuum because there are only a small number of learners. At the low contact end, the Knowledge level of Bloom's Taxonomy is what we can reasonably expect: recall of a new product's features and competitive products, for instance, or of a specific change in a business process.



THE HIDDEN COST OF PREPARATION

Trainers have a teaching mentality. It can be a handicap if it constrains them to think in terms of courses instead of business needs. But it is a tremendous asset if it leads them to ask questions about the appropriate teaching skills needed for a virtual classroom.

Teaching people you cannot see, or can see only one at a time, is a challenge. The instructor has none of the rich mix of sensory cues available in a live classroom that help him or her adapt to learners. That reality requires the instructor to use the types of feedback available through the system to gauge understanding and engagement.

Classroom management has always been an important task for instructors. Some classroom events, such as labs and demonstrations, involve an array of elements that requires serious management attention. Every virtual class does. A virtual event involving two-way video and audio, a whiteboard, a shared microphone, private and public chat, various inquiry modes (e.g., yes-no polls), and co-moderators is a challenge—and that is an understatement.

In addition, the virtual instructor is dependent on a large number of complex technologies. Complexity increases capability; it also increases the odds of malfunction. All of the technologies but one can work perfectly, and an event can be a disaster. Your voice can come through clearly, but if your slides load slowly on the remote machines, you will soon unknowingly be racing ahead of your students. Count on having an experience like this. Every classroom teacher has bad days, and so does every virtual instructor.

Learning how to use the technology takes time. Learning how to use it well, with contingency plans for the virtual equivalents of burned out overhead projector bulbs, takes more time and trial-and-error experience. Savvy trainers should give serious consideration to the virtual classroom technology. They should also consider all of the costs associated with its use and be sure that other stakeholders are aware of them.



About Training Media Review Research Reports

Training Media Review research reports are for trainers, human resource professionals, managers, and others with an interest in training. Our approach emphasizes first-hand user experience.

The reviewers are all training or human resource professionals who are technologically savvy. They spend significant time actually using the software on their own. We never settle for a vendor demonstration alone. Reviewers use real-world computers and Internet connections, not specially configured boxes and high-bandwidth connections.

The reports provide essential technical information and feature lists. However, they do not offer technical data of interest only to information technology specialists. Our primary focus is the quality of the user experience, ease of use, essential training-related capabilities, pricing, and stability and reliability.

Decisions about e-learning are complex, and our reports do not pretend to offer all the information you need to make them. No report can do that, although some on the market make that claim.

Our reports can help you understand the technology by explaining it in plain language and providing an honest evaluation derived from hands-on experience. They can shorten the critical and time-consuming tasks of finding options, understanding their pluses and minuses, and developing your short list of contenders.

Or the reports can help you make the decision to do nothing. As Yogi Berra noted, sometimes we can observe a lot just by watching. Research reports in this industry often are biased toward purchase. We make no such assumption.

In the end, only you and your team can decide whether the technology can help you advance and improve learning in your organization. And we strongly recommend that you put any product you are considering buying through a rigorous test drive under realistic conditions.

THE TMR MISSION

To provide accurate, unbiased, and actionable evaluations of media-based training.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BARBARA FILLICARO (barbiejf@earthlink.net) is an instructional designer and trainer based in Niles, IL, a suburb of Chicago. Her experience includes designing training for two Internet-based companies: an on-line auction house and a supply chain management system. She is adjunct faculty at two colleges.