



When Live Virtual Learning Really Works

The best courses deliver collaborative learning experiences that engage and inspire learners. Your virtual learning platform can either help or hinder that pursuit.



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WHILE NEARLY EVERYBODY IN HIGHER EDUCATION has had interaction with virtual teaching and learning in the last two years, some of those online encounters stand out for how exceptional they were while others were barely worth the effort to show up. What often makes the difference are three elements: 1) how engaging the interaction is; 2) how well-developed the virtual instructor tools are for delivering a peak learning experience; and 3) how effectively the instructor uses the video conferencing features at hand.

Multiple studies published in the *Harvard Business Review*, *Science*, *Nature*, *the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* and even **LinkedIn** have found that students learn best in active, social learning environments. It's the instructor's job to inspire and engage those learners. By asking questions, providing advice, giving context and explaining specific examples and solutions, an instructor brings learning to life for each student in his or her own meaningful way. Then additional learning occurs in the interactions among the learners.

These collaborative experiences can harness the power of diverse groups for learning – yes – but also for getting to know, like and support each other as they pursue their individual goals. Those kinds of outcomes have a major impact on student retention and their levels of satisfaction with their classes.

5 Principles for Online Learning

We've identified five basic principles for online learning that enhance the learning outcomes and interactions and that live, online instruction should incorporate:

A common visual experience for all learners. The right platform can let the instructor control what the learner sees – display of video, slides, chats, talking heads – to minimize the level of distraction and keep the focus on the content rather than, say, the attendee list or anonymous chatter.

Short bursts of content mixed with peer interaction. The bursts should be no longer than seven minutes and, ideally, between three and five minutes. Memorable instructors do careful sequencing to make sure content builds on one idea after the next and so that activities are appropriate for the

content being delivered. Those activities could consist of quizzes; focused chats; word-based tasks such as fill-in-the-answer, word clouds, sticky notes and task lists; and audience feedback through raised hands, agree/disagree, laughter, applause, speed up/slow down, upvotes and star ratings.

Peer-group breakouts, with some combination of video, audio and chat (depending on instructor preference); whiteboard usage; polling; question posting; and easy screen sharing. The instructor should be able to create breakout rooms quickly – through auto-assignment, a fixed list or rotation – and then communicate with participants across all breakouts or within a given breakout.

Movement. To combat limited attention spans and counteract the boredom that sets in when students have to stare at words on a slide, instructors need to provide a variety of slides, layouts, videos and interactive features. Top virtual platforms offer a multitude of options for keeping the learning session moving and learners engaged.

Accessibility. Here's where the virtual classroom can improve upon the in-person version. The addition of embedded closed captioning, keyboard commands, color controls, enhanced navigational features and integration with screen readers enable students with specific needs to more fully participate while expanding overall usability for all learners.

Functionality for Facilitating Memorable Learning

As you assess the caliber of the virtual learning tools your instructors are armed with, make sure they provide the functionality that facilitates a more memorable learning experience. That's how you can play a role in helping students get and retain more from their courses.

For example, make sure there's a level of *content consistency* across sections being taught by different people. You do that by using a platform where the entire presentation with all interactive tools (slides, video, audio, chat threads and exercises) can be stored in a shared system with assigned editing privileges.

Also, give your instructors "backstage" controls that

will help them monitor the presentation as it unfolds, so that they can understand what the students are viewing. Choose a platform that includes an engagement dashboard, to allow instructors to shift session operations in real time if engagement begins to lag. Essential tools would also include a

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speaker notes area and a chat, specifically to permit behind-the-scenes collaboration among presenters and moderators.

Of course, *integration* with existing learning management systems and authoring programs is essential. So is *security compliance* that ensures the data generated before and during class remains private and encrypted and the sessions themselves can't be breached by unauthorized people.

Finally, your platform needs robust *measurement capabilities*. In an in-person class, the instructor can see students' body language and make adjustments on the fly

to re-engage the group, when interest is flagging. Well-designed virtual learning tools provide clues too, in the form of engagement metrics for every activity, which are summarized in the instructor dashboard. These data points help the instructor to monitor success and identify where disengagement is taking place.

At a time when students are forced to learn while physically apart, live virtual learning offers the opportunity to bring people together in new collaborative scenarios, reinforcing a shared culture. The right technology that's used well creates connections both among students and between students and instructors and reminds them that investing in their online studies is a worthy endeavor.

To read more on this subject, check out the whitepaper, **"A framework for optimizing the virtual live learning experience,"** by Josh Bersin.

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