From Brick and Mortar:

Omega’s experience in classroom training fundamentals is from a client perspective—before and after the implementation of a virtual classroom program designed to alleviate training issues caused by an expansive geographic client distribution. If your firm faces similar geographic constraints such as multiple offices statewide, nationwide or worldwide, you might benefit from using a virtual classroom to train your employees. You will find, as we did working with our clients, that utilizing the Internet and applying many of the long-proven fundamentals of brick and mortar classroom training will enable you to bring the classroom and trainer to your employee desktops without sacrificing quality instruction.

Transitioning to a Virtual Classroom

by Nance J. Coen of Omega Legal Systems

Before the advent of the Internet classroom technology, the most common employee training models were either to bring a trainer to each different firm location or send the employees from different locations to the trainer’s location. The first model is less expensive in terms of travel costs; however, it does not typically result in an effective training solution for several reasons.

- The more distance between offices, the more training content is maximized to minimize the number of trips. The result is all day (not modular) training sessions for four to five days in a row to capitalize on travel costs. Even if your courses offer the appropriate knowledge, the length is inappropriate for adults to effectively retain the information.

- Your trainer is on site for a full day, but often is utilized only five to six hours a day due to unforeseen problems beyond his control, such as employees being unavailable when scheduled for training.

- During onsite training, your trainer may have to conduct training on the “live” system, rather than a classroom database in which students can practice without ramifications for mistakes. Training in a live system puts your data at risk and limits the areas that can be trained due to lack of data to support it. For example, you cannot teach someone to perform writeoffs if there is nothing to writeoff that day. You do not want to create false information in a live system used to provide financial analysis.

When you bring the employees to the trainer you gain the benefit of a more structured classroom environment with the trainer in control, and you can effectively deliver the training to multiple offices at one time—but with the added burden of multiple employee travel expenses.

With the virtual classroom solution, the additional cost for choosing the most effective training solution disappears. It solves the issues of travel cost and inefficiencies of onsite, all-day, day-after-day training, while allowing you to gain the maximum return on investment in your training staff. One resource (trainer) can deliver to many employees regardless of their physical location.

Designing a successful virtual classroom solution requires that you first understand the fundamentals of effective classroom training. Ideally, adult learning classes have each of these components:
Modular course curriculum. Starting with a physical classroom scenario and modular course curriculum that supports adult learning and retention principles, it is not a difficult task to move into the virtual classroom using what you have as the basis. If you don’t have a solid foundation, this is the most challenging task ahead of you.

Defining a curriculum to support the virtual classroom delivery is the most time-consuming piece of the transition. To begin developing your curriculum, determine the “need to know” information from the “nice to know.”

At Omega, we determined what training was necessary to go “live” and what training was necessary to complete the first billing cycle. From that we developed a “Basic Training Track” consisting of approximately 50 hours of training. Next we broke the 50 hours into small, manageable courses each with a specific job-related topic. The result is a track consisting of 14 modules offered monthly. The scheduling of the class within the month coincides with the various phases of an implementation. Courses for “nice to know” information are also offered monthly so that the students can attend when they are ready to learn more.

Since we are no longer forced to deliver all-day training for days on end, our course curriculum is delivered in appropriate doses. That leads to the question “What is an appropriate length for an individual module?” There is no clear-cut formula, but keep in mind it is more difficult for most people to attend a lengthy virtual class than a lengthy physical class. This is largely due to the fact that the students cannot see the trainer’s facial expressions or shift their focus to different areas of the classroom and see other student reactions.

Our modules range from 45 minutes to four hours. Four hours is pressing the limit, but depending on the subject matter, it is the appropriate length to deliver the necessary knowledge for a specific topic. Just as you would with physical classes, plan for scheduled breaks to ensure everyone (including the trainer) has time to rest, take care of physical needs and re-energize. For individual modules that exceed four hours, we deliver the module in two sessions on consecutive days. That way, a student is never in training for more than half a day.

Courseware. After defining your curriculum, creating the courseware is the next step. Conducting any class without courseware is contrary to effective classroom techniques. Courseware helps keep the trainer on track, guarantees consistency in training and serves as a tool for many students who would otherwise become distracted with note taking and not participate in their learning experience. Our courseware consists of:

- A conceptual introduction to each topic
- Business analogies to assist students in transferring the information to their individual job relevancy
- Mechanics, or “how-to” information for the topic
- Hands-on review exercises to let the students process the information

The Trainer. The qualifications for a virtual classroom trainer are similar to those of a physical classroom trainer. However, more emphasis on vocal quality and the ability to get students to participate in their learning experience is required. Since the student can only hear but not see the trainer, it is critical for the “virtual trainer” to have enthusiasm, clarity, and a tone that isn’t shrill or irritating.

My experience with trainers has been that the transition is not as difficult as they initially perceive it to be. It is hard for a good trainer to imagine delivering a class without the ability to read the body language of the students. A good trainer adjusts his presentation based on what he sees in the classroom. There are many tools available to continually measure comprehension level, pace, student emotions, etc. The tools become your eyes. It didn’t take long for our trainers to learn to use the tools, and they appreciate not being on the road so often. They experience greater job satisfaction and increased balance between work and personal life, resulting long-term in less trainer turnover.

The Student (Employee). In any classroom experience, employees should register for appropriate class levels based on their experience and prerequisite status. This is easy to achieve when the curriculum is modular. Students enroll in courses that focus on their job responsibilities rather than attend an all-day course, a quarter of which might apply to their function. A course catalog is the perfect tool to assist the students in choosing their course path.
The Classroom Environment. There are many classroom tools available on the market today. Some are more conducive to meetings, others to training. Our requirements were:

- Scalability
- Limited technology requirements
- Classroom facilitation tools
- Affordability

Our Experience—Your Gain
Omega University was a startup program, so we needed to use a classroom technology that allowed us to begin small and grow with our program. An ASP arrangement best met our needs.

It is critical that students are able enter the classroom without becoming network specialists or download wizard gurus. One of our criteria was the ability for a student to attend class with the least amount of intervention on his part. To come to class, students click on a link contained in their confirmation e-mail. The link takes them to the class.

Our most important consideration was the ability to closely emulate what happens in a brick and mortar classroom, within budget of course. We wanted students to walk away feeling as though they had a personal interaction with the trainer and the other students. Students must participate and engage in their class to get the most out of it.

Not only do we want them to participate in their learning, we want to keep them interested. A good rule of thumb is not to do any one thing for too long. Because it is a challenge to keep students engaged while they sit in front of a computer, try to avoid doing the same thing for more than five minutes. In a physical classroom, the trainer moves around the room. This is a way to “change it up” and to keep the student interested and engaged. In a virtual classroom, there are many tools available to help you change it up. Here are the ones we use most often:

- Voice over IP
- Raise Hand button
- Whiteboard
- PowerPoint slides
- Mark-up tools
- Application Share
- Survey questionnaires
- Emotion buttons
- Yes and No Polling

Effective trainers use questioning techniques to determine the comprehension level of a class before moving on to a new concept.

Voice over IP (VoIP) or teleconference? That was a difficult decision. Our program began with teleconferencing and moved into VoIP within the first year. With a headset / microphone a student can communicate to everyone in the class by pressing his control key and speaking into the microphone. The majority of students that had both experiences felt that VoIP was a superior learning experience. Our trainers also feel it is a better choice. As one trainer put it, “Why is it people feel compelled to yell into a speakerphone?”

A tool that works closely with VoIP is the “Raise Hand” button. Just as in a physical classroom, when students want to speak or ask a question, they raise their hand. The trainer passes out microphones selectively to maintain control of who is speaking and when.

In a physical classroom you often see a trainer writing on a whiteboard. They might do this so you can take a note, to clarify a key point, or to illustrate something for the visual learners. The virtual classroom has a whiteboard, and with permission, the students can write or draw on the whiteboard too.

We like to use PowerPoint slides during our training to display bulleted lists, objectives, screen shots of a dialog box, etc. PowerPoint slides are most often used in conjunction with the mark-up tools. As the trainer discusses a point, he can highlight, circle, underline, and utilize a multitude of other mark-ups while he talks. In addition, we often use the application share capability. When we share an application, everyone in class sees the application on-screen. They do not have to have the software loaded on their workstation for this to work. The trainer can give a student the control to perform tasks within the software during application share. This is a great tool to reinforce the concepts discussed on PowerPoint slides and gives the students a chance to directly use the application while it is still fresh in their minds.

Effective trainers use questioning techniques to determine the comprehension level of a class before moving on to a new concept. The survey questionnaire tool provides an
anonymous way for the trainer to poll the class regarding a skill they just learned. Based on the results of the polling, the trainer either moves on to the next topic or revisits the topic to make it clearer.

Some trainers use humor in their presentations, but the virtual classroom provides a challenge since the reaction of the audience can’t be seen. Emotion buttons such as laughter and applause help trainers measure how the group is doing. We encourage students to click the applaud button when they see a feature they know will save them time, or to click the laugh button if appropriate. By the end of class they are freely using these buttons to let us know what they think—and we love it because we know they are engaged.

Yes and No polling are used much like the emotion buttons. Our trainers regularly ask yes/no questions to give the students an opportunity to engage. When a student clicks “Yes” a green check appears next to his name or a red X if he clicks “No.” Trainers might ask a question like “How many of you have had this experience…” Students see a list of the other students and the status of their yes/no responses. It is just like glancing around the physical classroom to see how other students answer a question.

One final thought regarding tools. Many virtual classrooms provide the opportunity to connect desktop video cameras so “seeing” is a possibility. We did not pursue that option for two reasons: 1) the mouth and the voice always look like a bad Godzilla movie because they never match (now is the time to click your laughter button), and 2) the real reason is that it requires more technology on the part of the student.

**Conclusion**

Remember that all of the things that make a great physical classroom experience also make a great virtual classroom experience. The challenge is finding the tools and processes to make it happen.
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