AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION TO PROVIDING AN EFFECTIVE EXPERT-LED LEARNING EXPERIENCE: LIVE LEARNING

The Proven Approach to Virtual Classroom Instruction

Overview

The Challenge with Traditional Classroom Training

Over the last few years, it has become increasingly evident that organizations need alternatives to expensive traditional instructor-led training (ILT). While various forms of self-paced learning such as CD-ROMs, e-Learning, and online reference materials have provided cost-effective alternatives to the learning world, the importance of expert-led training cannot be denied. Whether the topic is related to business skills or technology, standard or custom software applications, there are times when people simply need to “hear from the expert.” The challenges in providing this type of learning typically boils down to budget and time constraints. The pressure of managing these two burdens has become so intense that traditional training providers have begun experimenting with new technologies and new business models to help meet the needs of their customers. In fact, IDC estimates that 25% of online learning delivered in the United States is combined with classroom-based instruction. This trend indicates that organizations are exploring new ways to cut costs and reduce training time by using online learning to supplement, rather than replace, classroom instruction. This kind of pragmatism has led to a further increase in consumer confusion as traditional ILT providers try to integrate approaches typically associated with “e-Learning” companies—such as “blended learning,” “self-paced,” “virtual classroom”—but who lack the technology and capabilities to truly deliver an effective online expert-led learning experience.

A Decision-Maker’s Guide to Training

In the absence of industry-accepted standards for optimizing learning programs, choosing providers with the capacity to help your organization
exceed its learning and business goals has become much more
challenging than it should be. However, the core objectives of any
blended training program remain straightforward:

1) To positively impact business objectives with a dependable, targeted
   learning strategy
2) To effectively transfer to learners the knowledge and skills required to
   be successful in the areas targeted by learning objectives
3) To cost-effectively scale the learning program while maintaining an
   optimal learning blend

To develop and deliver a training program that maximizes these
underlying requirements, the optimal learning blend should leverage the
effectiveness of instructor-led training with the efficiencies of online
learning. This statement is founded on the acceptance of classroom-based
training as the “gold standard” of training delivery and the bottom-line
savings and scalability associated with online training programs.
Ultimately, organizations should have the ability to seamlessly blend
these foundations into an integrated, scalable learning environment
where subject-matter expertise underpins every mode of learning in the
program. Moreover, the technology investments enabling this optimal
blend should be well established and should be capable of growing with
the organization’s training and development requirements.

The Natural Acceptance of Classroom Training

While e-Learning has obvious organizational value, many individuals still
prefer a traditional classroom training environment if given their choice.

Cultural Acceptance
From pre-school through high school and college, we have been
conditioned to expect one “expert” to lead a group of students through
a subject area. The better the expert knows how to teach and the more
learners can focus on the content, the more knowledge will be acquired.
Since nearly 75% of all dollars spent in the training industry go to
traditional ILT providers, the cultural acceptance of this method is evident
and has historical significance.

Proven Instructional Design and Delivery Methodologies
The culturally accepted strengths of ILT as an instructional format are
supported by cognitive and behavioral instructional design
methodologies alike. Cognitive theories like Gagne’s Nine Events of
Instruction and Bloom’s Taxonomy and Sequential Instruction describe
learning as a sequential progression of processes, or levels of abstraction,
each of which is a prerequisite to the next more advanced level of
comprehension. In the classroom, an experienced instructor actively
guides learners through the stages of the instructional program,
stimulating learner recall of prior learning, presenting the new material,
and facilitating the learners’ successful progression into the more abstract
levels of understanding so new knowledge can be assimilated and
applied.

The Rationale for Expert-Led Learning
The potential impact of the instructor in the classroom becomes very
clear when the behavioral models are considered alongside the cognitive
processes. Keller’s ARCS Model (Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and
Satisfaction) and Knowles’ Adult Learning Theory both support the idea
that “why” is just as important as “how” when it comes to adult
learning. Learners must know why they need to learn something and
how it will be meaningful to them to be motivated to learn it. Even the
best training program will fail unless the learner is sufficiently motivated.
In a classroom environment, an effective instructor does not simply
present the material, but commands the learners’ attention with vocal
variety and inflection, convinces them of relevance through analogies
and real-word scenarios, and keeps them motivated throughout the
program so they have the ability and confidence to apply the new
knowledge and skills in their professional roles.

In practice, and across all content areas, there is certainly variance in the
skills of classroom instructors. However, as an instructor takes
responsibility for the overall learning experience by mastering every
aspect of the topic, refining presentation skills, devising new analogies
and approaches to teaching specific topics, the quality of training
increases. The better the instructor is prepared to effectively guide
learners via appropriate levels of motivation, interaction, relevance, and
practice, the more effective the learners will be when they need to tackle
the task on their own.

The Realities of the Traditional Classroom
While learners often favor traditional ILT and are willing to pay a
premium for the expert interaction or because the method is familiar,
they have also learned to accept some of the disadvantages to this
established learning model.

High Direct and Indirect Costs
Probably the biggest roadblock to leveraging ILT in large-scale training
programs is the direct cost. Course fees, travel costs, accommodations,
business down-time and other expenses limit the number of learners an
organization can send offsite for classroom-based training. Typically
under-estimated are the longer-term indirect costs of productivity lost for each employee that is unavailable for the duration of the class. From a practical standpoint, only a limited number of employees in a given department can be out of the office at any one time, so the training program is not only expensive, it must also be extended over long periods of time.

Inconsistent Instructor Skills
Even though the classroom is accepted as an effective training method, every course is only as good as the instructor. The unfortunate truth is that there are three types of instructors: (1) those with a firm grasp on the content they teach through real-world experience and knowledge but difficulty communicating it effectively; (2) those still learning the content who depend on their personality and ability to communicate; and (3) those who have both. As traditional ILT providers scramble to retain good instructors they are continually pressured to put their best instructors in front of the most learners, which can lead to a less-than-optimal experience for some. Geographic limitations need to be considered as the best instructors can only be in one place at a time; therefore it must be assumed that having the leading subject-matter expert in the classroom, at the time the learner has chosen to attend the class, is not very plausible.

Unstable, Ineffective Practice
The success of technical ILT courses is often dependent on the in-class labs and simulations. While hands-on lab exercises are one of the most accepted components of traditional ILT, there are a few obvious challenges to this approach. In most situations, lab exercises and simulations are like following a “recipe” – the learners simply perform a short list of predefined steps without really knowing when or why they would utilize the skill in the real world. Since learners typically split time practicing newly acquired skills with a partner—there is only time to do each lab once and equipment problems are common—each individual rarely gets the opportunity to perform every lab once. In fact, this highly advertised benefit can often prove to be a bit of a disappointment in terms of measurable knowledge acquisition and retention.

Knowledge Transfer and Retention
The intensive format of traditional classroom instruction can be overwhelming to learners. While the accepted norm is to send a learner to a class for four or five straight days of six-to-seven hour “training,” there is little doubt that much of this time cannot be effective. Adult learners need time to assimilate new knowledge in order to maximize their ability to perform in the workplace. Traditional ILT mediums have conditioned us to accept the fact that adults can only retain 30% or so of the material presented to them during a typical presentation. In the
technology training market, “drink from the fire-hose” approaches simply magnify this challenge, leaving the learner with little practical knowledge transfer and thus impact on the business.

Put simply, there should be a better alternative. The traditional brick-and-mortar, face-to-face format presents seemingly insurmountable challenges to those attempting to align training programs with the organizations’ strategic goals. While the advantages of expert-led training make it one of the most desired methods for delivering training, the costs alone place it near the bottom of timely, scalable delivery methods.

The Inevitability of e-Learning's Next Steps

Although ILT is generally considered the most attractive vehicle to transfer knowledge and ensure retention, it is clear there are disadvantages that organizations have learned to work around – costs of down-time, travel expenses and lack of knowledge transfer. Many organizations that view learning as an integral part of staff development have accommodated ILT shortcomings by leveraging self-paced learning—particularly online learning—to replace or enhance more traditional methods of training delivery.

e-Learning Extends Training Budgets

From a purely financial perspective, the advantages of online learning are indisputable. The quantifiable savings associated with lower distribution costs, travel and expenses, and a reduced need for classrooms and equipment, enables a higher degree of scalability. This alone makes online learning a practical training choice for virtually every business and organization. Independent survey results recently released by CompTIA confirm that traditional ILT suffered declining demand from 2003 to 2004. While ILT companies hope for the return of growth and profitability as the overall state of the economy returns, the growth of online learning is expected to accelerate over the next year.

“Blended Learning”—Born of Disenchantment

While online learning programs continue to enable organizations to train more people with less money, there are challenges. Perhaps the biggest challenge to training organizations is the predominant tendency to not effectively align training initiatives with defined business objectives. According to IDC, “Many training efforts are not driven by business strategy. The more training and development processes are aligned with the goals of the enterprise, the less likely they are to have their funding cut when management looks to ‘streamline’ operations. Alignment makes training programs more relevant, which facilitates both communicating potential benefits to learners before they participate and measuring the actual benefits later on.”

-International Data Corporation (IDC)

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Many e-Learning providers have been limited in scalability and flexibility due in part to underlying technology platforms. The lack of native technology also contributes to the difficulty in retrieving timely, accurate data to validate the return on investment. Moreover, the data that is retrieved from these solutions often indicates poor usage rates and even lower learner satisfaction numbers. These issues have forced organizations to become more practical in their approach to online learning by using it to supplement, rather than replace, classroom instruction. It is this approach that led to the rise of the term "blended learning." IDC has defined corporate blended learning programs as "any possible combination of a wide range of learning delivery media (e.g., e-Learning, classrooms, job aids, and labs) designed to solve specific business problems." The demand for these blended programs has increased in this past year, and even stronger growth is expected next year. Essentially, online learning companies coined the phrase when they began to offer value-added services like mentoring and collaboration, include text-based content, ready-reference materials. Traditional ILT providers have since borrowed the term while attempt to integrate self-paced learning into their products admitting that one learning delivery option is not sufficient.

Many organizations have developed their own criteria for blending learning in an attempt to optimize which learning delivery methods to use and when to use them. Since most continue to recognize instructor-led training as the most effective modality for delivering learning, it remains the cornerstone of most blended programs. However, in today’s business economy there’s no denying the bottom-line savings and scalability associated with online training programs. In this fragmented learning industry, the training options are seemingly endless and ill-defined. Is there a formula available for delivering instructor-led training in a scalable, effective way without breaking the budget?

The Learning “Solution of the Future”—Proven Today

The virtual classroom, also known as virtual instructor-led training (vILT) or the distributed classroom, can provide effective on-demand, as well as structured, training content delivery to the extended enterprise. Six years ago, KnowledgeNet, now a part of Thomson NETg, became the first training company in the world to standardize on virtual classroom instruction as the primary deliverable in a blended learning program. KnowledgeNet's flagship offering, LIVE, was designed from inception to bring the benefits of traditional instructor-led training to the desktop. The LIVE product line continues to prove that the synergistic combination
of virtual classroom instruction and flexible technology can deliver a learning experience equivalent, and often times superior to traditional ILT. In the core areas of knowledge transfer and retention, KnowledgeNet’s approach provides significant advantages learners cannot find with any other training products on the market. In many ways, LIVE provides much more than the “blended learning” offered by traditional ILT and most traditional e-Learning providers in the marketplace.

**LIVE Learning Delivers Impact**

Thomson NETg’s commitment to excellence and the primary differentiators to our approach are driven by the core foundations of affordable, effective learning that is offered as a complete integrated learning solution. The objectives of any integration program remain straightforward:

1) To positively impact business objectives with a dependable, targeted learning strategy
2) To effectively transfer to learners the knowledge and skills required to be successful in the areas targeted by learning objectives
3) To cost-effectively scale the learning program while maintaining an optimal learning blend

**Equals LIVE Learning**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advantages of a Traditional Classroom:</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Effective instruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Classroom materials</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Instructor interaction</td>
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<td>• Scheduled</td>
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<td>• Hands-on practice</td>
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**PLUS**

<table>
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<th>Advantages of e-Learning:</th>
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<tr>
<td>• 24 x 7 availability</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Scalable</td>
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<td>• Multiple methods</td>
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Experienced, dedicated instructors  
Expert-led content development  
Instructional Team – Two+ instructors per class  
Engaging, graphical content in an interactive classroom  
Real-world examples and scenario-based instruction  
Flexible class times  
Anywhere, anytime access to:  
• Hands-on labs  
• **EXPERT EXPRESS** – recorded version of the class  
• Prescriptive learning  
• **Learn it Now™** performance support*  
• **Expert mentoring**  
• Certification practice exams  
• Searchable, printable-online student guides  
• ClassNotes and resources  
• Offline content access  

...the learners’ classroom and all other learning resources are easily accessed from a single location – Thomson NETg!
#1: Thomson NETg enables organizations to positively impact business objectives through a proven strategy of enterprise-level technology, content development processes and our approach to world-class, expert-led instruction.

While it is necessary to ensure that your learning program is aligned with business objectives, it is equally critical to implement the program in a timely manner. It is too easy to bog down a learning initiative with extensive technology platform requirements and costly implementations, in addition to the cost of developing and delivering custom learning content.

With a focus on quality in every step of our development and delivery processes, we are able to build a consistent learning experience that delivers results. The acquired KnowledgeNet technology provides Thomson NETg’s natively integrated authoring, which allows the creation and delivery of engaging, multimedia-rich courseware. Additionally, the management tools better enable companies to create multiple-format product deliverables in comparison to other content vendors or in-house development environments.

#2: LIVE leverages world-class, expert-led instruction as its core strategy to effectively transfer knowledge and skills to fulfill learning objectives.

Expert-led Instruction

We believe the key to effectively transferring knowledge is leveraging the knowledge and skills of the experts. The Thomson NETg LIVE training solution is created as a result of a team of expert instructors that rivals any organization in the world. All LIVE instructors are:

- **Experts in their given fields, with years of relevant, real-world experience**
- **Professional, engaging presenters who effectively leverage analogies and real-world scenarios to drive home learning concepts**
- **Certified in the courses they teach as well as more advanced and related technologies.**
- **Subject-matter experts for all LIVE content development efforts**
- **Delivery and development consultants for custom vILT content**

Learning Advocacy

Even though the notion of expert-led is the core of the product development and delivery strategy of Thomson NETg, learners benefit from much more than just capable instruction and subject-matter expertise. Our team-teaching approach in every course allows at least one expert to fill the role of “facilitator” or “student advocate” in their
interactions with learners. Throughout the experience, the team proactively integrates Q&A, interacts with learners, collects and distributes feedback into the course, provides guidance, directs learners to available resources (self-paced content, labs, exam prep, etc.), and explains how they can be best leveraged.

**Optimal Knowledge Retention**

Another element that makes the Thomson NETg’s virtual classroom offering a more effective way to teach is the way the classes are scheduled. Training is structured to maximize knowledge transfer and retention rates for adults. Class sessions are shorter, more to the point, and spread-out over time to provide the learner with time to digest and practice new skills. Activities are applied to real-world scenarios with which learners can identify in their day-to-day workplace, giving relevance to the topics and motivation to the learners.

**Engaging content**

One of the most noticeable differentiators is our world-class LIVE instruction. Possibly the best way for students to acquire and retain new knowledge so they can apply it later is through active participation and visualization. Activities that are rich in multimedia content accelerate this process. Our talented development teams work closely with our instructors-SMEs to deliver engaging, interactive supporting content unlike anything seen in training. Difficult concepts typically explained in self-paced courses with bulleted slides and clip-art are story boarded and brought to life as fully animated, interactive learning concepts, or “visual learning sentences.” This approach enables learners to better visualize complex topics, and more importantly, better retain each piece of new knowledge. Over the years, we have mastered this development process to bring the best possible experience to adult learners.

The Thomson NETg team of expert instructors is the underpinning of every mode of learning in the LIVE offering, from providing subject-matter expertise during development and professional classroom presentation, to the delivery of mentoring, class notes, study guides, and the content behind Learn It Now™—LIVE’s on-demand performance support tool.
#3: Proven reliable learning technology platform enables optimal blending and scalability while remaining cost-effective.

The ability to deliver training in a cost effective and timely manner is completely technology-dependent and is the key to scalable learning. IDC noted in a recent report that elements of learning infrastructure such as learning management systems, web-conferencing software, and self-paced content development tools are significant enablers of successful blended learning programs. Organizations putting training and development resources in place to support their strategic business initiatives should choose a learning partner that can support all aspects of their training needs. From its inception, Thomson NETg’s robust learning technology platform has seamlessly integrated multiple form factors to deliver a truly blended learning experience that is scalable to an enterprise-wide audience.

Thomson NETg remains the undisputed leader in delivering effective, distributed classroom training. However, because we know that custom-built training programs can have a more significant impact on the organization than off-the-shelf content, we created the ability to share our expertise as well as our technology. Our open, standards-based learning platform delivers a fully integrated suite of content authoring, virtual classroom, and learning management tools – the very same tools we use to develop and deliver our own expert-led training content. By leveraging our virtual classroom expertise and innovative technologies as a learning service, organizations can drive strategic initiatives with the broadest, most effective blend of learning modalities available.

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Conclusion and Recommendations

To develop an optimally blended training program that truly maximizes knowledge transfer and scalability, organizations should leverage the benefits of the virtual classroom in an environment that integrates it with other learning enhancements via native technology.

The effectiveness of expert-led development, instruction, and delivery should not be underestimated. Choose learning methods that can effectively guide learners through the stages of comprehension via appropriate levels of motivation, interaction, relevance, and practice.

The technology enabling this optimal blend should be well established and should be capable of growing with the organization’s training and development requirements.

Open, standards-based technology is infinitely more flexible than pieced-together solutions. Consider the learning partner’s ability to develop or add new technologies as they are discovered or established.

The learning partner that is chosen is ultimately a business partner and should support the overall needs of an organization’s training efforts, including custom content development and vILT delivery.
References:


