



Learning &
Performance Institute

Introducing the live online classroom

Part 2



Introducing the Live Online Classroom (Part 2)

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June 2011

Published by

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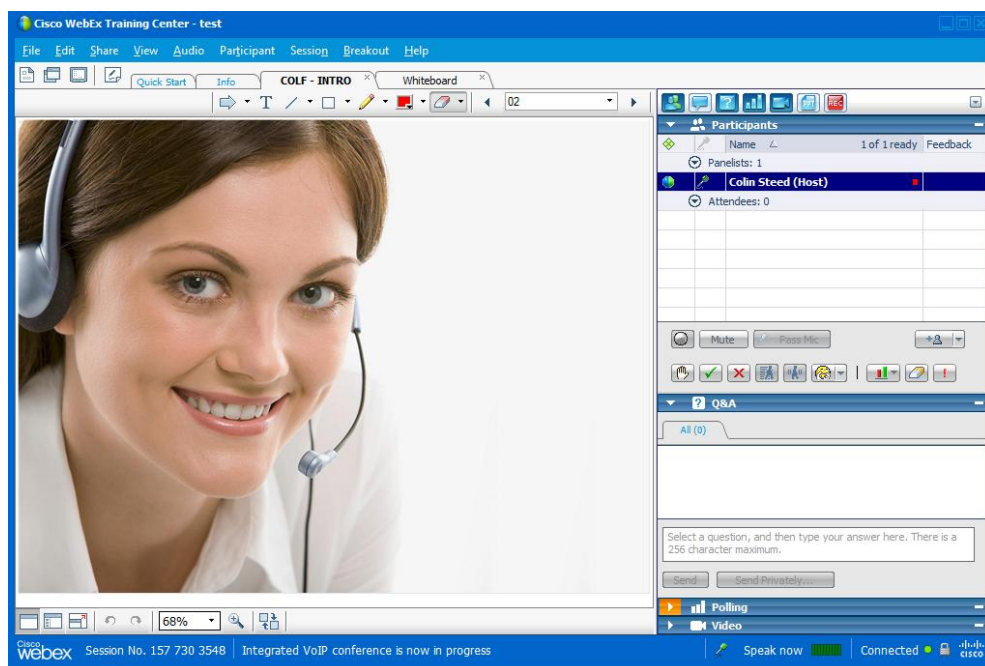
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Introducing the Live Online Classroom

PART TWO

Web Conferencing Systems

Let's now turn our attention to the software systems that provide the facilities for us to conduct live online learning events—we will refer to these as Web Conferencing Systems.



Many vendors now offer first-class products and services to enable us to run live online sessions. According to the e-Learning Guild Report 'Getting Started with Synchronous e-Learning' (2010), the top six web conferencing systems in use are:

- WebEx Training Centre (34.5%)
- Adobe Connect (27.6%)
- Microsoft Live Meeting (22.0%)
- Citrix GoToMeeting (13.8%)

- Elluminate Live! (8.5%)
- Saba Centra (6.2%)

Selecting a web conferencing system is something that you should not go into lightly as there are various elements you will need to consider. Besides deciding whether to host the system or have it hosted by the vendor, you will need to decide what tools and facilities you will need. Although most include the basic facilities, certain systems do not have breakout rooms or whiteboards which, in my opinion, are vital for learning events.

Additionally, it is crucial that you get your IT department on your side, as they will be an important player in determining the success of your live online events. So if you are intending to select a system, make sure that you establish a good relationship with the IT department early and involve them in discussing the requirements for your events.

Assuming that you have a web conferencing system in place, let's look at the types of events you can run on it. There are three main types of events that web conferencing systems can deliver:

- Web Meetings
- Webinars
- Learning Events

Let's take a look at each one to see what they are best used for and what their main differences are.

Web meetings

Web meetings are the online version of the much-maligned, but frequently attended, face-to-face meeting. In web meetings, the software is used for small groups to meet online to collaborate, share documents and make decisions, irrespective of the participants' locations. Common uses for web meetings include trainer meetings, sales meetings, management meetings and so on, but the software has uses elsewhere; notably for system/software support, coaching, and mentoring.

I am always surprised at the many organizations who have a web conferencing system licence for learning events do not use it throughout the company for live meetings. At the LPI, almost all of our meetings are held online—either through web conferencing systems or through Skype.

With many of our staff and associates spread around the world, having live online meetings means we can hold more collaborative meetings, more often, and at little

to no cost. Those members who are 'carbon footprint conscious' will be delighted with this!..

Webinars

Webinars are events where you want to distribute information or raise awareness to a large audience. A webinar is an online seminar, delivered by a presenter to an audience which may consist of many hundreds of people. At webinars, the presenter conducts a presentation and invites questions from the audience. These events are primarily presenter-focused, inasmuch as the presenter is the main focus for the event, as opposed to an online classroom event which is learner-centred.

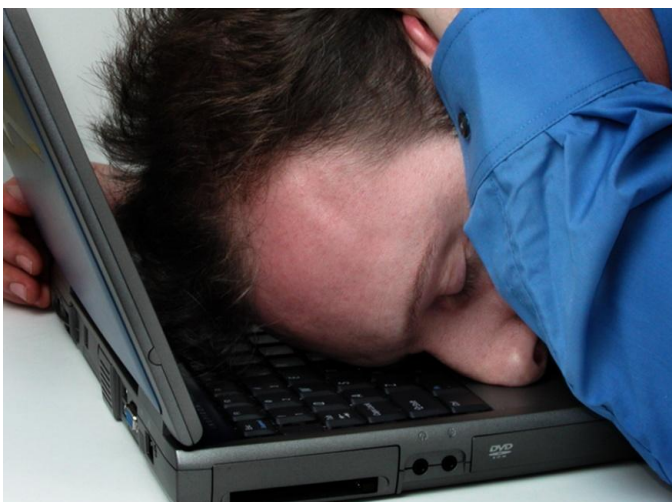
Webinars are very popular with organisations, allowing them to disseminate information to many employees at once. They are, however, quite passive for the learner, unless of course the presenter has the necessary skills to engage learners through frequent interaction.

Learning events

Learning events are sessions with a small audience for providing performance-based outcomes. They are live facilitator-led events which use the web conferencing system to provide the facilities for live online learning sessions. This type of event is explicitly learner-centred as opposed to the 'broadcast' approach of webinars.

The skills and techniques required to run an effective learning event are the primary focus of this white paper, but many of these skills are also applicable for running meetings and webinars.

And now a plea from me - please do not refer to your live online learning events as



'webinars'. These two applications of web conferencing systems are completely different, as we discussed above.

Live online learning gets tarnished with the 'boring' tag because people have been on a non-interactive webinar and assume all online events are run in the same way.

Web conferencing: features and facilities

We have looked at the types of event that web conferencing systems can be used for. Let's now have a brief look at the main features and facilities provided by typical web conferencing systems to enable you to deliver your online events. Note that I will just provide an overview here as we'll be looking in detail in later chapters at how to use them to best effect.

Audio

The audio facility enables the facilitator's voice to be heard and enables the facilitator and learners to talk to one another. One- or two-way audio is available in most web conferencing software. Audio is delivered either via the Internet—Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP)—or by using a telephone connection. For an event to be successful, the quality of your audio signal is vital, so pay careful attention to getting the quality right. This means acquiring a fast reliable Internet connection and using a quality headset or microphone.

Chat

Text-based chat allows the learners and facilitator to communicate with one another through text messaging. Private messaging between learner and presenter enables learners to signal difficulties to the facilitator without disrupting the session.

Often the facilitator will use Chat to ask learners to respond to questions. At first, learners are more likely to interact with text chat than by using a microphone, especially those who are shy. As a facilitator, you should constantly monitor the text chat panel for any learner questions, as this will provide you with valuable feedback.

Provided the facilitator gives permission, learners may also chat with other learners, either all at once or directly with another learner, as well as directly with the facilitator.

Emoticons/response icons

A useful way of obtaining feedback from your learners is to get them to use emoticons and response icons. These emoticons (for WebEx) are Agree, Disagree, Raise Hand, Step-Away/Step-In, Speak Louder/Softer, Speed Up/Slow Down, Laughter and Applause. Other web conferencing systems may use other emoticons, but the principle remains the same. Encouraging your learners to use this form of feedback helps to make up for that 'loss of eye contact', so set an example by using them yourself on a frequent basis.

Polling

Another useful way of obtaining feedback is through the use of the polling feature (an online survey). One of the benefits of using the polling facility is that it allows for all learners to be active at the same time and provides real-time collated feedback from a large group of people. Polls are generally very easy to set up and they can help you get a quick check on the pulse of the class. For example, you could use a poll to get feedback on, say, the experience levels of your learners. Remember to share the results with the class to foster a sense of community.

Whiteboard

The whiteboard facility is the online equivalent of a classroom whiteboard. The whiteboard has annotation (mark-up) tools which allow learners to add text, draw pictures and highlight items using the marker pen tool. Whiteboards allow trainers and learners to post ideas, either by entering text or drawing, and it is a good way of getting learners working at the same time and engaged with the lesson. One good use of the whiteboard is to ask learners at the start of the lesson to paste their expectations for the session and revisit them at the end. Try to promote discussions by asking learners to elaborate on their whiteboard input—your questioning skills need to come into play here.

Document share

Sharing documents is the most used facility in the online classroom. You display your slides by sharing your slide deck in the main viewer window to enable everyone to follow your presentation. You simply upload your slides and then click through as you would in the classroom by using your mouse, space bar or pointer. You can share other documents too: most systems can handle Microsoft Office documents, PDFs and various media files. You obviously need to check what types of files the system you are looking at selecting can handle. Some systems will also allow you to enable your learners to download documents that you have uploaded. This is a really useful facility for, say, course materials you want to hand out, as well as the session slides—although if you follow my advice on slide design, they won't be of much use!

Live video

Webcams using one- or two-way video streaming are provided by nearly all the main web conferencing systems. Being able to see the facilitator live (as well as the other learners) is a real bonus as it aids engagement and allows the facilitator to see the learner's body language in real time. It does, however, have some drawbacks to consider. Live video is a very bandwidth-intensive feature which often limits its use to learners with very fast broadband connections but, even then, it can slow the system down. Video is excellent for your session opening, and perhaps for

the Q&A sessions, but my advice is not to use live video throughout the session, as it can be very distracting for the learners—you want them to be concentrating on your slides and not you—and it can create bandwidth issues.

Application sharing

This feature allows you to share software applications running on your computer with the learners. There are many variations of this feature, ranging from 'view only' on the learners' side to allowing learners to actually interact with and use the application. This feature is particularly advantageous when demonstrating software on a one-to-one basis – so it is very popular with IT support/help centres, as well as for use during lessons when you need to demonstrate software applications.

Web browsing

This feature allows the facilitator and/or learners to bring to the class an Internet site or corporate intranet for everyone to view. The facilitator is able to demonstrate websites, but note that learners are just viewing the website that the facilitator has on their screen. A variation of this feature gives control of the web browser facility to each learner allowing them to explore different websites on their own. This valuable resource enables learners to take control of their own learning.

Breakout rooms

This feature allows the facilitator to create separate breakout rooms for group exercises, in much the same way that you would use syndicate rooms in your classroom sessions. In breakout rooms, learners have access to all of the major facilities of the main room, such as chat, audio, whiteboards and document share (show your presentation slides or share a document). Breakout rooms are ideal for training sessions in which groups can collaborate on specific content in their own rooms. The facilitator can visit each room to provide help and advice—or just listen—and then bring the groups back into the main room.

Managing breakout rooms can be a bit tricky at first, but after some practice you will be able to manage them effectively. This feature is a great way to achieve group collaboration amongst your learners and you'll find that you will probably use them much more frequently than you would in a classroom environment, with the added bonus that no-one has to walk down the corridor to the rooms—they can be set up almost instantaneously.

Recordings

Most web conferencing software provides the ability to record the session—either to the hosted server or, in some cases, your own computer. Provided the facilitator has recorded the session, this feature allows learners to play back a recording of the session for reflection or further study. This facility also enables learners, who perhaps have missed a session, to play it back at a later date. Another valuable use of the recordings is the ability for the facilitator to assess how the session went and what could have been improved. Some web conferencing systems allow the facilitator to edit the recording to eliminate parts that are not required.

That was a brief walk-through of the main features you can find on web conferencing systems. Gaining mastery of these features is really important for the new online facilitator but takes practice. We shall be exploring and using these features in more depth in later chapters.

How could your organisation use web conferencing systems?

Let's now think about how your organisation could use a web conferencing system to provide learning events for employees. Take a minute to jot down ways in which your organisation could make use of it for meetings, webinars and online classroom events.

Here are a few examples, but note these are just some of the available options.

- **Where face-to-face interaction is not critical.** For some training programmes it is vital that the trainer is in the same room as the learners in order for the programme to be successful. Lab courses for hardware specialists, where learners physically build computer systems; training in self defence; and wine tasting for beginners, are some typical examples of where web conferencing would not be a good choice. However, in each of these scenarios, some elements of the training would be possible online; so always keep your mind open to reaping the rewards of online learning by combining it with other delivery methods.
- **Where your audience is dispersed throughout a geographic area.** Where learners are not all located in the same place, the online classroom will minimise travel time and save on expenses for travel and accommodation. Therefore, any organisation with locations throughout the country—indeed throughout the world—would achieve some excellent cost savings using web conferencing systems.

- **Where the topic is sufficiently critical that all employees must complete the training.** Although self-study instruction may be appropriate for teaching the content of, say, Compliance Training, the learners may not be motivated to complete the work. Where a topic is mandatory, using an online event as a follow-up to self-study will provide the impetus for learners to complete the requirements.
- **Where you have a new product or service and you need to update your entire workforce.** Here is a great example of how using the online environment would be invaluable in getting product/service information out to your workforce more quickly and providing some cost savings.
- **Where your work group needs to collaborate.** If you have a geographically dispersed work group that needs to come to a consensus, say to agree the sign-off for a new product, or agree sales targets, you can utilise web conferencing to allow the group to collaborate and share ideas and documents.
- **Where a company official or content expert is available for a specific time.** Let's say that your managing director needs to address all staff on the company's results. By using web conferencing, all staff can see and 'attend' the presentation. This is also true for when, say, a leading expert in your field is available for a particular time on a specific day.

A typical response from some trainers when discussing live online training is that their content is not suitable for teaching in the online environment. With experience you will find that you can design a wide range of effective and interactive online events that you may have previously thought not possible.

We must, however, accept that not every topic for every course is best suited to online instruction. It is important to realise that you should not convert every available course to the online environment just because you can. That said, there are very few courses that could not be adapted in some way for the online environment.

In summary

We saw earlier that organisations throughout the US and Europe are now delivering learning events using the live online classroom environment. Clearly, those organisations are now incorporating it into their learning strategy.

Of those organisations who responded to the e-Learning Guild Survey (2010), 85% strongly agreed/agreed that “management believes that these approaches are essential to their organisation”. Notably, almost 90% stated that they “believed that their live online learning can be as effective as their face to face classroom sessions”.

However, there were a couple of significant findings that must be addressed:

- 90.3% strongly agreed/agreed that their online learning tools are not being used to their full potential, and
- 67.9% strongly agreed/agreed that many people in their organisation do not understand the role and benefits of live online learning tools.

We still have a long way to go before we can say that we are really reaping the rewards and opportunities that well-facilitated live online learning can bring to our organisations.

Further development



Get certified to facilitate live online learning events

**Certified
Online
Learning
Facilitator**

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Further information

Certified Online Learning Facilitator: www.learningandperformanceinstitute.com/colf

Colin Steed's Blog: www.virtualclassroomtrainer.com

Facilitating Live Online Learning by Colin Steed.

Published September 2011

