



# A crash course in creating your most engaging virtual classroom

- Jo Cook, *Lightbulb Moment*

Live online learning, virtual classrooms, webinars... they have been around for a long time and gained importance over the last decade. 2020 has been a seismic year in many spaces, including the virtual classroom, where learning at the same time as other people whilst being remote is now normalized. The next step is to go from merely delivering an adequate experience to ensuring that not only do learners have the best outcome, but so do the facilitators.

## The Human Connection is of Paramount Importance

I define the virtual classroom as a learning session with up to 10 attendees, or up to 30 for a large virtual classroom. It's not good enough to just be presenting or lecturing information at hundreds of delegates – that's called a webinar, and maybe a poor one at that.

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What we are seeking now is the charm of being face-to-face with our facilitator and other attendees, with the safety, convenience and cost-savings of live online learning. This charm comes from the facilitator and designer of the session or course, as well as the organizational approach, and the people participating. The organization, in the first instance, needs to have senior stakeholders doing their part to ensure that the virtual classroom approach is the right one. I'm a huge advocate of live online-learning, but only when it's the right solution for the problem. It could be that face-to-face training, e-learning, coaching, or no learning at all (Yes, really!) is the right way forward. Assuming that due diligence has been done and virtual classrooms are the tool of choice, the organization needs to ensure that everyone has the right skills in place.

First and foremost, people need to understand the technology platform they are using. This needs to go beyond the basics of sharing their slides and knowing where the chat window is. Designers need to know how to create an activity specific to a platform. In Webex you can't play a media file and use a whiteboard, but in Adobe Connect you can, changing the nature of the interaction. Adobe Connect's chat window has text that can change size and color. That's good for accessibility, but how can that color choice be used in an activity? One of my favourite face-to-face activities is sharing ideas on post-it notes that everyone then sorts into categories. Most virtual-classroom platforms allow you to put ideas on the whiteboard, but outside of Adobe's offering, I have to use external applications like Jamboard or Padlet to emulate a familiar classroom environment.

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The facilitator's understanding of the technology also greatly impacts the quality of the virtual classroom session that they deliver. There's a confidence issue but also one of mindset. Many facilitators at the beginning of my courses don't believe how engaging a virtual classroom can be, how much connection they can have with other attendees, how positive the learning experience can be and just how much you can pick up on the energy from their attendees.

## Reading the Room

It is a subtle yet important skill-set we develop over the years. Knowing when a group is with us or needs more explanation, spotting someone struggling, and so on are keys to being a great teacher, trainer, or facilitator. Once they realize how easy the digital platforms are to use, the biggest challenge that people have with live online-learning is being unable to see the people they are training. **Digital Body Language** answers that, by helping people understand the depth of their observation skills and learn how to translate those into designing and delivering in the virtual classroom.

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The designer and facilitator of a session may be the same or different people. Either way, live online-learning design and platform technical knowledge are the foundations of a good virtual classroom. It's the facilitator that then breathes magic into the live event. Not being able to see your attendees on a webcam can feel disarming, and even if you can see them, it's still very different from in-person delivery. However, there's enough technology available to overcome that, and creativity from our learning and development experience to wield it really well.

Ensuring that there's engagement and interaction is key to both the quality of the learning experience and to unlocking the feedback loop needed to read the people you are with. Welcoming people audibly and with the chat window as they log in is a human connection. Unmuting your virtual classroom attendees and speaking to them inherently checks whether the technology is working, builds rapport and sends a clear signal that this is the norm for the session. The 5-15 minutes before your class even begins could be the most important you plan and put effort into.

Once you begin the session you need to ensure people are involved within a few minutes. The introductions I plan for myself, my company and my producer takes a minute, as I've got far more important things to get to. I then explain the emoticons and chat window, getting people clicking to show that they know how to use it. Then the agenda or learning outcomes, with an immediate "green tick/check mark if you are happy or type in chat if you have something specific you would like to learn" gets people using those tools immediately.

My sessions always then have a question where I ask people to type their answer in chat and that follows up with a question where people are invited to unmute and answer. This is a really important pattern to ensure that people have used the most common interaction methods early on, that they have learned them and I've normalized it. Through the format of my session I'm highlighting that this is the way we are going to work together.

By this time, I've already got a bit of an idea who the jokey or chatty person is, perhaps even the tentative person, or someone who is a bit more technical in the way that they answer questions and so on. All this helps me with the tone of my delivery, with the wording of my questions, with whom I call upon to answer and so on. Every single interaction is an opportunity for people to be involved with the learning point and for me to be involved with them.

Without this feedback, without answers in chat, or using stamp tools on a whiteboard, or asking poll questions and for people to unmute to explain more... how can I tailor my delivery to them? How can I get to know the 8 or 10 people I'm spending a few hours with? How can I know that they have taken anything in? These techniques help me feel the energy of the group and the individuals within it. There is usually someone who puts their agreed emoticon last, perhaps one person who writes three sentences instead of one, a couple of people that like to come on audio rather than type. None of this is right or wrong, it's just about the individuals and getting to know them, just like we are all so used to doing in-person.

Through these planned interactions that have been designed, and knowing the platform I'm working with, I can breathe life into the session. I can flex my facilitator guide, for it is just a guide, to take account of the needs of people. If I realise things have been a little quiet in the chat window, or a lack of hands-up to make a comment, I can ask a closed question using the feedback icons. I see some agree and disagree icons showing, then a few with nothing. This is Digital Body Language. I can choose to interpret this as people not paying attention, or that they are considering and don't know the answer, or that my question wasn't very good and they wish they had a maybe icon! It's then that I can ask people to add more and follow up in the chat window, or unmute to explain or ask. This is how I get to understand my group and the individuals within it.

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## What are Your Next Steps?

Consider if you are going to explore learning from podcasts, webinars, books, or training courses. What platform are you going to select for your organization? Can you spend a few hours a week developing the design of your session, or practicing new techniques with a colleague? What will you commit to so that everyone succeeds in the virtual classroom?

### About the Author



*Jo Cook is a speaker, instructional designer, and classroom facilitator who specializes in virtual classrooms, webinars, and live online learning technology. Jo's passion is in helping and supporting teams, professionals, and organizations embrace the benefits of the virtual classroom. Jo's background includes: further and higher education; the charity sector, small and large organizations, including CNN News, and Bupa International.*

*Through her company Lightbulb Moment, Jo has specialized in training learning professionals about virtual-classroom design and delivery since 2013 and has spoken on various topics at conferences such as Learning Technologies, Online Educa Berlin, and keynoted for Colleges Wales and E-learning Fusion.*