



THE ART OF READING A VIRTUAL ROOM

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The best virtual presenters connect authentically with their remote audiences. They create an online atmosphere of trust by inviting attendees to participate in the online experience. They encourage robust dialogue, give and receive feedback, and communicate using the platform tools.

But exactly how do these virtual presenters connect with dispersed audiences? The seemingly obvious answer is via video. Using webcams in a virtual class can create a feeling of being together due to eye contact and visual communication. The use of video has skyrocketed in recent months, and is now commonplace in many virtual classes and online events.

However, for a variety of reasons, video may not be possible. One attendee may struggle with bandwidth, another might not have a webcam-enabled device, and yet another might not be allowed to show video due to office security concerns. Or, the audience size may simply be too large for the trainer to meaningfully connect with each attendee in an eye-to-eye encounter.

Despite these concerns, and whether or not video is used, the best virtual presenters can still read a virtual room. They simply use other techniques besides sight to communicate and collaborate. They seek and scan the room, reading everyone's digital body language. When attendees actively contribute to the conversation, virtual trainers pay attention to the cues and respond accordingly.

Here are three techniques to read a virtual room:

EXPECT PARTICIPATION FROM THE START

Experienced virtual trainers recognize the importance of capturing attention from the start of a session. The best openings set the stage for participation and engagement. This means from the moment someone logs in, an attendee will be drawn into the virtual event. In other words, the expectation of engagement is set from the beginning, which creates the environment for a virtual trainer to read the room.

To do this, have something on screen for attendees to do the moment they log in. Use a “lobby” for early arrivals. Have attendees respond to poll questions or type introductions in chat. Greet people by name, and if the group is small enough, have them verbally say hello in response. Ask them to turn on their webcams (if available). Establish a set of ground rules or guidelines for participation.

By setting the stage for interaction, attendees are primed to get involved and contribute.

INVITE DIALOGUE BETWEEN ATTENDEES

Experienced virtual trainers not only invite dialogue between attendees, they actively encourage it. The more attendees communicate with each other, the easier it is for the trainer to read the room.

For example, attendees who have friendly banter with each other in chat give clues to their current mood. And attendees who respond to posted questions either with a “me, too” or “I can help you with that” help the trainer know how everyone is doing. When attendees get to join breakout rooms for deeper discussion, dialogue and practice of the event topic, they actively contribute to the conversation.

By creating a shared social experience in the virtual classroom, virtual trainers can pick up on the “mood” of the room and react accordingly. For example, if the trainer senses confusion, they can spend more time explaining a point. Or if the trainer realizes attendee energy levels have dropped, they can take a short stretch break to re-energize the room.

ENCOURAGE FREQUENT FEEDBACK USING TOOLS

Experienced virtual trainers make frequent use of the platform tools to gather feedback from attendees. Tools, such as chat, polling, whiteboards, and breakouts, allow for attendee input and serve as a launching point for deeper discussions.

For example, a trainer might ask attendees to “agree” or “disagree” with a statement using the Status Indicators. From there, attendees can share reasons for their choice. Or a trainer might use a short-answer poll question to look for common themes on a certain topic. Or a trainer could set up a whiteboard brainstorming activity (either in breakouts or the large group). There are so many creative ways to use the platform tools for attendee engagement for audiences of all sizes.

When used frequently for input and interaction, the tools enable trainers to assess the virtual room. As attendees contribute their thoughts, their digital body language is heard.

