



Making the Most of Virtual Classrooms and Self-Paced
Presentations—Guidelines for Rapid E-Learning

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Making the most of virtual classrooms and self-paced presentations: Guidelines for Rapid eLearning

A strange new world

As a classroom instructor, you are an experienced and savvy classroom learner. You've participated in many classroom environments and explicitly understand unwritten classroom rules:

- The presentation is the primary experience and should receive full attention.
- Learners should arrive on time and stay for the whole session.
- Side conversations and disruptions are not permitted.
- Learners may raise their hand to ask a question.
- Instructors will monitor learner expressions and body language to assess comprehension.
- Learners as a group, or individually, will answer questions when asked.
- Learners are responsible for taking notes on important material.

This knowledge of expected learner behavior translates into empathy and understanding of the skills required for you to deliver a dynamic classroom training message. Effective classroom instructors understand the dynamics, protocols, and delivery of face-to-face instruction.

When you are confronted with web-driven instruction, you may not have the experience of attending web seminars (webinars) or webcasts. You may lack the experience needed to empathize with online learners and to create an effective online learning experience for learners.

Fortunately, when you understand the dynamics of the web delivery environment, you can create and execute engaging, exciting web lessons. Applying basic techniques and protocols transforms novice web instructors into dynamic deliverers of web instruction.

This article describes how you can become a successful web instructor exploiting the similarities between classroom delivery and online instruction while maximizing the technology. This document explains what you can do before, during, and after your presentation to make it more effective.

Advanced planning

Effective instructors, web or otherwise, carefully plan their lessons. The following list provides some areas in which pre-work pays off for the instructor.

One important but often overlooked aspect of delivering an online learning message is that you should plan the delivery ahead of time. When you deliver a message online, a little practice goes a long way. If you are comfortable and prepared, your message will be more effective.

Create a plan for your lesson. Think ahead and ask some basic questions:

- What am I going to teach?
- In what order will I teach these topics?
- What type of examples am I going to use?
- Where should I insert visuals?
- What types of visuals should I use?
- What word on this screen are you going to highlight?
- How long am I going to pause on this screen?

Plan your lesson step by step so that it makes sense to the learner and conveys all the necessary information. The planning process will make the lesson more effective, dynamic and engaging. In a classroom, you can react to learner questions or adapt the content based on feedback from the learners. For online learning you will need to anticipate rather than adapt; this requires a keen understanding of your audience and content.

You need to decide when to have interactions and how many to have for each section. Decide when to summarize key points and when to present new content. Determine what types of interaction will give you the feedback you need, and help reinforce learner understanding. The planning process involves many different facets of the lesson from delivery to proper design of the instruction.

When conducting a webinar, you should estimate learner reaction, confusion, and misunderstandings. You can use this knowledge to insert strategic explanations, clarifications, and activities into the lesson. The first step is to plan the content you are going to present and how you are going to present it.

Orient your learner to your lesson

Since online learners might be multitasking (eating lunch, checking e-mail) while logged onto your session, you need to continually orient your learner to the lesson in the following ways:

Provide the learner with an overview of a lesson Online learners might need only a portion of the instruction you created. Provide them with an overview of the topics covered in the lesson and the order in which they will be presented. Doing this allows learners to choose applicable instruction for the topics they want to learn.

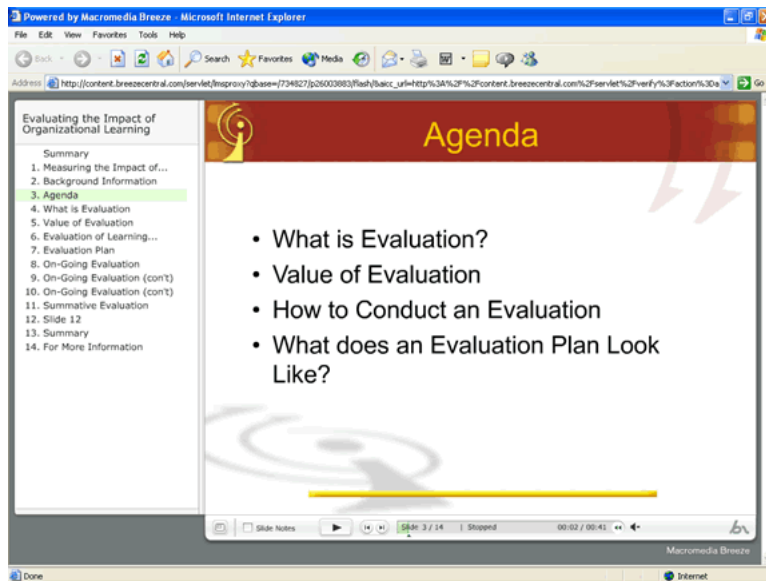
Provide an advance organizer An advanced organizer is a cognitive learning technique that helps learners orient to a lesson. It encourages the learner to think about the content prior to its presentation and provides a context for the instruction.

Plan interactions with the learners Interactions don't just happen online; they need to be planned in advance. Decide when you are going to ask questions, when you are going to have the learners break into virtual groups to complete an assignment, and when they are going to answer surveys or take a quiz. Plan to keep the learner engaged and active.

Provide a summary After you have presented all the information contained within your overview, and provided dynamic visuals and interactive material, provide a summary of the key points before ending the lesson. Summaries reinforce information and aid with learner retention. A summary also provides closure to the online session so that learners are comfortable that the session is over.

Provide resources and additional information As part of your summary, don't forget to tell the learners how to access additional information on the topic if they are interested. Provide a Resources or Links page so the learner can gain more information if desired. If appropriate, provide your e-mail and other contact information.

Remind them that the session is available for review One terrific advantage of a web lesson over a traditional classroom session is that web lessons can be recorded or replayed. Let learners know the session will be recorded and explain to them how they can access the recorded session for later viewing.



Adding an agenda to your presentation helps to focus your learners on the topics to be covered.

One picture is worth a thousand words

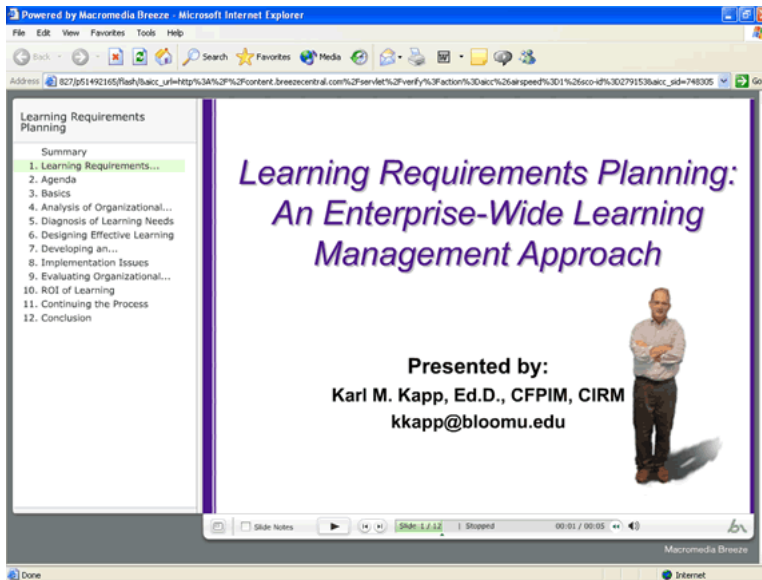
Online learners do not want to look at screen after screen of text. If that happens they will soon be checking voice mail and tuning out your lesson. Lots of text is physically tiring on the learner's eyes even with an accompanying audio track. Remember to include visuals in your lesson. They provide a place for the learner's eyes to rest and relax.

Visuals also have an added cognitive benefit; they explain difficult ideas and illustrate relationships between concepts. Visuals arrange information in the appropriate order and increase the chance of learners retaining and comprehending what is being taught.

You should apply the following tips for online visuals:

- Include a picture of yourself on first slide. Learners want to know who is speaking.
- Keep the visuals relevant to the topic.
- Diagrams and flowcharts are great for explaining complicated material.
- You can use actual pictures or line drawings to emphasize a point.
- Keep diversity in mind when you use images of people.

- If you have a lot of information, consider placing it in a table.
- Use magazines and advertising to pick up visual design tips.



Include a picture of yourself to help learners identify with you as an instructor.

Find a buddy

One effective technique that pays off handsomely is finding a technical assistant or co-presenter to help with the delivery of the lesson. An online instructor has myriad elements to consider when delivering an online lesson. In addition to all the instructional issues, the instructor may need to address technical problems. Perhaps a learner can't log in, didn't receive the registration e-mail, or can't hear the audio. It is difficult to conduct an online class while troubleshooting learners' technology problems.

Enter the technical assistant. The assistant can field the technical calls, answer login questions, and generally shield the instructor from having to troubleshoot and instruct at the same time. This type of arrangement benefits the learners because the ones without problems proceed with the lesson, and the learners with problems get them resolved quickly. The instructor benefits by being able to concentrate solely on the information at hand.

Even if all the learners are technically savvy, you may still want an assistant. Regardless of their technical sophistication, a large audience can easily overwhelm an instructor with a deluge of e-mails or chat messages. Difficulties arise when you need to juggle too many competing tasks. The assistant can initially field questions and send them to the instructor, who can then address the problems. The following tips might help when working with a co-presenter or assistant.

- Provide a "side-channel" of communication so that you and your co-presenter or assistant can share information just between the two of you. Consider both a second phone line (such as a cell phone) and some type of messaging system to talk in real time with your assistant (options include Breeze chat, Breeze Preparing Presenter mode, or instant messaging).

- Distribute the e-mail address and phone number of the technical assistant to learners so they know who to contact, and make it available during the entire presentation in case of telecommunication or networking failures.
- Consider having the assistant responsible for Chat pod while the presenter speaks.
- If you have a co-presenter, take turns to vary the delivery, or have the co-presenter summarize chat questions so that the presenter can address them.
- Determine in advance who is covering each section of the material.
- Consider having a colleague in the audience. The colleague can log in remotely as a student and monitor the student experience, while channeling any concerns or considerations to a technical assistant or co-presenter.

Check, one, two ... check

Technology is not equal among learners. Some learners browse with Microsoft Internet Explorer, others with Netscape Navigator. Some have Macintosh computers, some have PCs. Some have high-resolution monitors and others have low resolution. Some learners have high-speed Internet access; others are working on modems with low-bandwidth capabilities.

Determine the average learner workstation and design your session to that machine and connection type. If you don't design to the appropriate machine and connection type, your high-speed, high-resolution presentation will appear slow on the learners' machines. It might be so slow that they would rather watch grass grow.

When considering workstation configurations, remember that different monitors display the same colors differently, so you shouldn't rely on subtle color differences to make a point or highlight information. If you use colors as an educational tool, make them bold and dramatically different from one another. If learners have slow connections, keep graphic sizes to a minimum and use a white background for your slides. Many graphics tools provide a standard web-safe color palette and reference palettes of accessible color combinations that improve visual contrast and readability. These palettes help assure a consistent presentation across platforms and improve the accessibility of content for viewers with minor visual impairments. As an additional improvement to accessibility, you should tag your graphics with alternate descriptions called *Alt text* or web text. Microsoft PowerPoint provides this capability in the *image properties* for graphics objects.

Application sharing can pose unique problems if you don't pretest the application to be shared. Sharing large applications can be laborious if the learners have slow connections. You may need to talk more while the screens load to allow the learners' systems time to catch up. For applications that frequently do full-screen updates or have slow connections, using a sequence of screen captures or animations instead of the actual application might be best.

As an online instructor, you need to be aware of these issues and take some proactive steps:

- View the material as a pretest in different browsers. Verify the legibility of text, and the clarity of graphics and images.
- Test application sharing for readability of application text and responsiveness across a typical learner connection. You may wait a second or two between application actions to accommodate transmission delays.
- Ask some learners or your colleague to log in a couple of days early for a pre-class technology check. Then have someone stand by to assist with any problems. If your technology provider has any tools to test connection prior to the event, take advantage of those.

- Check with your network or IT team. Don't plan a session during a major system backup or during peak network usage; the performance of your session will suffer.
- Determine the average machine and connection speed of your learners and design the lesson to those specifications.
- Check to see if your delivery software allows you to choose the connection speed for optimization of the delivery of content. This feature helps you choose the correct delivery speed for your audience's technical capabilities.

Web instruction rules of order

Early in your presentation you should establish rules of behavior for your online session and provide a learner orientation. One of the first elements of your presentation should be a quick lesson on how to interact with the web software. Learners unfamiliar with the interface will not use all its features. Take a minute to familiarize learners with the features. Many systems have features for “raising your hand” and for telling the instructor to speed up or slow down as well as online notes features for sending messages.

Once the learners know about all these features, explain the proper online etiquette for the class. This should be done before the session is under way and included in any information you send to the learners prior to the session. Consider using some of the following rules of presentation etiquette:

- Ask learners not speak or type unless given permission. Use a question mark symbol (?) to request permission to participate in a chat.
- Use Breeze features, such as the Participant List pod, to indicate if the pace is appropriate and to request permission to speak.
- Establish how and when learners should participate.
- Request that there be no web surfing during the session.
- Ask learners to turn off “hold music” if the session includes a conference call.
- Tell learners that if they can't be heard when speaking, their phone might be muted. Have your learners check the Mute button at the beginning of the session.
- Request that learners lock their office door or put up a sign saying “Learning in process.” Otherwise all learners will be able to hear background sounds.
- Require participation to keep the session active.
- Establish how you will call on learners to participate.

If you plan on having recurring or frequent virtual classroom sessions, you should consider creating a self-paced presentation that provides these etiquette guidelines, frequently asked questions (FAQs), and support contact information. You may be able to direct learners to this presentation as a prerequisite, or simply play this presentation at the beginning of your individual live web sessions.

You are cordially invited

Creating the invitation is an important element in your planning for a webinar or webcast. A few weeks before the session, you should send out an invitation so learners can plan for the event.

If you are engaged in a weekly or bi-weekly program, send out a schedule so learners can plan for all sessions. Provide a link to any prerequisite materials (such as your online etiquette or FAQs presentation) and contact information for support resources. Then, a day before the session, send a reminder so the learner doesn't forget the online event.

Invitations to webinars and webcasts should contain the following information:

- Name of the event
- Event data and time
- Name of the event facilitator, with contact information such as their phone number and e-mail address
- Expected duration of session
- Session agenda
- Web address and directions for connecting to the sessions
- Directions for learners to pretest their system
- Instructions indicating who to contact with any technical difficulties
- A link to any web page you might have, so learners can get to know you a bit before the online session

Let the presentation begin

Presenting a webinar or webcast takes special consideration of many elements. The following list provides information to consider during the presentation of your web instruction.

Be calm but show enthusiasm

The first rule when presenting online is to relax. If you carefully planned your lesson and have someone to assist with the communication or technical aspects, you can already breathe a sigh of relief. An online presentation is not unlike a classroom presentation, and experience shows that your classroom personality will shine through online. Express enthusiasm in your voice and actions. Don't hesitate to laugh, smile, or gesture even if you are in a room alone.

One of the biggest adjustments moving from classroom to online delivery is the fact that you can't see your learners. This can be disconcerting and a bit of a challenge to overcome. Many instructors get involved with teaching or training in front of an audience because they enjoy the learner feedback. However, there are some techniques that can help you visualize your audience, remain relaxed, and show enthusiasm.

- Post a learner picture. Use a picture that represents your learners and post it near your work station. The picture will help you remember that you are talking to real learners on the other end.
- Visualize the best class you have ever delivered. Attempt to mimic that feeling with your web presentation.
- Stand up and smile. Your learners will be able to "hear" the smile in your voice and will be more engaged, and you'll feel more relaxed. Standing up will make it easier to breathe and will dissipate some of your nervous energy.
- Remain calm. If you find yourself getting flustered, slow down and take a deep breath.

- Be prepared for unplanned events. You can't plan for everything, so be willing to be flexible just as you would in the classroom.
- Remember, your co-presenters or technical assistants are there to help.

Set an engaging pace and monitor the audience

Speaking too quickly or slowly leads to bored, listless trainees. Your delivery rate should be between 130 and 170 words per minute. Research has shown that speakers who tend to speak toward the higher end of the range are perceived as more competent and persuasive than those who speak at a slower end of the range.

Encourage learners to use the pacing indicators of the software. Periodically ask the following questions: “Am I going too fast or too slow?” “Is everyone following what I am saying?” “Are there any questions?” You need input from your learners to determine the proper pace for the lesson. Also, you may need to move backward to cover a point not understood by the entire class or move forward because the class is familiar with the content. If you constantly check with the learners, they will provide you feedback on your pacing.

Effective online instructors vary their speed when conveying excitement or making a point. You do not want to set a monotone pace. Use inflection, tone, and pitch to vary the sound of your voice. Your body is not there to help you make points, so your voice must “step it up a notch” and convey the energy and emphasis that is needed to reach the learners. Here are a few general tips to keep in mind:

- Speak at a reasonable, enthusiastic rate.
- Encourage learners to give you feedback about your pace of instruction.
- Constantly check with your learners to see if the pace is appropriate.
- Vary your delivery rate to avoid a monotone presentation.
- Convey passion and energy in your voice. Work on creating an “on-line presentation voice.”

Speak with confidence

When you speak online, be confident and comfortable with your presentation:

- Avoid verbal pauses (*umms* and *ahhs*).
- Eliminate verbal tags (*you know, OK*).
- Record and listen to yourself to determine areas of improvement; in other words, practice.
- Create a script or at least an outline of what you are going to cover, and use it.
- Use software editing tools to “clean up” your delivery.
- Speak with passion and enthusiasm.

Few things undermine an online instructor more than verbalized pauses. A verbalized pause is when, instead of a quiet pause, the instructor mumbles or grunts. These are the *um, ah, tst, hm, errr, eeb,* or *ahs* we hear when listening to some instructors. These verbalized pauses are annoying, distracting, and bothersome in the classroom and are deadly online. Verbalized pauses give the impression that you are not confident with the material.

In fact, online the verbalized pauses can increase because of the new technology and nervousness. Work on eliminating these pauses. One method of eliminating the pauses is to listen to your recorded web session (ideally, a practice session) and count the number of times you verbalize a pause. Just being aware of the fact that you verbalize pauses will help you to eliminate them.

Another verbal problem with online instructors is the *verbal tag*. A verbal tag is the addition of phrase onto the end of a sentence. Some of the more popular verbal tags are *you know what I mean*, *OK*, or *you know*.

For example, an online instructor explaining the idea of counting inventory might say, “The proper method for counting inventory is cycle counting, *you know what I mean*. You can’t keep track of inventory with a year end count, *you know what I mean*. You need to count periodically, *you know what I mean*.” Verbal tags are distracting during any web-based learning event. Ask friends and associates if you tend to use verbal tags (most people are unaware that they do), and then work to eliminate those tags.

One method of eliminating verbal tags is to listen to the recorded web lesson prior to releasing the lesson to the learners. Many e-learning systems allow you to edit the audio portion after it has been recorded. Since verbal tags usually come at the end of a statement, they can be easily edited.

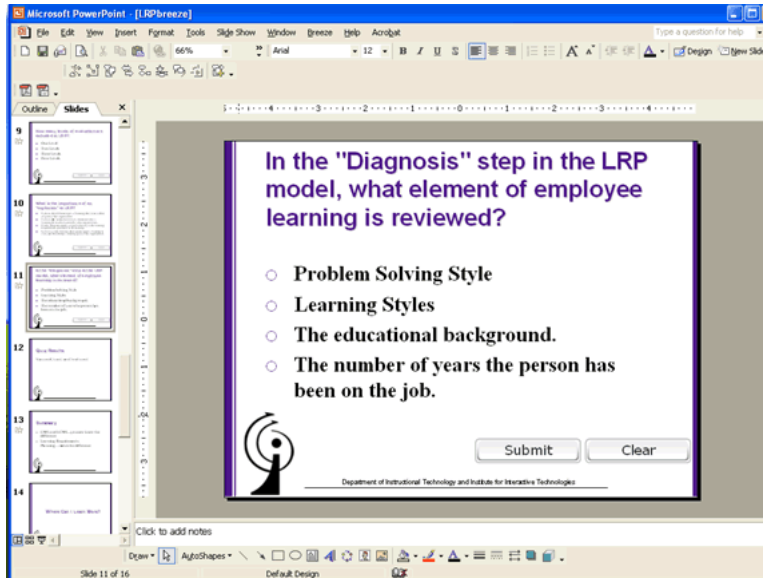
It is also helpful to have a written script of what you are going to say during your online lesson. This allows you to see what you are going to say and goes a long way toward eliminating both verbal pauses and verbal tags.

Actively engage the learner

You planned for engagement and interactivity; it’s now time to execute your plan. Active learning is encouraged when the instructor is active on the screen. Let your learners know that online instruction is a two-way street and they are required to interact with you and each other.

- Use the arrows, pens, highlights, and other items that are available for emphasizing words and images. While describing a visual, use the pen to mark certain areas or to draw attention to certain attributes.
- Include multimedia elements such as video clips, pictures, or audio clips to break up the monotony.
- Break learners into online groups and have them report back to the entire class.
- Give the microphone to a learner to explain a point. Ask learners for input and to share their experiences with their fellow online learners.
- Let a learner lead the group to a particular website of interest.
- Give a pop quiz of three questions to evaluate learning.
- Ask thought-provoking questions.
- Probe learners for insights.
- Include animations if bandwidth allows.
- Consider using a segment with an interview format—think talk show, Larry King Live, or even Howard Stern. Don’t limit your thinking to the traditional classroom format.
- Have a panel discussion with many presenters.

- Set up a story or scenario and use visuals to enhance the experience.
- Exploit both the audio and visual aspects of the software.



Add questions to your session to keep your learners alert and engaged with the material.

At all costs, avoid recurring static displays with only your voice narration. This encourages passive learning, and you'll quickly find that you are talking to yourself. Online learning software vendors have done a lot of research and have created attention-gaining tools and interactive features in their programs; take advantage of all that hard work to engage your learners. They'll have more fun and so will you.

Prerecorded presentation and rebroadcast issues

One advantage of web technology is the ability to record a web session for later use. This capability provides a tremendous amount of flexibility in terms of delivery time and in the structuring of content. To properly develop a prerecorded session, keep in mind the following guidelines.

Create a script or outline

Recording a session in advance requires careful planning. With learners in an online environment, you can carry on a dialogue and have interactions that are natural. With a recorded session, you may not have any learners on the other end. In that case, you need to have a script. Scripts provide you with the content you need to convey to the learners and prevent you from getting lost or losing track of the topic you were covering. The script also helps ensure that you cover all the topics you intended to cover.

Use the Notes feature in PowerPoint to insert the script for each page. This provides you with the visual of the screen and the information you want to say about each item on the screen.

When you create your script, do the following:

- Highlight and bold any words you want to emphasize.
- Add stories and anecdotes to engage the learner.
- Add summary and overview sections to the script
- Practice with the script so it doesn't sound like you are just reading to the learner. You want to sound unscripted even though you have a script.
- Create your script using the PowerPoint Notes feature to match text with slides.

Quiet on the set ... most of the time

Background noise in a prerecorded lesson is distracting. Learners deserve a lesson that is recorded in a quiet place with no external noise. You might want to record your session early in the morning or late in the afternoon when fewer people are around so that ambient conversations are not picked up when you are recording. Disconnect the ringer on your phone and turn off the speakers on your computer to avoid sudden, unexpected noises.

You might also want to invest in a good headset with a strong microphone so that your recordings sound crisp and not muffled. Also, don't place the microphone too close to your mouth or it will pick up the sound of your breathing.

For optimal recordings of an event, do the following:

- Purchase good headphone and microphone sets. USB microphones tend to work better.
- Do a pre-check on the sound to avoid being too close or too far from microphone.
- Record at time when you can ensure minimal background noises.
- Turn off ringers on desk phones, cell phones, pagers, watch alarms, and so on.

There may be times when you want to add noises to gain the learners' attention or to liven up the event. To do this, you might use the following methods:

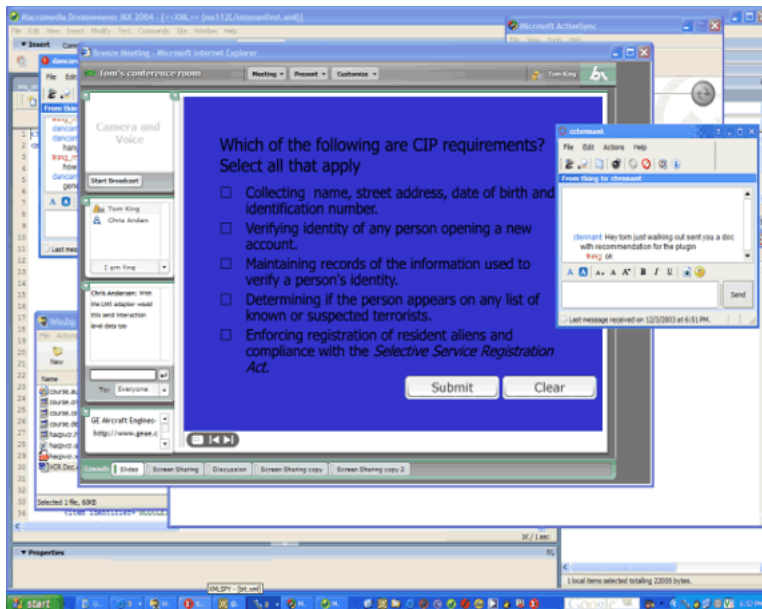
- Purchase an electronic noise maker and insert applause or laughter at strategic times during your presentation.
- Play soothing background music when you want learners to think or work on a problem.
- Think of yourself as sort of an educational DJ inserting noises, sound clips, and songs to help learners grasp the required materials.
- Use another presenter or other voices to break up the monotony of only one person speaking.

Strive for interactivity

It might seem difficult to add interactivity to a prerecorded session, but it can be done. Ask questions of the learners to get them to think about content before you present it. For example, ask learners to write three attributes that they think a leader should have before you reveal your list of attributes. You can use the following methods to keep learners engaged:

- Use built-in software features to create questions the learner must answer.
- Strategically place the questions throughout the instruction.
- Take advantage of any linking capabilities in a prerecorded session, and allow the learner to link to specific areas of your presentation or to an external resource. Remind the learner to pause the presentation before they link to another place.

- Consider how you use builds and other features. Do you want to reveal all the points at once and then discuss them one at a time? The learner might be reading point five while you are still discussing point one. Do you want to reveal points one at a time, forcing the learner to focus only on the point you are discussing and not allowing them to see the other information?
- Think about how learners will want to access the information and provide it in a flexible, quick, and easy format.



Remember, learners may be multitasking, so try to keep them engaged in your content.

Consider the content's shelf life

When a prerecorded session is posted online, you never know how long it will be available. Even if you intend a short shelf life for the course material, the reality is that it may be online and available for quite some time. So that learners do not get confused about the currency of your material, always provide a date stamp for the presentation, so the learners know when it was recorded. Also, provide links to additional information or to websites that you know are updated frequently. This will provide the learner a place to go for more up-to-date information.

If you are talking about a timeless topic, such as leadership, you may want to avoid references to current situations that will date the material unnecessarily. Instead, refer to timeless events that to which the learner can relate. This helps increase the shelf life of your presentation.

To ensure an appropriate shelf life for your content, you should do the following:

- Time and date stamp your presentation so people know when it was created.
- Provide links to more frequently updated references.
- Avoid references to current events if discussing a timeless topic.
- Provide pointers for accessing potential updates or where to find material that may be released subsequent to your presentation.

Tips for learners and attendees

While you have a lot to consider as an instructor with webinars and webcasts, you are not the only one responsible for effective online learning. For online learning to be effective, learners must also take some responsibility and prepare ahead of time for the lesson. You should distribute the following tips to your online learners so they know what is expected of them:

- Use headsets instead of the PC speakers; you will be more focused.
- Web handles such as *MountainMan1* are not good names for participating in a learning session. Use your actual name when you sign on. It adds credibility to the session and shows that you are a serious learner.
- Put a sign on your door or cubicle letting others know you are participating in a learning event. If that won't work, reserve a quiet conference room or other location that is quiet.
- Check your system's capabilities a few days before the session.
- If the instructor has a pre-class session to check equipment, take advantage of it.
- Ask questions and stay engaged. If the instructor is going too slow or too fast, politely let them know. Chances are you are not the only one who feels that way.
- Participate in online polls and questions.
- Think about the material being presented. Don't fall into the role of a passive learner.
- Sign in and out of the session properly.
- Ask if results from polls and quizzes will be posted. Ask if the session is recorded and how to gain access.
- Ask if there will be a follow-up session or what to do if you have additional questions.
- If you have to share a computer for a session, take turns participating and identify yourself to the group when you participate.

Summary

Online instruction can be fun for the learners and the instructor. Following the basic hints outlined above will help you to become a confident and comfortable online instructor. Keep in mind these few simple rules:

- Remain calm at all times.
- Your knowledge and wisdom is the most important part of the presentation.
- Engage the learners as often as you can.
- Act as a facilitator or catalyst for learning.
- Encourage learners to provide you with feedback.
- Every once in a while, actively seek to gain the learner's attention.
- Plan your presentation; don't wing it.
- Have fun and enjoy the experience.

About the authors

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