

The secret is in setting expectations and then living up to them.

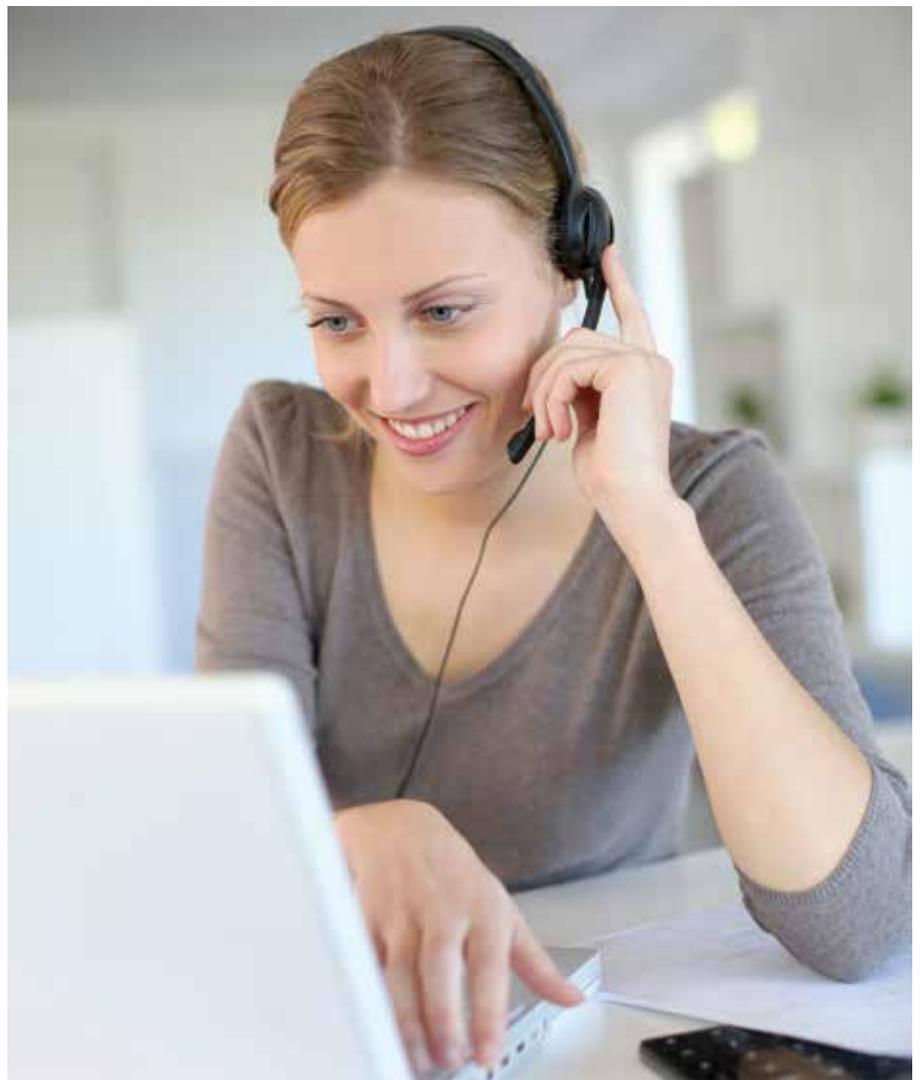
Engaging Online Learners

BY CINDY HUGGETT

“What’s your experience with this topic?” the virtual trainer asks. She is greeted with silence. She wonders if anyone is even paying attention, and then just continues talking, answering her own question and moving on to the next topic. Unfortunately, this scenario repeats itself every day, over and over again in many virtual training classes: A virtual trainer asks a question and learners stay silent.

There’s no question that online learners are largely disengaged, either because of the myriad distractions around them or because the virtual class in front of them doesn’t seem interesting or relevant. The greatest benefit of virtual training is that learners can stay at their own desks to learn; it saves time and money. Yet the greatest challenge of virtual training is also that learners stay at their own desks to learn. Remote learners are easily distracted by their surroundings.

So, how can a virtual trainer capture the attention of these learners? With so many competing demands for learners’ time and attention, how can a trainer ensure their eyes stay in the virtual class instead of wandering off to their email or another nonrelevant task?



While it's a common occurrence for there to be silence on the line, it doesn't have to be this way. Virtual training can be engaging and interactive. Virtual trainers can ask questions in such a way that guarantees responses every time. It's just a matter of following four simple guidelines for success.

Set expectations

You must set expectations well in advance of the event by framing it appropriately. This is the first and most important key to engaging online learners. If learners think they will be able to log into the session, place their phones on mute, and multitask by listening to your event while completing items on their to-do lists and catching up on email, they will never fully engage in the program.

Change the learners' mindsets by changing your marketing for the event. Describe the program as interactive. Frame it as an engaging online experience. For example, choose a name for the program that conjures up interactive thoughts, such as "Managers First: An Interactive Online Program for First-Time Managers."

Also set expectations ahead of time by communicating with learners, and expecting them to respond. You could send an email asking for a short answer (for example, "What's your number 1 challenge related to this topic?") or you could require that they test their computer for compatibility with the virtual classroom platform and send you a screenshot of the test results.

There are many creative ways to interact with learners ahead of time—what's most important is that you actually do it and use the opportunity to educate them that their active participation will be expected.

Interact from the start

Once you've set the stage for interaction, deliver on that promise by engaging learners from the moment they log into your session. Greet learners by name when they join. Have an on-screen activity available, and invite learners to jump in and begin doing it. Get learners actively involved both with the platform tools and with one another.



ONCE YOU GET STARTED WITH INTERACTION, KEEP IT GOING.

If it seems impossible to engage learners from the start because your learners often encounter technical problems at the beginning of a session, then have a designated technical expert (usually called a "producer") on the line with you who can troubleshoot technical issues and assist learners who need help.

There are two other big benefits to using this "interact from the start" technique. First, it will help new learners get comfortable with the platform because they learn how to chat, answer a poll, or draw on the whiteboard—whatever activity you have set up for them. And second, it will help learners realize that they are not alone but instead in a virtual room full of other connected individuals.

Keep the pace up

Once you get started with interaction, keep it going. Most experts agree that engaging learners every three to five minutes is the "sweet spot" of keeping their attention. This means that learners are asked to do something—type in the chat, respond to a poll, click on the screen, or communicate in some way—every few minutes. These

activities are not busywork but instead should lead toward the program's learning outcomes.

You also can keep the pace moving by teaching learners to use the platform tools as you go, instead of taking 10 to 15 minutes for an in-depth tutorial at the start of a session. This tactic will give learners just-in-time performance support for each interactive exercise. For example, if you invite learners to type on the whiteboard, then make a point to provide instructions for how to use the drawing tools while you give activity directions. The more you can integrate platform instructions into your activities, the more comfortable learners will feel using the tools, and the more actively they can be engaged in their learning.

Another way to keep the pace moving is to carefully monitor the session flow. When teaching skills, make your point then move on. Don't belabor a discussion just to kill time. You can even ask learners to use the platform status indicators (that's to say "raise their hand") once they've completed an activity so that you're not unnecessarily waiting for people to finish.

Keep the focus on learners

Virtual trainers often make the mistake of thinking they are doing a presentation to a remote audience instead of enabling participants to learn something new. When they can't see learners' faces, they default to excessive talking.

To engage online learners, always keep the focus on them. Ask thought-provoking questions and carefully listen to their answers. Acknowledge their contributions and appreciate their input. Create opportunities for dialogue—as opposed to monologue—and encourage conversation.

Not only should you engage learners with the content and with the platform

tools, you also should allow for focused time during the event for learners to interact with one another. Invite them to use private chat for partner discussions, and make use of break-outs for small-group activities. The more the learners connect to each other, the more engaged they will be in their learning.

In addition, find out what's interesting to the group, either through your advance preparation or by asking polling questions during the program. Use that information to choose relevant stories and examples.

Also, be sure to use learners' names throughout the event. Weave their

names into examples ("For instance, let's say that Adam uses this process ..."), and refer back things they've said ("When Scott mentioned this challenge earlier in today's program, he indicated ...").

If you want to call on learners by name, you could start with a poll question, or a change of status indicator (agree/disagree), and then ask individual learners to expand upon their choice. "Maria and Joel both disagree with the on-screen statement. Would one of you please tell us your reason?"

If you directly call on someone, make sure you've set the stage for that at the beginning of the event (by saying something like "expect to

be called on") and then make sure to ask a question that has no right or wrong answer to maintain a comfortable learning environment. There's no need to put someone on the spot while encouraging engagement.

Remember to put in place these four techniques so that the next time you ask, "What's your experience with this topic?" in a virtual training class, you'll create rich dialogue among the group.

■ **Cindy Huggett** is author of *The Virtual Training Guidebook: How to Design, Deliver and Implement Live Online Learning*, and consults with organizations who are moving to the virtual classroom; cindy@cindyhuggett.com.

Telling *Ain't* Training



July 28-29, 2016 | Los Angeles • November 3-4, 2016 | Chicago

For the past 10 years, Harold D. Stolovitch has delivered his Telling Ain't Training event to thousands of trainers. This is the final year for this program as a public workshop, and only a few dates remain. Don't miss your chance to learn from the man who made "telling ain't training" a popular expression that has spread across the globe. In the workshop, you'll:

- Apply the five-step model to new training or retrofit it to existing programs.
- Transform content into effective outcome-based training.
- Increase skill and knowledge acquisition and retention.

Register at www.td.org/2016tat.

0416188_45710



SUBSCRIBE TODAY!



INTERESTED IN SUBSCRIBING TO TD MAGAZINE?

RATES

\$150

Individual Domestic (United States)

\$300

Institutional Domestic (United States)

\$249

Individual International

\$399

Institutional International

To subscribe, go to www.td.org/tdsub.

Get even more when you become a member of ATD!

All ATD memberships include a monthly subscription* to *TD* magazine, plus access to Watch & Learn webcasts, digital publications, research, discounts on conferences, and much more.

For details about ATD membership, visit www.td.org/members.

*International members outside the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico receive the digital *TD* magazine as part of their membership.

0316143.31610