

The Virtual Trainer's Guide to Online Course Design:

READY TO USE ACTIVITIES FOR ENGAGING ONLINE LEARNING

A white paper by Cindy Huggett, CPLP

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What is Virtual Training?

Virtual Training is more than just a straightforward lecture or simple presentation. Virtual training is a highly interactive, live online, synchronous instructor led class. It has defined learning objectives, with participants who are connected from dispersed locations. And it uses a virtual classroom software platform that has been designed for online training. Most of the time, virtual training classes have a small number of participants – less than 20 – to allow for maximum interaction and dialogue.

Are you tired of the same old routine in your virtual training – presenting slides and wondering why your learners are not paying attention? Are you ready to go beyond the simple slide presentation and get creative with your virtual training? If you're ready, then your participants are probably eager for it as well. It's time to move from plain presentations to engaging online learning!

This white paper reviews why your live, online training classes should be interactive, and illustrates how to make them more engaging through intentional activities. It also includes 10 ready-to-use exercises that you can immediately apply to your virtual sessions.

Importance of Interactivity

Imagine that one hour from now you have a live, online session on your calendar. You plan to participate from your current location. Now look around you... what do you see? How many potential distractions can you identify? What's likely to steal your attention from the upcoming live, online session? If you are like most people, your workspace is filled with potential distractions that will keep you from actively participating in your virtual session.

It's the same with your virtual training participants. While virtual training has many advantages – including the convenience of learning from your desk – it's not without challenges. As a designer or facilitator of virtual training, you have to be more interesting than all of the potential distractions in your learners' workspaces. This may be the most difficult part of virtual training: maintaining engagement with your audience. Fortunately, by using the wide range of tools available within the platform, plus a touch of creativity, you can keep participants engaged throughout the entire session.

It's important to note here that virtual training classes should be centered on learning objectives. Therefore, the goal of interactive exercises during class is *more* than just activity for the sake of activity. It's not just about playing games. Instead, the planned activities are purposefully designed to get – and keep – participants involved in their own learning. They are designed to be interesting, relevant, useful, and appealing to adult learners. They have purpose and meaning in the context of the virtual training topic.

Designing for Interactivity

Designing an interactive exercise for the virtual classroom is a simple three-step process. First, start with the outcome that your participants need to accomplish. By determining the learning point, or specific goal to achieve, you will ensure that your activity drives toward the overall learning outcomes.

Next, consider the available platform tools that could help you meet this outcome. A list of common tools and their sample uses can be found in Figure 1. Remember that there are many ways to accomplish an outcome, and *how* you get there may not be as important as actually getting there.

In other words, asking a question and receiving participant responses could be done in the chat window, by a poll question, or by show of raised hands. Using any one of these tools could work. Consider all the available tool options at first, and then narrow down your choice once you have completed the next step.

Tool	Sample Use
Poll	Ask challenging questions to invite participant responses
Annotation	Highlight words and draw on screen
Chat	Encourage dialogue between participants
Raise Hand	Ask yes/no or agree/disagree questions
Screen sharing	Share slides, software programs or websites with participants
Material distribution	Offer handouts and other paper-based resources
Tests	Check for knowledge transfer and comprehension
Audio	Allow verbal responses from participants and encourage open dialogue

Figure 1: Common Tools found in Virtual Training Software Platforms

The design process is a combination of art and science.

Finally, your creativity comes into play. What you do with the platform tools and exactly how you use them can be limitless! On the surface each tool has a function and purpose. But with your creative juices flowing, you can use the tools to interact and engage participants.

This design process is a combination of “art” and “science.” The platform brings the tools, which function in a certain way. That’s the science. Then you bring the design using your creativity. That’s the art. And together these two pieces combine to create an interactive exercise.

In summary, the activity design process is:

1. Start with the outcome
2. Select the best platform tool
3. Shape the activity using your creativity

Examples of Interactivity

Here are several examples of 'ready-to-use' activities that follow the design process outlined above. You can use these exercises by modifying and adapting them for your own use. You can also use them as a springboard to help spark your own creativity. There's an Activity Design template at the end of this document for convenience.

1. Word cloud response

Purpose: To build rapport, and to raise awareness of chosen topic

Tools Used: Screen Sharing

This activity begins prior to the session start time with an email message to participants. Sending a personalized email message to each individual participant helps you begin to build rapport with him or her before the session begins. It also sets the stage for engagement by inviting them to get involved. This targeted message asks each person to respond to a quick question related to the session topic.

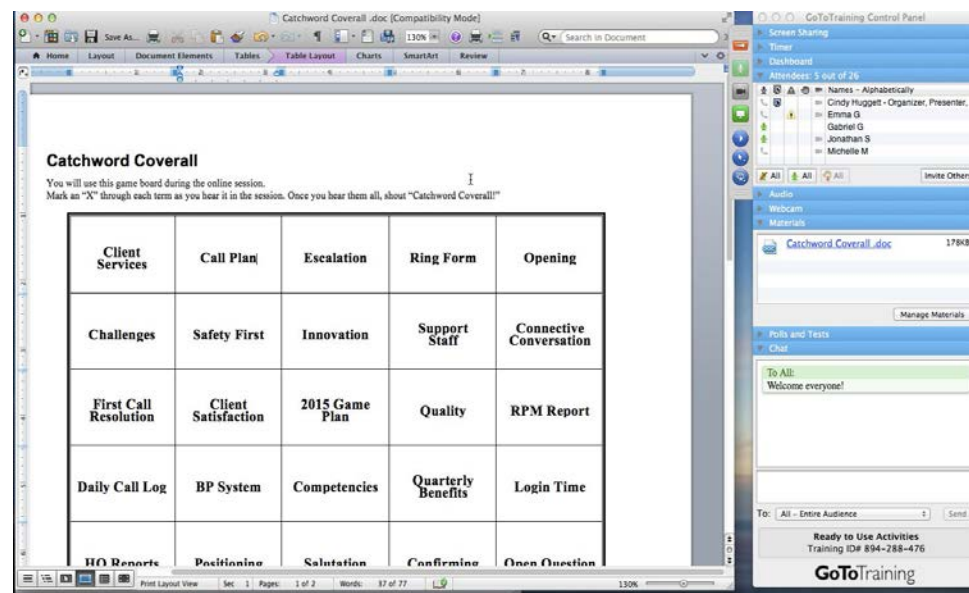
For example, in my train-the-trainer programs, I send an email ahead of time asking learners to describe in one word their experience as a participant in virtual training. Most participants respond to this message because it's only asking for a short, quick answer.

Next, take those answers, combine them into a word cloud, and place the word cloud graphic on a slide. (If you don't have access to a word cloud generator¹, then simply listing all of the participant responses on a slide is fine.) What's key is that you have captured the exact learner responses word-for-word, so that they can see and identify their own input.

¹ A popular word cloud generator can be found at www.wordle.com

been said, they may announce “coverall” (either aloud or in the chat window).

You can offer virtual prizes to the participant who first announces coverall (i.e points toward your company store, e-gift cards, or a fun round of applause from the entire group). It's possible that more than one participant will announce “coverall” at the same time – that's okay and expected. The more participants are listening closely to the virtual class discussion, the better!



3. Pair Chat Discussion

Purpose: To discuss a topic related to the training

Tools Used: Chat

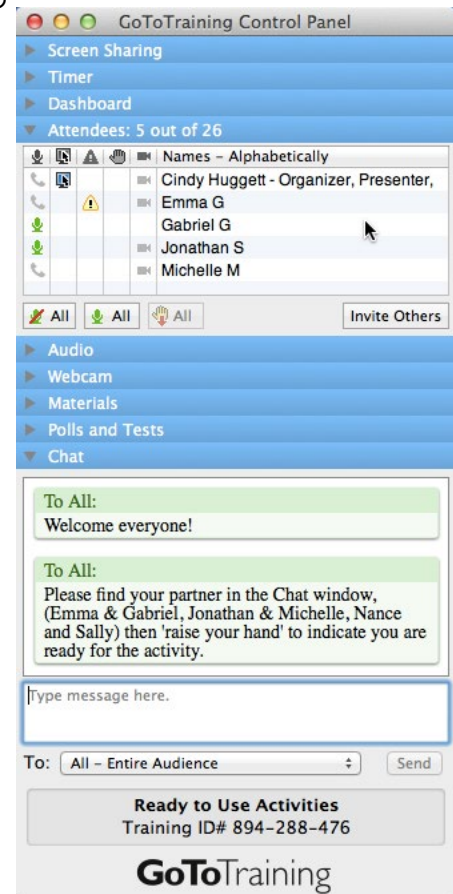
In many face-to-face classes, it's common to say “turn to the person next to you and talk about ‘xyz.’” Wouldn't it be nice to do that same activity in a virtual class? Well, it's possible by using the chat window!

The first step is to pair up participants. If you have an odd number, the facilitator will need to join in. You can find simple

pairings by choosing every other participant name (i.e. “Anna & Brad, Christopher & David, Emma & Francesca, Gabe & Hannah...”). To help participants discover and remember their partner, I recommend typing the participant pairs into the chat window for reference.

Next, give instruction to participants to “find” their partner. They can do this by saying “hello” to one another in the chat window. If your platform supports private chatting, then invite them to use that feature. If it does not, then ask participants to begin each chat message with their partner’s name. In either case, the partners will be able to have a conversation between the two of them.

Once each person has “found” his or her partner, you can supply the official discussion question. Set a timer for two or three minutes and allow participants the time to chat with one another. At the end of the time, debrief the discussion by asking participants to share highlights of their conversation.



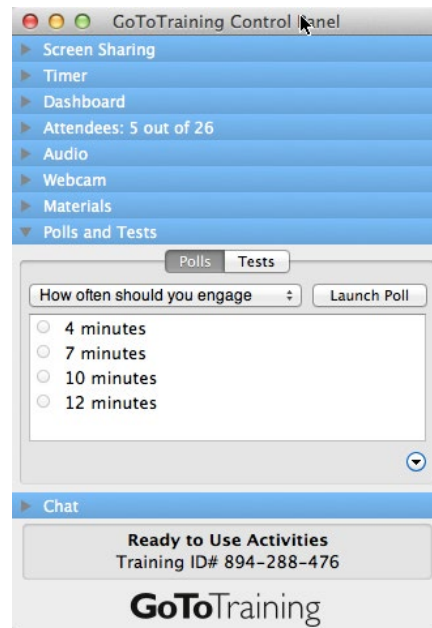
4. Polling for Points

Purpose: To check knowledge on the training topic

Tools Used: Polling

Competitions during a virtual training class can be fun and energizing. This particular activity can be done with teams or individuals, either way works. If you choose to play in teams, be sure to identify each team by posting the team

assignments in the chat window or on a slide.



To begin, create a series of polling questions related to your training topic. Each polling question should be challenging enough that it requires thought, yet not so tough that it's impossible to answer. A reasonable number of poll questions should be prepared. If you plan to post the poll questions in consecutive order, then use no more than 5-7 for this activity. If you spread the questions throughout the session, then it's okay to have

more polling questions.

Let participants know that each poll question will be assigned a point value. On the honor system, they should keep track of how many points earned through selecting the correct answer. Individuals playing along would receive individual points, while team assignments would pool their points together for an overall total. Point totals can be typed into a chat window. After the last poll question, check to see who won with the most points!

5. Story Time

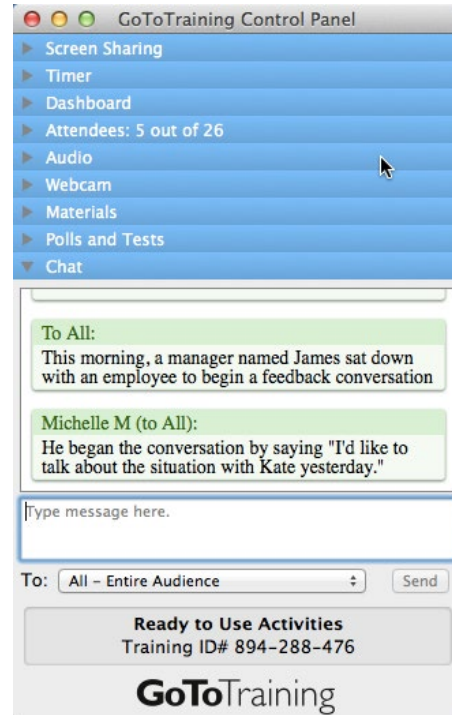
Purpose: To create a story together as a group, to check comprehension of a topic, and to promote networking among attendees

Tools Used: Chat, Audio

Who doesn't love a good story? And it's even better when it's a collectively shared story among the participants. This high-energy exercise brings the group together and asks each person to contribute.

Begin by choosing an appropriate, relevant story topic. You'll also want to have a list of participant names, preferably straight from the attendee list window. Determine the order of participation – either straight down the attendee list in alphabetical order or allowing each participant to choose who goes next. And decide if the story will have any parameters, such as a suggested plot line or other rules.

A sample facilitator guide template for virtual classes is available for download at: www.cindyhuggett.com



After explaining how the activity will work, type a starter sentence in the chat window. Then, the next participant should add the next sentence in the story. And so on, sentence by sentence, as you watch the story unfold in the chat window.

For example, if your training class topic is on coaching skills for managers, you might set the stage by asking participants to tell the story of a manager who encounters a routine challenge during a coaching conversation.

For this story, your starter sentence could be, *"This morning, a manager named James sat down with an employee to begin a feedback conversation."* Go "around the room" by inviting each participant, in turn, to contribute the next sentence by typing it into the chat window. You could also ask them to read their statement aloud. Be sure to move quickly,

asking participants to keep their sentences short and topically relevant.

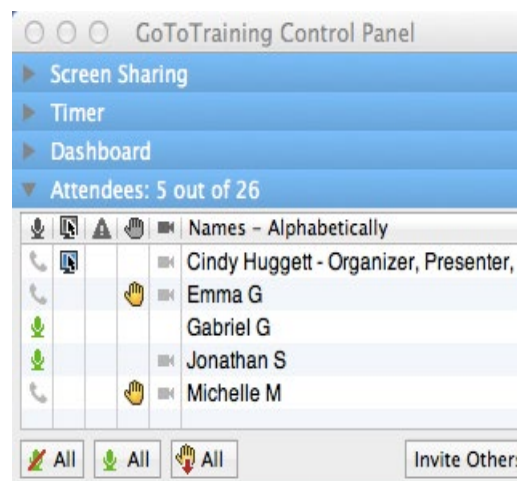
After the story concludes, debrief it by asking relevant questions about the story and the activity experience. You should also collectively celebrate your shared creation!

6. Finish First

Purpose: To give participants control over the amount of time allotted for an individual exercise

Tools Used: Raise Hand

One of my must-haves in any virtual training class is a participant handout. This electronic document serves as a job aid, a place to take notes, and provides one more way to engage participants through interactivity. My handouts typically include short pen-and-paper exercises that we complete during class. Often, the handout exercise is one that can be completed individually.



When participants work alone to complete a handout exercise, it's common for them to need different amounts of time to work on it. While the time allotted might be 3 minutes, not everyone will need that much time. So I ask the class to "raise their hand" upon finishing the assignment. Then, whichever comes first - all hands are raised or the

allotted time is up – we debrief and move onto the next activity.

A variation on this activity is to create a competition among participants to see who can finish first. The first person to raise their hand “wins”, with recognition and acknowledgement for second, third, fourth, and fifth place.

7. Voting Preferences

Purpose: To allow for self-customization of a training activity

Tools Used: Annotation

Adult learners need training content to be relevant in order to find value in it and stay attuned during class. But how do you customize content in a way that works without having to re-design a class every time? One way to accomplish this is to design an activity that tailors itself depending upon the needs of each participant group.

For example, let's say your training topic is customer service skills – specifically handling upset customers. The participants need to learn

effective listening skills and defusing techniques that they can apply in challenging

customer

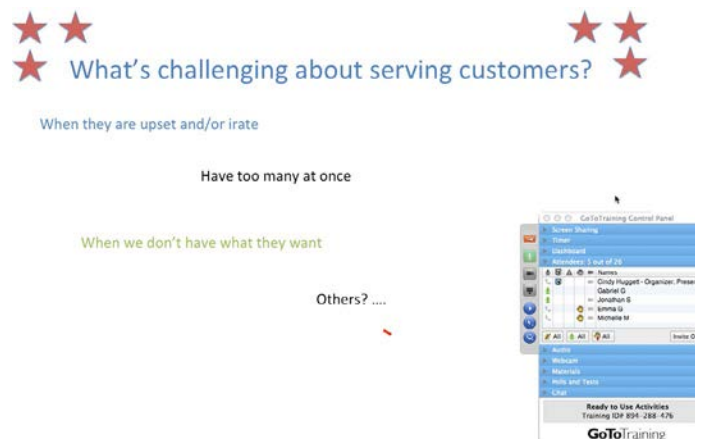
situations. But

which challenging

customer situations

are relevant to your participant group? You might have some common ideas to start, but it would be ideal to spend extra time on the situations that your participants find most challenging.

One way to achieve this goal is to ask participants to submit suggestions and vote for their top choices. Begin by listing the



common ideas on a pre-prepared slide, then ask participants to use their text annotation tool to type additional ideas on-screen. Once the ideas have been captured, ask participants to use the marker annotation tool to place a dot next to their top two or three choices. Tally the results, and use the highest resulting votes as your discussion focus.

8. Quote Quibbles

Purpose: To provoke thought and discussion about a training topic

Tools Used: Screen Sharing and Chat

One way to spark interest in a subject matter is to post an interesting quote or surprising statistic and ask participants for their reactions. It gets attention because it's interesting, and it gets participation because it requires response.



To set up the exercise, prepare a slide in advance that has the quote or statistic on it. Then, at the appropriate time during the virtual training class, share the slide and ask participants to react. If it's a statement, you could ask them to agree or disagree with it by raising their hand, and then typing a reason why in the chat

window. If it's a statistic, you could ask them to guess the correct number by typing in the chat window, and then reveal the answer on the slide. You could even ask participants to debate a statement by asking them to choose a side and then taking turns sharing statements why their position is the correct one.

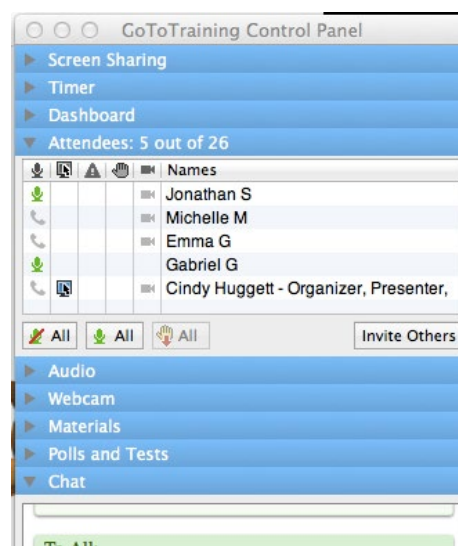
My favorite way to use this activity is to have the slide posted either before the session begins or at the very beginning of the session. If you have a high-quality quote related to the training topic, it can evoke immediate reaction and participation, setting the stage for an interactive session.

9. What's the Scene?

Purpose: To promote comprehension and retention

Tools Used: Chat and Annotation

Informative visuals help most participants remember training topics. Whether it's a complex diagram or simple graphic, some people learn better with visuals.



There are several variations of this activity, which can be used either alone or in combination with one another. First, you could prepare a slide with a graphic on it. The graphic could be almost anything, from a teacup to a ladder to a camera or a cityscape. When you post the graphic on-screen, ask participants to type in the chat window how that object relates to the training topic. There are no right or wrong answers; it's

simply a matter of interpretation and application. What's meaningful to one participant may not be what's meaningful to another. The important point is that participants are making connections between the graphic and their own knowledge.

As an alternative, you could reverse the activity by sharing a blank slide and asking each participant to use their annotation tools to draw a visual that represents a key point in the training topic. Use the space on the slide judiciously, either by dividing it into sections and assigning spots, or by asking participants to take turns. Encourage them to be creative, and let them know that stick figures are fine! Once the graphics have been drawn, ask participants to share the meaning of their graphic.

10. Red Light, Yellow Light, Green Light

Purpose: To promote immediate action and application of the training topic.

Tools Used: Annotation

A goal of most skills-based training programs is on-the-job participant behavior change. Once a participant learns a new skill, they should start using it. It's common to ask participants to create an action plan to implement after class. To get participants committed to their action plan and excited about implementing it, help them by using this engaging activity.

Set up the exercise by preparing a slide with three sections labeled "Red", "Yellow" and "Green." The sections could be graphical with an image (like sections of a stoplight) or they could just be three columns with labels at the top. Either way, there should be room on the screen for every participant to type a short phrase in the section.

When you share the slide on screen, let participants know what each label means. Here is one example set of statements I use

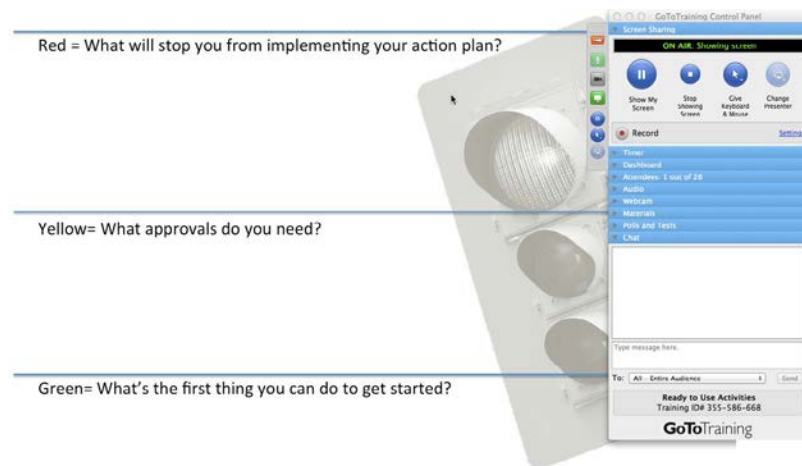
with managers who are leaving class with an action plan for change.

Red = What will stop you from implementing your action plan?

Yellow = Who's approval or buy-in do you need?

Green = What can do immediately to get started?

Then invite them to use the text annotation tool to write their response statements on-screen. By typing on-screen, it increases their commitment to the actions, helps them see obstacles they might encounter, and adds a layer of accountability to their plan. After a short debrief discussion, ask each person to make notes in their handout for a takeaway.



Now that you've seen several examples of virtual training activities, it's time to create your own. Determine your purpose, select a tool, and get creative!

Job Aid: Activity Design Template

Use this template to design your own creative virtual training activities.

Learning Objective or Outcome:

Available Tools:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Chat | <input type="checkbox"/> Polling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Annotation | <input type="checkbox"/> Screen Sharing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Materials Distribution | <input type="checkbox"/> Raise Hand |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tests | <input type="checkbox"/> Audio |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

Setup Needed:

Activity Instructions:

-
-
-
-
-

Notes:

About Cindy Huggett, CPLP

Cindy Huggett, CPLP, is an independent consultant, professional speaker, instructional designer, classroom facilitator and author who specializes in workplace training and development. With over twenty years of experience, Cindy has successfully designed curriculums, facilitated classes, and led training rollouts in almost every industry and every size organization.



Cindy is the author of *The Virtual Training Guidebook: How to Design, Deliver, and Implement Live Online Learning* and *Virtual Training Basics*. Cindy is also a past member of the ASTD National Board of Directors and was one of the firsts to earn the Certified Professional in Learning and Performance (CPLP) designation.

You can find Cindy sharing training tips on Twitter as @cindyhugg or on her website (www.cindyhuggett.com).

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