The little book of
Virtual Classrooms

Other titles in the series:

The little book of Induction

The little book of Webinars

The little book of
Virtual Classrooms

By Gaëlle Delmas-Watson

The **Charity Learning** Consortium

Foreword

The coronavirus crisis has been the catalyst for organisations to move their training online. This has given learning professionals a huge problem. Trainers have suddenly been placed in a position where they lack the skills for facilitating and managing live online events. You can't simply transfer your classroom skills into the virtual world.

Facilitating live online sessions requires some important new ways of working, so I welcome this excellent pocketbook written by Gaëlle Delmas-Watson. It covers all the essential aspects of virtual classroom delivery to get you started on your journey. It provides the foundation for you to develop your virtual skills and ensure that your online training is a success.

Colin Steed
Founder of the Certified Online Learning Facilitator programme at the LPI

Don't get overwhelmed by the platform and technology. Always start with the business need

**Jo Cook,
Lightbulb Moment**

Feel the fear and do it anyway

There's a long-held fear that virtual training will have a lesser impact than face-to-face. But I don't know why! Learning practitioners, like Nicola Tyzack and Laura Winstone, are successfully using virtual classrooms to transform training. Equally, some fail because they don't understand learners' needs or evaluate impact. Fear of using technology can also be a barrier.

Whether they're a one-off or part of a multi-session programme, virtual classrooms offer a brilliant opportunity for interactive group work. Just like real classrooms, learning is driven by discussion, role play and brainstorming.

I hope this little book will help you face your fears and overcome any hurdles, so you'll embrace this fantastic tool for delivering engaging learning.

Using virtual classrooms is incredibly cost effective. It means you can do a lot more with a lot less

**Nicola Tyzack,
National Autistic Society**

Winning benefits

Using virtual classrooms can help learning practitioners:

- Save time and expense
- Provide accessible resources to anyone with an internet connection
- Support blended learning
- Interact with learners and facilitators
- Develop resources fast when there's an urgent need
- Quickly deploy new programmes: once processes are established, they're easy to create

Case study: National Autistic Society

Nicola Tyzack became a Certified Online Learning Facilitator in 2013 and uses virtual classrooms to support technical training at the National Autistic Society. She finds that virtual classrooms are great for delivering ad-hoc training, or a quick session on a specific subject with less planning and organising. They help her provide 'just-in-time' training, exactly when it's needed, so everyone isn't waiting for a face-to-face session.

Help participants to understand the behaviours of engagement - we know the social norms of face-to-face experiences, but a virtual classroom is still new for many

Michelle Parry-Slater,
CIPD

Key challenges

Engagement

Planning and design are essential, but what really makes a difference is the energy of the facilitator.

Accessibility

Participants will need a stable internet connection, so ideally they should be on a desktop computer - and definitely not using a tablet on a train!

Attendance

People may seem keen to join virtual training then don't show up, or join late. This can be very disruptive for group activities.

Tip: Set expectations

Virtual classrooms are perfect for multi-session programmes, but not everyone will attend them all. How many absences can be accommodated and how will people catch up? For example, by completing extra assignments. Set this out in joining instructions and reinforce this message throughout.

We don't use
the word webinar.
We call our Adobe Connect
sessions virtual learning
events. It shows upfront
that the sessions are
very interactive

**Laura Winstone,
RSPB**

Case study: RSPB

Laura Winstone, Digital Learning Adviser at RSPB, has been using virtual classrooms for several years for drop-in sessions with subject matter experts. Since September 2019, she's also been using them for all inductions for employees and volunteers. The two day inductions include practical work, so no-one is stuck on a computer all day. Moving inductions to the virtual classroom has been a critical culture shift, enabling greater adoption of learning technologies from everyone.

Using virtual classrooms has become the default training system and face-to-face courses are only used as an exception, for hands-on programmes. Virtual learning events cover a wide range of topics, such as coaching, performance and advocacy. They're part of a blended strategy based on learners' SMART objectives and are well rated and supported.

I do like Cisco's
Webex Training Center
as it's designed for 'proper'
online training, but we're
looking at alternatives
simply due to cost

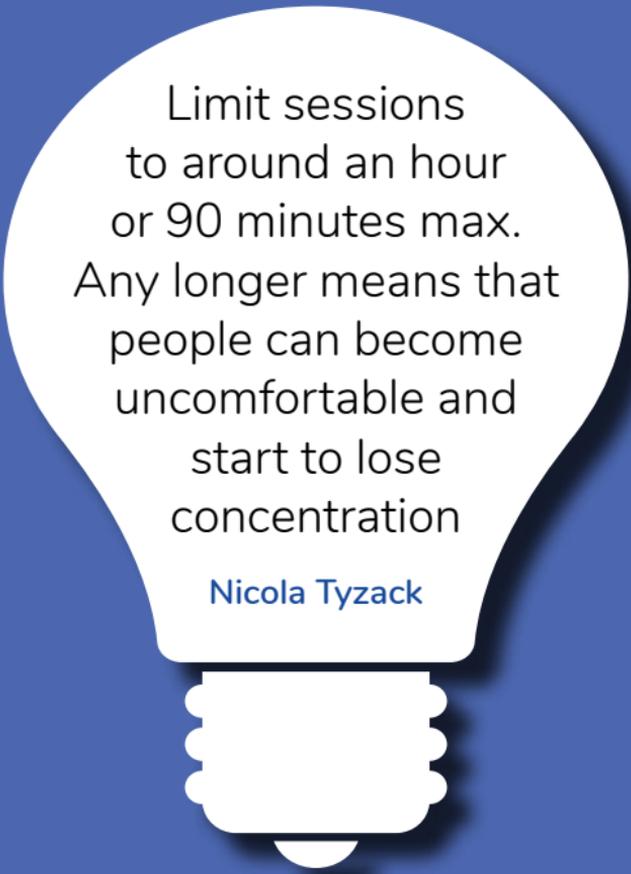**Nicola Tyzack**

Choose a platform

An online whiteboard and easy access to break-out rooms, to work in small groups, are essential. The main providers are:

- **Adobe Connect:** Supports more varied activities than other platforms, but uses more bandwidth so there's a greater risk of disconnection

- **GoToTraining:** Similar functionality to Zoom, but more secure

- **Cisco Webex Training:** Looks dated, but a solid solution which enables collaborative, fun learning

Warning! Webex Meetings, Microsoft Teams and Slack don't have the breakout functionality you need and there are security concerns over Zoom. Prices can also be deceptive. Always check the number of participants and licences allowed.

Tip: Do you really need multiple licences?

With careful planning, one may be enough. I've run 200 sessions in 10 months using just one licence.

Limit sessions
to around an hour
or 90 minutes max.
Any longer means that
people can become
uncomfortable and
start to lose
concentration

Nicola Tyzack

How long is too long?

Opinion varies, but most people agree that virtual classrooms should be short and engaging. A session should ideally be an hour to 90 minutes long, but could be up to two hours for more collaborative work using multiple breakouts.

Warning! Don't be tempted to try and replicate a full day's face-to-face training with three virtual sessions, each two hours long. This is way too much and you will lose people's attention and goodwill.

Tip: Space learning for better retention

There are real benefits to spreading sessions over a few weeks. This will help space out learning, aid retention, and fit around everyone's work. In this way, you can offer other resources and activities to provide a blended programme.

Ensure you know your platform and tools really well. It will remove technical stress so you can focus on making your activities engaging

Jo Cook

What do you need in your toolkit?

A virtual classroom trainer must have:

- A computer connected to the internet with a LAN cable, going from router to computer, for stable connectivity. Buy online for around £10.00

- A good quality headset with a microphone to avoid feedback. This helps you hear participants with poor audio connection

- A second computer connected to Wi-Fi. Presenters can then log into the virtual classroom as a participant, and see the same view as an attendee

Tip: What's your ROI?

Compare the effectiveness and cost of using virtual classrooms against face-to-face. Measure the savings on rooms, refreshments, travel and time - for yourself and your learners.

Read about a simple way to evaluate impact at **clc.link/virtualclassrooms**

Virtual classrooms are incredibly inclusive. Travel can be a real deterrent for anyone with reduced mobility

Record or not record, that is the question...

All platforms come with the option to record sessions, but this doesn't mean you should! A highly interactive two-hour training session with breakout rooms is great to attend but seriously painful to watch.

Pitfalls:

- You might make everyone more self-conscious
- Participants may be less open
- Being able to watch again may inadvertently encourage absenteeism

Benefits: For programmes that run over several weeks or months, recordings can be really helpful. People who miss sessions can catch up and participants can watch again.

Tip: Be open about visibility

Be honest about who will see any recordings.

Give your participants a sweet start when they join. Encourage logging in a few minutes early to test their technology

Michelle Parry-Slater

A checklist to help you get started

To get started using virtual classrooms, you'll need:

✓ **A booking platform:** Use the booking tool on your learning management system (LMS) or use Eventbrite (free for complimentary events)

✓ **Joining instructions:** Create a template to send by email or via your LMS. Include technical requirements and set expectations, for example, ask people to bring a headset, be punctual and join in activities

✓ **Everyone to check their tech:** Most platforms provide a link to a test room which is accessible 24/7

✓ **Orientation slides:** Create slides to welcome participants and show them how to connect to audio and access tools, such as chat and emojis

✓ **Manager and learner commitment:** Iron out any issues around attendance and engagement beforehand
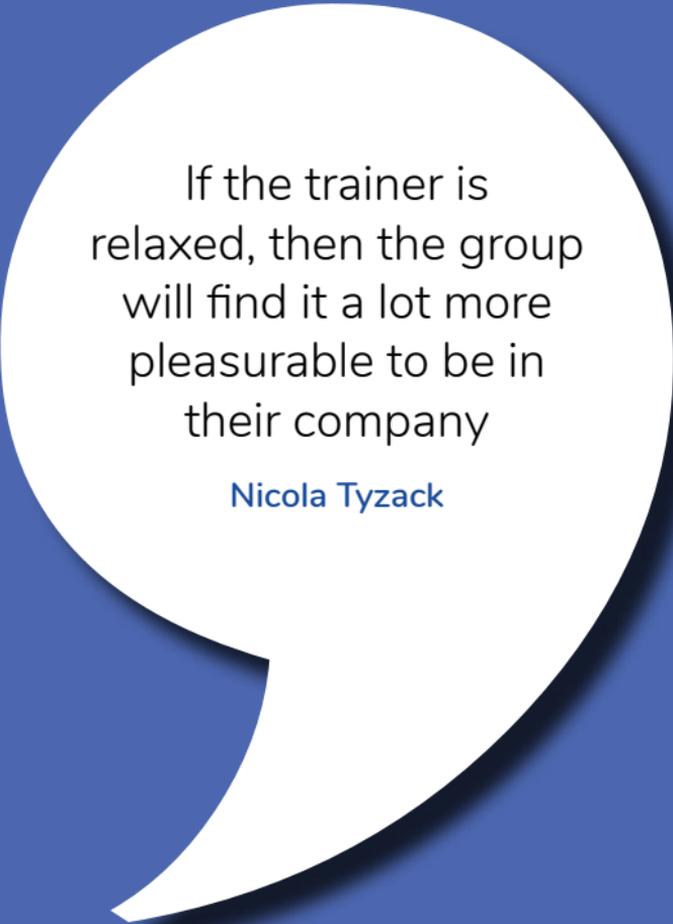
If the trainer is relaxed, then the group will find it a lot more pleasurable to be in their company

Nicola Tyzack

Creating a good first impression

Participants should feel safe to share personal challenges. To help break the ice, facilitators could greet everyone and/or ask them to introduce themselves to others.

A group of 10 to 12 participants is ideal, but larger groups of 15 to 20 can work as long as you're well prepared. Help create a human experience by:

- Asking everyone to keep their web camera on whenever possible
- Using short icebreaker activities

Tip: Virtual classroom etiquette

Ask your learners to: close down other applications and switch off their phones; take part wholeheartedly in all activities; be respectful of everyone's comments. The facilitator can ask everyone to agree by using icons or typing into the chat box. Follow up with unresponsive participants.
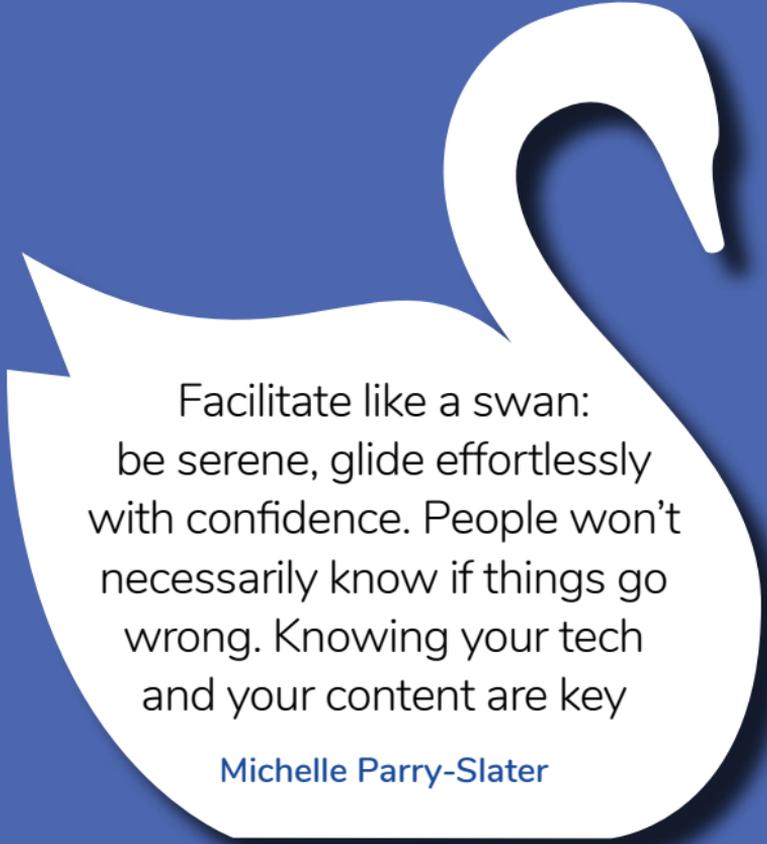
Facilitate like a swan: be serene, glide effortlessly with confidence. People won't necessarily know if things go wrong. Knowing your tech and your content are key

Michelle Parry-Slater

Top tips to solve participants' audio issues

They've forgotten to join the audio conference

🙂 Create a slide to show where the menu is

Their computer audio is off

🙂 Use the chat function to ask them to check

They've muted themselves by accident

🙂 Again, use the chat function to ask them to check

They don't have a headset and this is causing feedback

🙂 Mute them and ask them to use chat. Follow up and see if they can bring a headset next time

I use humour a lot in my delivery and find that attendees react well to some lighthearted fun along the way!

Nicola Tyzack

Have a wingman

Having someone look after technology is essential for new trainers and when breakout rooms are used. This can be done remotely, with everyone in different locations. A producer/co-host can:

- Ensure everyone can hear properly
- Welcome late joiners through chat
- Prepare breakout activities
- Give instructions about using various tools
- Collect poll results
- Take screen captures of key activities
- Check recording has started, if needed
- Monitor chat and relay questions/comments

The facilitator can then focus on content and be more relaxed knowing technology is looked after.

Tip: Ask your producer/co-host to 'tidy up'

Whiteboards can be a bit messy, but text can easily be moved around and categorised.
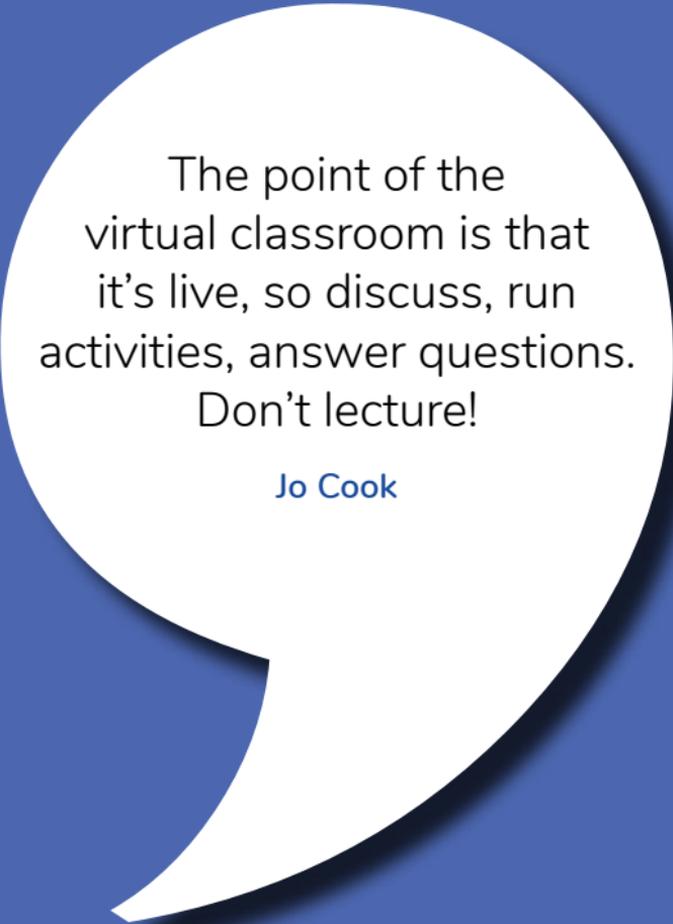
The point of the virtual classroom is that it's live, so discuss, run activities, answer questions. Don't lecture!

Jo Cook

Using polls

Polling is one of the only features in a virtual classroom which is completely anonymous, so it can be a good way to tackle feedback on sensitive issues.

Use polls for:

Quizzes: Most platforms allow the host to set up questions and answers. This can be brilliant for evaluating how much has been retained at the end of a session.

End of session feedback: Instead of using SurveyMonkey (or similar) after a session, ask participants to complete feedback whilst still in the virtual classroom. I guarantee you'll get a higher number of responses.

The thing I love most about virtual classrooms is that everyone can 'speak' at the same time using chat. That can give a voice to people who wouldn't normally contribute

Michelle Parry-Slater

Operating whiteboards

Whiteboards are the virtual equivalent of a flipchart, providing a common place for everyone to make notes. They're massively under-used and they're actually really easy to manage. They're brilliant for creating focus and making everyone's contribution visible.

Giving whiteboard instructions

- Don't get bogged down in technology. Keep it simple

- Start by indicating where the whiteboard tool is located, for example, top right of the screen

- Then describe what the tool looks like in simple words, focusing on colour and shape

- Explain how to use it and what outcome to expect: 'Click on the arrow then click on the screen where you'd like it to appear'

- Repeat the instructions and encourage participants to let you know if they get stuck

One of the great things about virtual classrooms is that extraverts can talk and introverts can comment in the chat at their own pace

Running breakouts

Dividing people online into small groups, to work together in breakout rooms, can be empowering. Running these breakouts can be the most challenging part of facilitation, but the most engaging for participants.

In more than 70 breakout activities that I've monitored, over 90% of people say they feel engaged. When everyone is together, rarely more than 75% say the same.

Top tips for breakout activities from Laura Winstone, RSPB

✓ **Set expectations:** Be clear about what you want people to do

✓ **Establish an alternative means of contact:** How will you contact people if the internet fails and they've switched off their phones?

✓ **Give context and a deadline:** Tell them who they're working with and how long they have for activities
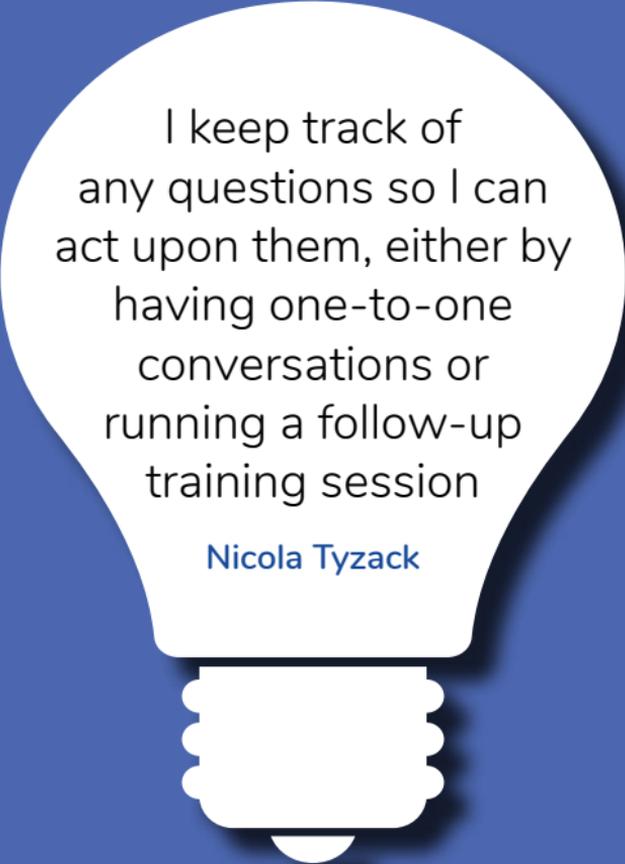
I keep track of
any questions so I can
act upon them, either by
having one-to-one
conversations or
running a follow-up
training session

Nicola Tyzack

Measuring success

Start with the end in mind: What is the goal of your virtual training? How are you going to evaluate your impact?

Beyond the 'happy sheet', plan a formal evaluation for the end of the programme. There are many ways to measure success:

- Derek Mitchell suggests an incredibly simple way to evaluate learning - find out more at **clc.link/virtualclassrooms**

- Use multiple-choice questions

- Create a written case study

- Carry out some short virtual interviews

- Suggest attendees complete learning journals

Counting completions and awarding badges/certificates may be useful, but it doesn't necessarily show understanding. Ensure activities link to learners' SMART objectives. Create accountability to support embedding learning into work. Managers are vital to support this.
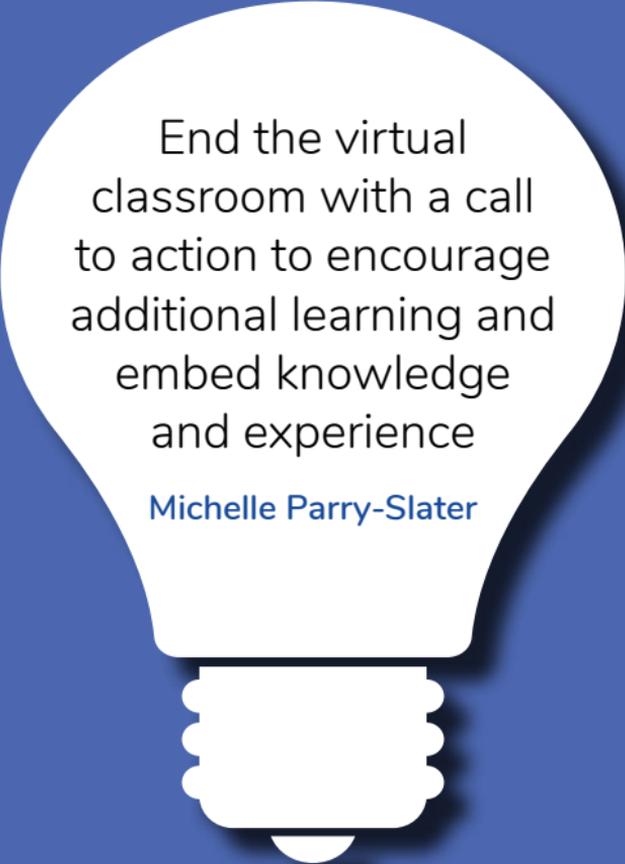
End the virtual classroom with a call to action to encourage additional learning and embed knowledge and experience

Michelle Parry-Slater

Quick tips for success
before a virtual classroom

✓ Know why you're running a virtual classroom - what result do you want to see?

✓ Work with learning objectives in mind, but don't pack too many into one session

✓ Keep text on slides to a minimum and choose fonts and colours which are easy to read

✓ Plan activities which are accessible to all and offer alternatives - some participants may be self conscious about their spelling, for example

✓ Set clear expectations to avoid anyone lecturing. Encourage them to start conversations instead

✓ Try and iron out any lack of engagement, from stakeholders, managers and participants

✓ Think of ways to engage with reserved participants and plan-in time for monitoring contributions

✓ Practice! Ensure everyone is well rehearsed and understands their roles

Quick tips for success **during a virtual classroom**

✓ Send out pre-session activities, such as pre-reading, videos and assessments to avoid wasting time introducing topics

✓ Grab participants' attention as they join

✓ Capture participants' specific objectives at the start

✓ Make it clear that participants are responsible and accountable for their learning

✓ Limit learning objectives to two or three per 90 minutes

✓ Use collaborative tools such as chat, whiteboards and breakout rooms to encourage discussion

✓ Avoid dull lecturing. With practice, you'll get a feel for when people start to 'switch off' so you can avoid it

✓ Review participants' specific objectives at the end

✓ Keep a record of what works, and what doesn't, to continually improve

Quick tips for success
after a virtual classroom

✓ Review and reflect on the virtual classroom and what you need to change for next time

✓ Follow up on what you've promised during the session, such as extra-content, answering questions, providing resources

✓ Ensure trainers and facilitators are accessible to answer follow-up questions

✓ Respond to any newly identified needs by creating job aids and compiling quick-tips to support immediate application

✓ Support learning retention and practical application: encourage use of learning journals for reflective thinking and/or ask people to feed back their experiences to managers, groups and teams

✓ Find out how people are getting on within two or three weeks, and then again three weeks later, to see whether they're applying what they have learned

About the Charity Learning Consortium

More than 190 charitable organisations benefit from collaborating with us. Bringing charities together enables the Consortium to offer cost-effective, quality eLearning to more than a million people in the third sector across the UK.

We've worked with our members to design some unique functionality into a Moodle learning management system that we provide, alongside a whole host of other benefits, as part of an annual subscription.

Our collaborative approach paves the way for eLearning success, with ongoing support, fantastic networking opportunities, relevant workshops and an inspirational Charity Learning Conference & Awards.

charitylearning.org

About the author
Gaëlle Delmas-Watson

Gaëlle is an award winning, certified online facilitator and coach. She founded SyncSkills to provide hosting and production services for virtual classrooms and webinars.

To help bridge the industry's skills gap, Gaëlle created a return-to-work programme, to enable stay-at-home mums to become virtual classroom producers - working flexibly around family commitments.

She works with both British and European organisations to design and implement unique, innovative learning strategies for training organisations and membership bodies.

syncskills.net

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