

84 { Multi-sensory virtual learning – an impossible dream?

“Nope. 3D glasses and a bowl of cold custard don’t make it multi-sensory learning.”

“Damn! We’ll have to try something else....”



Virtual learning is here to stay. The imperative is to make it succeed for 21st century business. This Lucid Thought brings together the themes of virtual, multi-sensory learning and expert facilitation, on which we have already reflected, and asks: **“Is the facilitation of multi-sensory virtual learning an impossible dream, or an achievable goal?”**

Enabled by ever-improving technology, capable not only of increasing convenience and reducing cost but also of improving learning outcomes, the business case for virtual learning is clear. The challenge is getting it right. We put massive focus on facilitating high-value learning events, workshops and other

meetings using innovative learning approaches that engage participants using multiple senses and learning preferences. This makes it easy for participants to learn and for clients to achieve their objectives.

Early attempts by some organisations were flawed, with the old media just ‘virtualised’. The materials that would have been studied in a classroom were just put on-line, perhaps with the addition of a few podcasts or videos, but essentially a virtual version of a ‘chalk and talk’ approach.

This reminds us of one of our all time favourite cartoons– also featured in Lucid Thought 5...



Herein lies the challenge in the design of lots of learning events.

People are taught things, but are they able to apply what they’ve learned?

For virtual learning to be effective, we need to draw on all we know about **how adults learn** and to be far more creative about designing programmes that bring actual benefit, rather than accepting second-rate learning at reduced costs. A key challenge is that an important part of the learning process for many people is the interaction with others, and the opportunity to practice new techniques and skills in a safe environment. Conceptual and possibly reflective learners may embrace ‘virtualised’ media and find it a great way to learn, but we **also need to engage those people who learn through discussion and practical application.**

We know from our use of Accelerated Learning, an approach designed to improve recall by drawing primarily from the work of Howard Gardner, a Harvard Professor who popularised understanding of multiple intelligences, that the key is to design sessions that use as many of the 'intelligences' as possible. This means integrating auditory/musical, linguistic, visual/spatial, bodily/physical, mathematical/logical, intrapersonal and interpersonal stimuli as far as possible.

Since 2007 we have been fortunate enough to work through Cranfield School of Management within the Project Academy for an international oil company. The design of this academy has taken blended learning very seriously indeed, and our flagship course – a 72 hour risk and decision-making event – combines eight weeks of virtual learning with a four day face-to-face event. What we've learned, having run the event more than 20 times, is that **the virtual phase of the learning is a fantastic way to achieve many things**. Not only do we use the virtual phase to share knowledge (so there's reading, video and audio recordings involved), but it's also a great way to share experiences (on facilitated teleconferences, and through small groups working together on a problem). In addition it's a great way to get participants reflecting on their experiences and the barriers to improvement in their workplace and sharing this in a much more detailed way than would be achieved in a classroom. **The link between the virtual and face-to-face course is an agenda for skills development and further discussion that the group has created for themselves**. The face-to-face course as a result has zero 'input' in terms of new knowledge, but a continuous facilitated discussion about what works and what doesn't work supported by practical exercises to try out new approaches and skills. The work in the virtual phase ensures that participants start skills development from the same knowledge base.

We know effective learning in the classroom is much more than 'death by PowerPoint' with the occasional disconnected exercise thrown in. Likewise effective virtual learning is much more than a few podcasts and voice-over PowerPoints.

We offer an increased number of carefully designed virtual

learning events to our clients, in support of our face-to-face interventions. We are now launching innovative wholly virtual offerings. The first event is a collaboration between ourselves and Penny Pullan at Making Projects Work. In their book, Ruth and Penny have shown how facilitation of risk management can add massive value. Starting very soon they will facilitate a virtual coaching programme designed for anyone who is asked to lead face-to-face or virtual sessions looking at the identification and management of risk.

We are exploring possible futures with **truly blended learning, facilitated virtually**, but integrating reading, listening, watching, reflecting, discussing, practicing and action planning, i.e. engaging multiple intelligences, and therefore your learning preferences.

As we put our ideas into practice, we will share our learning of what works, what needs to be improved and what opportunities emerge.

Multi-sensory virtual learning is not an impossible dream – we just need to be more creative and tap into our understanding of how people learn. The value to individuals, organisations and the environment is huge, if we get it right. Please come on the journey with us.

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Ruth Murray-Webster, Sergio Pellegrinelli & Peter Simon

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