Honing Virtual Facilitation Skills by Gandyassociates

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Facilitating a virtual meeting or leading a training session online can be intimidating. I certainly felt that way in the weeks preceding Gandyâ€™s collaborative efforts with ACCES and RBC Royal Bank to design and implement an online corporate English language training course. As designated trainer for this project, my primary task was to deliver the curriculum to a group of 12 participants virtually â€“ something I had never tried before. Below are some of the strategies I used to build my confidence and adapt my facilitation skills. As you read the tactics, consider how you might apply the suggestions to your companyâ€™s online training.

Gain confidence by playing

If your company has, or is planning to use, a particular online meeting software platform, investigate the application. Find out if you can download a trial version. After downloading the software, start experimenting with all of the functionalities available. By setting up mock meetings with colleagues, friends, and even family members, you can learn a lot about the limitations of the platform and hone your skills. As these mock sessions are stress free, treat them as fun learning experiences. Feedback from your volunteers is invaluable, so solicit suggestions and tips from your volunteers as you turn on/off webcams, open whiteboards, share documents etc.

Telegraph your intentions to avoid dead air

All business English training facilitators are multitasking in the classroom. In addition to attempting to deliver the curriculum in a variety of stimulating ways, language trainers are modelling the language, listening for accuracy, providing feedback, answering questions, presenting new language, encouraging participation and adapting the lesson to suit the participantsâ€™ particular needs. All of this can be done virtually tooâ€¦with one adaptation: facilitators might find it beneficial to telegraph their intentions.

Telegraphing, or announcing, what is happening or what is about to happen will eliminate the eerie silence that often accompanies shifts from looking at a PowerPoint slide to creating break out rooms for participants to practise the communication tactic of the session.

In an in-person training session, participants can see the instructor stand up, walk over to a flipchart, or pick up a marker. However, the virtual environment provides no such visual cues. To overcome this, I found it useful to vocalize my intentions. Here are some examples:

Iâ€™m opening up a new whiteboard.

Iâ€™m setting up the break out rooms.

Iâ€™m going to open a survey and when it opens Iâ€™d like you to read the question and select your answer.

Although the above tactic will increase teacher talk time, something normally shunned, the benefits of avoiding uncomfortable moments of dead air are far greater.

Engage participants with the technology

Multi-view webcams, VOIP microphones, chat capability, shared whiteboards, check marks to

indicate a â€œyesâ€• and â€œXâ€• marks to indicate a â€œnoâ€•, pointers, drawing toolsâ€¦and the list g instructor, using the technology is good. However, encouraging your participants to use it is even better. Although certain functions are solely in the hands of the presenter, e.g., the microphones and webcams, participants become highly motivated when they are given face time and hands-on time.

Adapt your old ways to the new medium

Just because you are using something new doesnâ€™t mean you have to abandon your old ways. For an in-person session, I like to arrive early so I can set up the whiteboard and/or flipcharts. For my virtual class, I do the same thing. As for calling upon participants to provide input, I love when participants call on each other as opposed to relying on me to do it. In person, I indicate with a gesture; in the online world, I provide the speaker with a visual cue such as drawing an arrow or highlighting another participantâ€™s name. Keep in mind that the participants are the same, the material is the same, YOU are the sameâ€¦only the medium is new.

As a final note, remember that all learning is continuous. Iâ€™m still learning by playing, streamlining my telegraphing language, utilizing the technological functions, and investigating how I can adapt some of my favourite in-person techniques to the virtual world.

Are you planning to host a meeting or conduct a training online? How will you use these strategies to hone your skills? Share your ideas by leaving a comment.

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