

Best Practices for Polling in Virtual Classrooms

By Darlene Christopher, Sr Learning Officer, World Bank Group

A high level of interactivity and audience engagement is vital for successful virtual classroom deliveries. Most virtual classroom platforms offer a simple but effective interactivity feature: the poll. Well-designed polls can enhance your session and give a boost to your audience engagement. Poorly designed polls can frustrate your audience and have the opposite effect. To avoid such pitfalls, one should think of polls as ‘mini-surveys.’ We can apply best practices from surveys in a virtual classroom to maximize the results of polling.

This article will explore the keys to designing and delivering effective polls during a virtual classroom or synchronous learning session. Instructional designers who design and develop virtual classroom events and those who facilitate these events will find practical tips to improve the effectiveness of polling. While this article focuses specifically on polls for training events delivered via virtual classroom, the techniques discussed apply to other types of live web-based events including team meetings, marketing events, online focus groups and more.

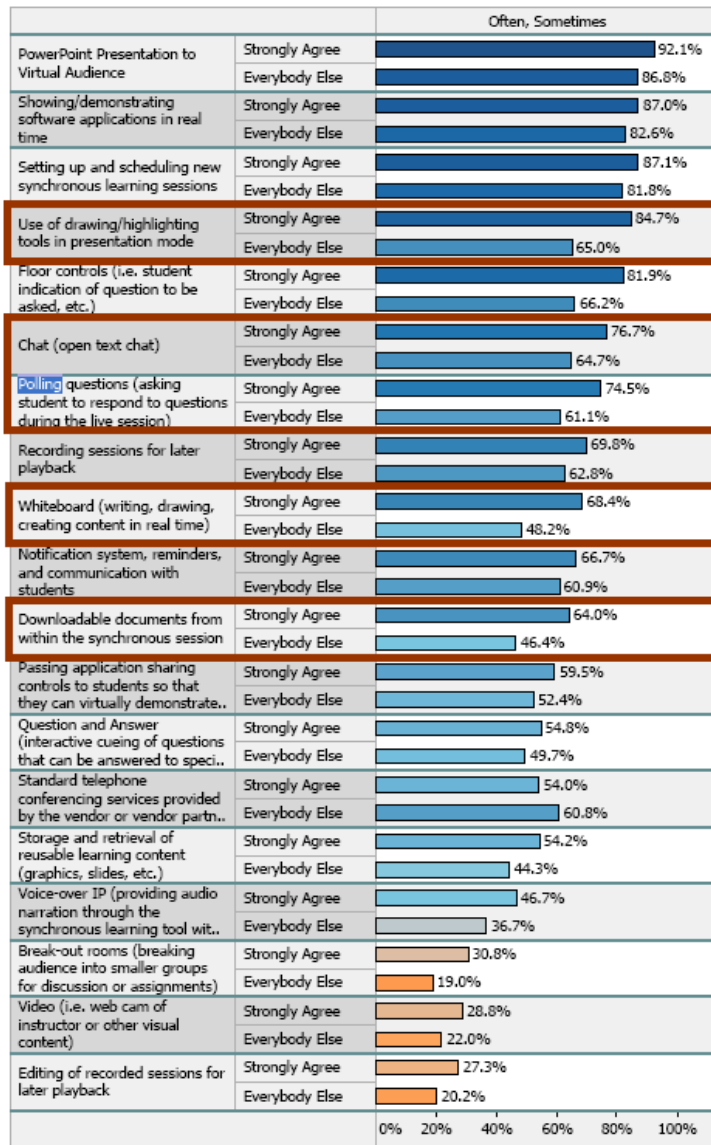
What is Polling and Why Use It?

Polling allows the facilitator to post questions to participants and display poll results in real time. It’s one of the easiest ways to interact with the audience in a virtual classroom, and it is also fast, fun and scalable. Typically, a facilitator posts a poll and participants immediately begin responding. Both facilitators and participants watch as the poll results keep changing in real time until all responses are collected. An audience new to polling in a virtual classroom will find it especially fun to see responses and immediate feedback in real time. You can see if others responded like you to an opinion question, if you selected the right answer to a quiz question and more. It’s an easy way to engage participants new to virtual classroom as these participants may be reluctant to speak or type in the chat box but will often jump right in and respond to a poll. Additionally, polling is scalable: whether you have an audience of five or 500, a live web poll instantly tallies responses from as many participants as your virtual classroom platform accommodates.

This real time questioning and answering provides both the facilitator and participants with immediate feedback on topics relevant to the content. Polling can reveal interesting information about the audience’s background, their knowledge level and opinions on the topics of your session, and a range of other data. Guild members also believe that using features such as polls help produce effective learning via virtual classroom, according to the

June 2008 [360 Report on Synchronous Learning Systems](#). According to this research, 74.5% of respondents who use the poll feature “strongly agree that synchronous learning can be as effective as classroom instruction” vs. 61.1% of respondents who are not strong believers in synchronous learning (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Source: The eLearning Guild Research

However, just because it's easy and interesting to poll the audience, doesn't mean that a live session should be loaded with polling questions. Polling should never be done for the sake of polling – it should be done with a specific purpose in mind. For example, polling may be done to learn information about the audience, to quiz participants, to allow participants to self-reflect or to evaluate your session in real-time.

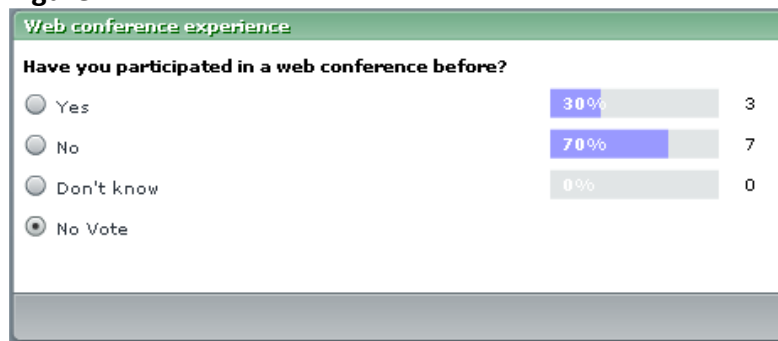
The rest of this article will cover best practices for designing and implementing first-rate polls for virtual classrooms. Keep in mind that writing polls and determining how to integrate them into your session is an iterative process. As you start to develop your session outline you may see places where a poll will naturally fit into the flow of the session. If you are developing a PowerPoint presentation, adding a place holder slide for the poll allows you to “bookmark” the spot where you think the poll will work. Continue with the development of the content of your session since at this point you don't need to fully develop the poll. As you start to finalize the content of the session you can begin writing the polls. By working in this order, you prevent the misstep of polling for polling's sake.

Designing Polls

One way to think about polls in a virtual classroom is to consider them essentially mini surveys. Think about a recent survey that you took or perhaps designed: it most likely included a few multiple-choice questions and the purpose of the questions in the survey was to gain feedback from an audience. Sounds a bit like a poll, right? Since surveys and polls share many similarities it makes sense to review best practices for surveys and keep them in mind when writing polls for the virtual classroom.

Let's begin by breaking down the poll into two parts: (1) the question or comment line and (2) the responses. The question or comment line is the statement that your participant will respond to. Responses are the list of answers your participants choose from (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Best practices for formulating questions include:

- **Keep it short**

The question should be clearly and concisely written, using plain language. Review each word of your question statement to make sure it's necessary, simplifying any unclear language. An example of a wordy question is: "If given a choice of taking a self-directed course or an instructor-led course to learn about corporate governance, which would you select?" This question can be reworded and shortened but still maintain the essence of the question: "Do you prefer a self-directed or instructor-led course to learn about corporate governance?"

- **Avoid double-barreled questions**

A double-barreled question contains two issues or ideas presented in a single question. For example, "How often do you search for and enroll in classes using the learning management system?" A person who searches for classes on a regular basis but never enrolls would have difficulty answering this question and if they did, the validity of the poll results would be questionable. Breaking this question into two questions solves the problem: "How often do you search for classes using the learning management system" and "How often do you enroll in classes using the learning management system."

- **Eliminate acronyms or unclear language**

If your organization is anything like mine, we speak an alphabet soup of acronyms which have a tendency to creep into our writing. Avoid acronyms or spell them out in the question. For example: "How often do you use the new LMS?" Don't assume that your participants know what LMS stands for – spell out "learning management system." Thus, a clearer way to write this question is, "How often do you use the new learning management system?"

- **Avoid leading or biased questions**

A leading question prompts the participants to respond in a particular way. For example, "Why do you prefer course delivered via the web or in a classroom for further training on project management?" assumes that the respondent prefers web-based training. Rewording this question to "Which of the following delivery modes do you prefer to receive further training on project management?" eliminates the bias of the question.

Best practices for formulating responses include:

- **Use plain language**

Just like the polling question, use plain and simple language when writing a list of responses. Keeping the responses short and to the point allows the audience to quickly scan the list and locate their choice. Using plain language prevents the list of poll responses from becoming a speed bump in the flow of the live session.

- **Limit answer choices**

Keep the number of possible responses limited to prevent overwhelming the audience with choices. Polls are aimed at quickly obtaining information from participants, and they should not be so long or difficult to answer so that they become a hindrance to the flow of the session.

- **Use mutually exclusive responses**

The list of responses also needs to be mutually exclusive for a multiple-choice question. For example, if we ask the participants where they are right now and the list of responses is “At work, At home, At a hotel,” how would someone respond who is working in a home office? Also, review your responses with number ranges carefully to make sure that the ranges don’t overlap. If a person had been at an organization for 3 months, how would he or she choose from these responses: “0-3 months, 3-6 months”? For either of these examples the overlap in the responses needs to be eliminated.

- **Use number increments in equal amounts**

Check for balance in your responses with number ranges. For example, if you ask participants how much time they would devote to an elearning course on corporate governance, the responses could be in 20 minute increments: “Less than 20 minutes, 21-40 minutes, 41-60 minutes, More than 60 minutes.”

- **Include options for outliers**

The range of responses needs to include an option for anyone who may be an “outlier.” An outlier is someone whose response varies greatly from the rest of the group. Review your responses and make sure that you have offer answer choices for everyone, not just the most common cases. Common outlier responses include “Other,” “Not applicable,” or “None of the above.”

- **Include a “Don’t Know” option if appropriate**

Include a “don’t know” option for those questions where the participant may not understand what you are asking or may not be able to respond to the question. Offering a

“don’t know” option allows the entire audience to respond to the poll. If you are monitoring the number of poll responses, you need to include a “don’t know” option when appropriate so that there is an answer choice for everyone. If you have 20 participants, you want to see 20 responses, or close it. Remember, at no point during the session do you want the user to feel boxed in and think that the poll doesn’t apply to him/her. This can quickly turn an engaged user into a disengaged user.

Introductory, Main Content and Conclutory Polls

The type of polls you utilize will vary depending on the learning objectives of your session and other factors, however, all sessions have a beginning, middle and end. If we divide a session into these three parts, we can think about polls to use at the beginning of a session, during the main content of the session, and at the conclusion of a session.

Let’s begin by thinking about opening or introductory polls. Ask yourself what would be good to know about the audience, or for the audience to know about each other, prior to the main content of the session. Introductory polls serve the dual purpose of warming up the audience and getting them used to the polling feature. For this reason, opening polls should always be inviting and non-threatening. After all, this may be the first time you are meeting some or all of your participants and it’s best to welcome and engage them, not intimidate with a difficult or intrusive question. For example, an opening poll could be “Where are you located?” or “How many years have you worked for x company?” Also, given that your audience may potentially consist of participants from around the globe, you may also consider questions such as “Is English (Spanish, Arabic, etc.) your first language?” Responses to these types of polls give the facilitator essential information about the background of the audience to help guide the session.

Once your session is underway, you can move onto different types of polls that relate directly to the learning objectives and content of the session. You may want to lead off each section of content with a poll to gauge the audience’s knowledge level of the topic. For example, “How many years of work experience do you have doing data analysis?” If you plan to share statistics or data, an interesting way to stimulate the audience is to pose questions about the data prior to revealing the data. For example, a sample poll covering a data point would be, “What percent of accredited universities in the U.S. offer online degrees?” After the audience has a chance to respond, display the poll results, juxtaposed against the actual data. For example, if most participants selected “20%,” reveal those results to the audience against the actual statistical results. Integrating polls into the main content of the session using these techniques will maintain the attention and interest of the

audience. Furthermore, polls that address the main content of a session help break up the one-way nature of a presentation by engaging the audience.

As your session concludes you may post polls to quiz the audience on what was covered and gather feedback on the session. Using quiz questions at the end of the session is a good way to highlight key points you want your participants to remember from the training. An evaluation poll at the end of a session provides real-time feedback about a session which may be especially useful if you are going to repeat the session.

Preparing to Poll in a Live Session

Now that you have designed a set of well-written polls, the final step is to implement them in the live session. Most webinar tools allow you to pre-build your polls and this is highly recommended. Preparing as much as possible prior to the actual delivery of your session will help ensure that the polling goes smoothly.

- **Rehearsing**

When rehearsing for a live session, make sure that you include your polls as you practice. Decide who will be in charge of posting the polls and exactly when the poll will be posted. Using the notes section of PowerPoint is an easy way to make sure that everyone is on the same page regarding the timing of the poll.

Practice how you will introduce the poll and comment on poll responses. Make sure that you have something to say about the poll results. Have you ever participated in a virtual classroom where a poll was posted, responses collected, then the session continued with no comment from the speakers about the poll results? I like to refer to this as *pointless polling*. This situation can be very frustrating for participants who may wonder why bother answering a poll if the facilitator ignores the poll after responses are collected. If you are going to take the time to post a poll and collect responses, the onus is on the facilitator to comment on the poll results. To prevent *pointless polling* in your session, make sure the facilitator practices commenting on the poll responses during the rehearsal. Since you may not have actual responses on the screen when you rehearse, it will be a good time to practice commenting on poll responses with various results. If the audience responds completely opposite of what was expected, what will the facilitator say? It's always best to be prepared for any poll results, even the unexpected results. Adding comments in the notes section will help prepare the facilitator for a range of results.

- **Anonymous polling**

Check to see if your platform has the option of anonymous polling. Anonymous polling allows you to engage more openly with your audience and this is the technique that I prefer. Be sure to tell your audience whether or not poll responses are anonymous at the beginning of your session. You may want to remind participants early in the session again about the anonymity of the polls in case some people joined late.

- **Broadcasting Poll Results**

Many synchronous learning systems offer flexibility when displaying poll results. Generally, there are two options for displaying poll results: broadcast results instantly, as the participants respond or broadcast the results after a delay at the moment of the facilitator's choosing. Figure 3 shows the difference the participant sees before and after the poll results are broadcast, when you choose to delay the broadcasting of the results.

Figure 3



How you use the broadcast feature will depend on the purpose of your poll. In an opening poll it makes sense to display results instantly so that participants can see their interaction with the platform in real time. With knowledge check and opinion polls, I prefer to delay the broadcasting of results to get a more “honest” answer from participants. The downside to broadcasting results immediately for this type of poll is that the first responses that appear on the screen will tend to influence the participants who have not yet responded. Delaying the broadcast also gives the learner more time for self-reflection on the question. Whichever technique you choose, be sure to include instructions in the notes section of your PowerPoint or other production notes for the session facilitators to indicate how and when you will broadcast results.

Final Thoughts

In summary, putting some extra time and thought into your polling questions and how you will utilize them during a session will help you maximize the polling feature during a virtual classroom. Remember, polling is just one of the many tools facilitators have at their disposal to engage the audience. The rule of thumb for virtual classrooms is to engage with

your audience approximately every three minutes. This means that a one-hour session needs about 20 interactive moments. If one-third of the interactive moments were polls, that would translate to approximately seven polls per hour. Of course, the objectives and content of your session will drive the final number of polls you use. Just be sure not to over-utilize the polling feature and tire your audience or making polling a nuisance. On the other hand, don't under-utilize this rich and interactive tool which can greatly enhance your participant's learning experience. Over time as you gain experience using polls you will get a better feel for how often to poll and how to make the best use of the polling features of your webinar platform. Keep in mind the tried and true techniques from surveys when writing polls and you will be on your way to creating first-class polls for your learners.

Author:

Darlene Christopher, CPTD has designed and delivered virtual training programs for global audiences for 15 years and has authored a book, [The Successful Virtual Classroom](#), on the subject. She is a Senior Knowledge & Learning Officer at the World Bank in Washington D.C.

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