

FACILITATING IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM: How to Compensate for Lack of Body Language

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SUMMARY

Increasingly facilitators are finding themselves training online participants in virtual classrooms...participants they can't see or make eye contact with. Facilitators who rely on their techniques for communicating and interacting with an in-person audience, without making any adjustments for an online audience where both the facilitator and participants need to overcome a lack of body language, will soon become frustrated and frustrate their audience as well.

One key challenge in a virtual classroom is that participants and trainers cannot “read” and interpret each others’ body language as they do in a physical classroom. Just as content needs to be adjusted for a virtual classroom delivery, the trainer’s facilitation technique needs to be adjusted to make up for the absence of body language.

Facilitators need to first adjust their spoken language, then use the interactive features in the virtual classroom to supplement their language.

Adjustments to Language

Facilitators who have taken presentation skills training or studied communications will be familiar with the research that shows that the impact of the speaker’s message is based largely on how the message is conveyed including body language, posture and gestures, rather than the message itself. Borg (2008) found that 93 percent of communication is based on nonverbal behaviors.

Most facilitators have naturally mastered a style of communication in the classroom that is as much about “form” as it is about the message itself. They use eye contact, gestures and physical movement in the classroom to convey their messages. And for many facilitators, their first attempt at online facilitation makes them acutely aware of the extent to which they rely on visual cues and body language in the physical classroom – a fact they may not have even been aware of until they tried to facilitate online.

At first thought, a web cam displaying the facilitator on a portion of the screen visible to all participants appears to be the solution. However even a high-quality web cam cannot fully replace the physical separation between facilitator and participants. Furthermore, if a web cam is used, it’s typically one-way which means the speaker cannot see participants.

Since participants cannot “read” the facilitator’s body language as they do in a physical classroom, the facilitator needs to adjust their word choice to make it clearer and more purposeful. Often in a physical classroom precise language is not as important because participants watch for gestures and body language to fill in any knowledge gaps or even watch other participants to understand what the facilitator is saying or to understand what they are supposed to do to complete an exercise, for example. However, without the visual cues offered by body language, the facilitator needs to adjust the language used in the classroom to make it as clear and precise as possible. Whenever the facilitator wants participants to take an action such as respond to a question or turn to a page in the workbook, specific and purposeful language is needed so that participants can follow along. When asking participants to respond, tell them how to respond as well – by typing in the chat area, by verbalizing out loud – and if it doesn’t matter how they respond, tell them that as well. By adjusting the spoken word, the facilitator will prevent misunderstanding and frustration from participants.

Annotate While Speaking

In a physical classroom, the facilitator may use a laser pointer or finger to point to a specific part of a slide projected onto a screen. Or, the facilitator may gesture by making a big circle to indicate the cyclical nature of the steps displayed on a slide while speaking about the slide.

Most virtual classroom platforms include a pointer device as well as annotation tools such as a highlighter and writing instruments. As the facilitator speaks they should use these annotation tools generously but wisely to emphasize key information on the screen. For example, as the facilitator displays a slide, he underlines or circles key words while speaking, uses the pointer tool to point to a specific part of a graph or table or draws a circle around a cycle of steps for emphasis. Annotating the screen while speaking helps the audience know where to focus their attention and it also approximates gesturing when done properly.

Some virtual facilitators like to stand up while speaking so they can gesture as if they had a physical audience in the room. Even though the participants can’t see body language, they will hear it in the speaker’s voice. Note that if the speaker stands, a second person is needed to run the controls on the screen such as forwarding the slides and annotating the screen.

Obtain Participant Feedback

Facilitators in physical classrooms rely heavily on participant body language such as nodding heads to indicate agreement or blank stares to indicate confusion. Since facilitators cannot see virtual participants, they also need to adjust their facilitation technique to compensate for the absence of participants’ body language. Most virtual classrooms offer a variety of interactive features that the facilitator can use to obtain feedback from participants to make up for the lack of body language. However, simply having access to the feedback features in the virtual classroom is not enough: the facilitator needs to actively guide participants to use various features throughout a session.

Typical interactive features are listed in Table 1. The facilitator should become familiar with the chat, instant feedback and polling features to make the best use of them to elicit the feedback from participants.

Table 1: Typical Interactive Features in a Virtual Classroom

Feature	Description
Chat	Participants send text messages in real time to all participants, the facilitator, or each other.
Instant Feedback	Participants to select an icon to raise a hand, agree, disagree or other status icons that give instant feedback.
Polls	Participants respond to multiple choice and true/false questions created by the facilitator.

It's good to set the tone for an interactive session by getting participants used to giving you feedback using the interactive features right from the start of the session. Weave early interaction into the first few minutes of your session by asking participants to type their location into chat, respond to a poll about their background, and "raise" their hand if they can hear the audio clearly, for example.

Throughout their session, facilitators can use the interactive features in a variety of ways to get feedback from participants. Examples of how to adapt techniques used in the physical classroom to a virtual classroom are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Physical Classroom Facilitation Techniques Adapted to the Virtual Classroom

Physical Classroom	Virtual Classroom
Facilitator calls out a list of choices and asks participants to raise their hand when they hear the description of their experience level with the topic to be discussed (no experience, 1-2 years, 3-4 years, etc.)	Facilitator posts a poll with a question about experience level with the topic to be discussed and asks participants to mark the response on the screen that correspond to their experience level.
Facilitator makes a comment or statement then relies on head nods or frowns to gauge agreement or disagreement.	Facilitator asks participants to use instant feedback features if they agree or disagree with a statement (feedback features vary by system, for example: checkmark for agree, x for disagree, etc.)
While explaining a difficult concept, facilitator scans audience and watches for nods or quizzical looks to judge comprehension.	Facilitator tells participants to use instant feedback features to indicate if they understand and are ready to move on or not (feedback features vary by system, for example: smiley face = move on, sad face = confused, or thumbs up = move on, thumbs down = still has questions.
Facilitator watches participants to see when they look up to indicate they are done reading a document.	Facilitator tells participants to type 'done' into the chat box when they are done reading a document.
Facilitator scans the room to look for participants with a raised hand.	Facilitator checks the part of the screen where participants can click to 'raise their hand'

Ask Then Pause

With in-person participants, body language is immediate which means the facilitator is used to a certain pace when interacting with participants. The facilitator needs to be aware that virtual classroom participants need more time to give feedback because they typically must physically act such as click on a part of the screen, type, un-mute their phone, etc. There may also be slight delays on the screen after a participant takes action.

If the facilitator poses a question or asks participants to use a feature in the room and the response is not immediate, the best technique is to pause. The sound of silence while facilitating a virtual classroom session may be uncomfortable, but that silence is important and worth getting used to. After posting a poll, typing a question in the chat box or asking a question verbally, the facilitator should pause and give the audience time to respond. Some silence is okay and virtual classroom facilitation doesn't mean the facilitator has a license to conduct an un-ending monologue – that's pure "sage on the stage".

When asking a question your audience needs a few seconds to process the question and think of a response or review the poll response options to determine how they will respond. If respondents will be typing their response, they will need even more time to respond. Resist the urge to jump in and break the silence – let your participants fill the pause instead. Most of the time you will be pleasantly surprised when your participants chime in with their ideas and thoughts.

Rehearse Your Session

Getting used to facilitating where you need to adjust your language and use interactive features to make up for the lack of body language takes time. Facilitators should spend time rehearsing their sessions to get used a new style of facilitation. Rehearsing with a mock online audience allows the facilitator to fine tune their communication techniques and get used to the features of the virtual classroom. Ask your mock audience participants to give you feedback on their level of engagement, your voice and use of annotation tools. If you cannot rehearse with others, use the recording feature in the virtual classroom, then listen and watch the screen carefully to see how your communication techniques are working.

CONCLUSION

Bridging the distance between facilitator and participants requires a variety of facilitation techniques to make up for the absence of body language. Facilitators who understand the difference between face-to-face and online facilitation and adjust their facilitation techniques to meet the needs of a virtual audience will achieve success in the virtual classroom.

By interacting with the online audience, using clear language, annotating the screen and rehearsing these techniques, facilitators will be able to communicate clearly and effectively.

REFERENCES

Borg, J. (2008). *Body Language: 7 Easy Lessons to Master the Silent Language*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.