VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Guide to uploading, organising and hosting

Quilotoa x RISE UP

Contents

01

Introduction

With employees doing their jobs remotely and hybrid working becoming ever more prevalent, the world of work is changing. So too is the training sector. After numerous lockdowns, face-to-face training has been put on the back burner, while forms of remote tuition, such as e-learning and virtual classrooms, have come to the fore. Now, what was initially thought of as a temporary solution has become a seemingly permanent fixture, and virtual classrooms are here to stay. So, how can you make the most of this new tool?

a) What digital can do for traditional players

When we talk about education, we are first and foremost talking about how knowledge, expertise and skills are passed from one individual to another, or to a group of people. Over time, the concept of education has dramatically evolved, and technology has turned the "conventional" model of face-to-face learning on its head. Traditional classrooms have slowly given way to virtual teaching and other forms of distance learning. Companies are now turning to online methods such as e-learning to train their employees. There are plenty of reasons why this is such a popular choice, such as lower training costs, increased capacity and wider accessibility. **But do you really know just how much of an impact technology has had on the very idea of education?**

Digital technologies have played a major role in transforming professional training. Firstly, they have totally changed the way that training takes place. Nowadays, training often takes place over the long term as part of a complete programme, which often consists of different modules and a mix of learning methods.

More than just changing the timescales, digital technology has redefined the way in which training takes place. We are now witnessing a transition from event-based training—focused around in-person learning in a classroom setting—to process-based learning. This approach allows for both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Synchronous learning means that learners and trainers share the same space, be it virtual or physical, at the same time, making it easy to discuss topics. Meanwhile,

asynchronous learning methods, such as e-learning modules, do not include real-time interactions between participants.

It's important to note that synchronous learning isn't always in-person, just as asynchronous learning needn't be remote. Here are some examples:

- **In-person, synchronous learning:** classroom training
- **Remote, synchronous learning:** virtual classrooms
- **Remote, asynchronous learning:** e-learning modules
- **In-person, asynchronous learning:** sub-group activities, individual exercises, quizzes, etc.

According to **Albert Bandura's social learning theory**, starting from a young age, we learn primarily by observing and imitating the behaviours of those around us. With this in mind, we can think of learning as being driven by our interactions with others. This is why any effective digital learning strategy must allow for interactivity. Three different ways of achieving this have been made possible by the use of technology.

- **Learner–content interaction:** Learners have more freedom to consume training materials—such as quizzes, multiple-choice questions and videos—in their own way
- **Learner–trainer interaction:** Online tools such as web chats and video calls allow learners to contact their trainer outside of face-to-face sessions.
- **Learner–learner interaction:** Learners are able to interact with one another throughout their training programme and can share their knowledge via online messaging, forums and more.
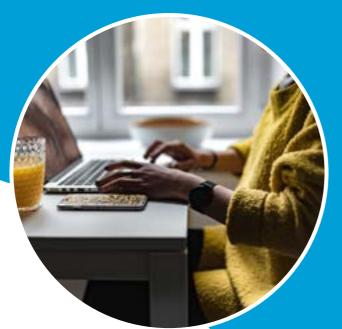
b) The limitations of digital training

There are plenty of benefits that come with digital training, such as lower costs, higher capacity, greater autonomy and flexibility, and the ability to foster interaction between peers. However, it comes with some drawbacks, too.

- Some learners may be **reluctant to use new technologies**, and will require additional time to learn how to use them. When different learners have uneven levels of computing skill, group cohesion can be affected, negatively impacting the training experience.
- There is a need to **invest in equipment** that will allow all learners to take advantage of digital training.
- Existing tools **may not be fit for online training purposes**—for example, a video conferencing app might not allow you to create sub-groups, making it a poor fit for virtual classrooms.
- It can be more **difficult to monitor** how motivated learners are and how they are progressing.
- Learners can **feel isolated** when sitting alone in front of a screen, thus lowering their motivation.
- Trainers must **monitor all the latest developments** in order to keep up to date with fast-evolving technologies.
- Many hours spent in front of a screen can lead to **cognitive fatigue**.

More about cognitive fatigue

Cognitive fatigue is a kind of mental exhaustion that can arise after excessive use of tools such as video conferencing and virtual classrooms. Distance learning can often be more tiring than in-person classes, both because of the visual fatigue brought on by staring at screens and because your brain has to work harder to decipher other participants' body language.

Virtual classrooms: Just a tool, or a learning method in their own right?

02

c) Digital training isn't always remote, but remote learning is always digital

We often conflate digital learning with distance learning, coming to the false conclusion that this kind of training programme will consist of a dull series of e-learning modules. However, using technology doesn't mean doing away with in-person learning, but instead giving it a new lease of life by bringing it into a new way of training.

Training programmes combining e-learning modules, group exercises and in-person sessions are no longer a rarity. Pathways that bring together a variety of training methods, including both synchronous and asynchronous learning, help to maximise learner engagement and increase their chances of success. The face-to-face aspects of such a programme help to maintain ongoing interaction, while the distance learning elements promote flexibility and autonomy.

Organising in-person sessions isn't always easy, however, due to time or budget constraints, or simply logistics. Here, virtual classrooms come out on top. A practical, low-cost option, they make it easy for learners and trainers to meet up at the same time, no matter where they're based.

The lockdowns triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic have made in-person learning impossible. Businesses, schools and other training organisations needed to act quickly in order to keep training activities going. As a result, the use of virtual classrooms has surged during this time period.

Nonetheless, some companies have still paid little or no attention to the concept of virtual classrooms.

a) What is a virtual classroom, anyway?

Virtual classrooms **simulate the experience of a real-life classroom** by bringing together learners and trainers using video conferencing. This allows individuals to see each other, to communicate via audio or messages, and to share text documents, audio and video files—all remotely.

This system helps to ensure that learners do not feel they have been left on their own. Instead, they are part of a wider group even when they're logging in remotely from a computer, tablet or smartphone, and get to speak to their trainer in real time.

A virtual classroom is used by two sets of participants: **trainers** and **learners**. The trainer is responsible for leading the class, while the learners typically attend in groups—though one-on-one classes are sometimes also possible.

Be careful not to confuse virtual classrooms with webinars. Both use **video conferencing** apps, but they are different concepts. During a webinar, one or more experts address a group of people (sometimes hundreds at once!). Much like an in-person seminar, the experts in a webinar generally keep interaction with attendees to a minimum, taking the time to present their points and sometimes taking questions at the end. During a virtual class, however, interaction is a necessity, as the aim is to replicate a traditional

classroom. For example, the trainer may ask participants to work together in small groups. In essence, the aim is to tailor the tools used to the learning objectives and target groups you have in mind.

As a result of the soaring popularity of virtual classrooms, a number of new apps have recently sprung up, while older tools have undergone improvements so as to better meet the challenges of distance learning. **Some of the most popular include:**

- Zoom
- Microsoft Teams
- Google Hangouts
- Adobe Connect Learning
- Webroom
- Glowbl
- GoToTraining
- Skype

b) The positives and negatives of virtual classrooms

Virtual classrooms have proved a practical solution for unprecedented times. However, trainers and learners have come to appreciate not only the convenience it offers, but its many other benefits too. Some even find it to be a more effective option than face-to-face learning!

The first reason for this is its accessibility. Though digital exclusion remains an issue, the vast majority of learners only need a device and an internet connection to be able to access virtual classrooms at the same time as those located far away.

As a result of this, virtual classrooms can also help to shrink our carbon footprint, as no travel is required to use them. They also enable reduced training and accommodation costs. However, some additional expenses must be considered, including:

- **Direct costs**, such as the licence fee for your virtual classroom software of choice
- **Indirect costs**, which are easy to forget but can quickly build up—for example, investing in a computer and webcam, or even the labour costs associated with preparing training sessions.

In terms of interactivity, virtual classrooms do a good job of matching what is possible in person. As well as allowing participants to discuss things with their trainer, it also facilitates group activities, games and other exercises. By enabling such a broad range of learning methods, it helps learners to retain as much information as possible.

Edgar Dale's learning pyramid

This pyramid aims to measure **how much information a learner is able to retain** using each different learning method. It ranks the various approaches according to their potential, from least to most effective. To understand how we are able to truly retain what we learn, we need to take two factors into account. The first is **the number of senses we use**. We can think of the five senses—hearing, sight, touch, taste and smell—as our gateways to the world. The more we use them during training, the more likely we are to remember what we've learned. For example, an interactive video that stimulates our vision and hearing will activate our brain more than a text document that only uses sight. The second factor that comes into play is **the degree of learner participation**. The more active we are when we learn, the more likely we are to retain that knowledge over the long term. As virtual classrooms make a variety of different interactions possible, they are an excellent way to ensure learners retain information.

Lecture course

Reading

Audio-visual

Demonstration

Discussion group

Practice by doing

Teach others

Additionally, virtual classrooms make it much easier to incorporate **sound** into the training experience. In fact, music can be an excellent tool for creating a pleasant working environment for learners. Firstly, it connects the process of training with something enjoyable. Secondly, it helps to boost productivity and promotes concentration. In a virtual classroom setting, the trainer is able to provide appropriate background music for use during individual activities.

Finally, in a virtual classroom environment, **both the trainer and learner are in the same boat**, as both are sitting in front of a screen remotely. This helps to create a more equal dynamic and brings the two sides closer together. While virtual classes may require more planning on the trainer's part, tools such as Zoom make things easier by, for example, allowing them to share only part of their screen, meaning they can take notes that the participants cannot read. This will, however, mean changing the way that training is planned—such as getting rid of animated slideshows in favour of more annotations and commentary.

The limits of virtual classrooms

Amongst the drawbacks of this approach is the difficulty of **keeping remote learners engaged**. Keeping learners' attention is no mean feat in person, and it gets even trickier at a distance. They may, for example, switch their webcams off, leaving the trainer speaking to a blank screen. Worse still, learners may then simply ignore the session and turn their attention elsewhere. In this scenario, it becomes much harder to form a real connection with course participants. Trainers must therefore hone their interpersonal skills so as to ensure that their virtual classes are effective.

What role do cameras play in virtual classrooms?

On the trainer's part, the camera is essential to **establishing eye contact with participants**. This helps them to feel less alone and to analyse how learners react in much the same way as in person.

For the learner, meanwhile, the use of webcams remains divisive. Some feel shy and prefer not to turn on the camera; others may instead focus too much on how they appear on screen, distracting them from the class itself.

How can trainers get learners to turn on their cameras without getting distracted?
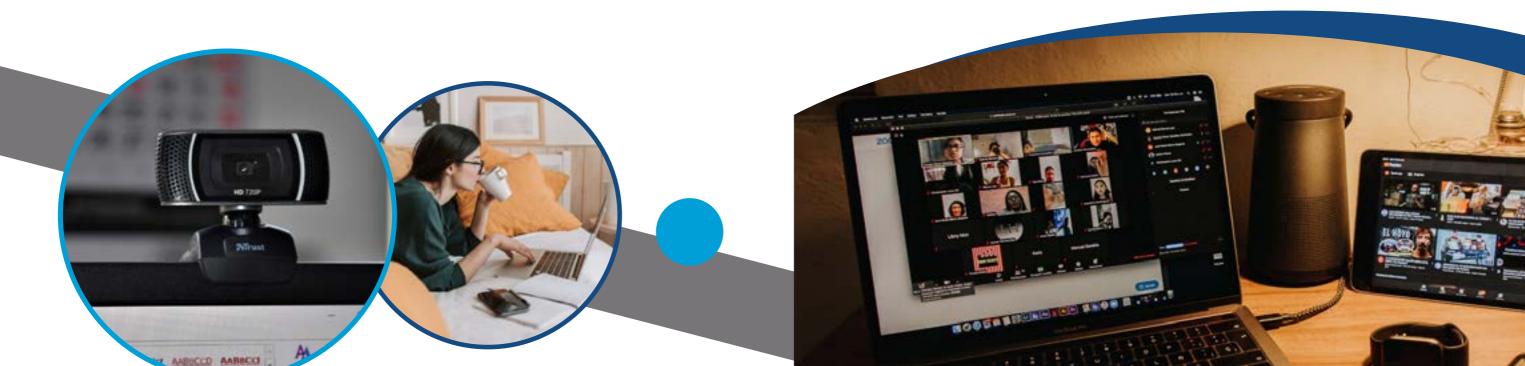
- **Let them know ahead of time.** You can use humour here—for example, when sending out an invitation, tell learners they'll need to change out of their pyjamas because they'll need to turn their camera on. This will give them advance warning and increases the chances that they will pop up on screen of their own accord.
- **Meet up in person** at the start of the training programme. This gives participants a chance to get to know each other, helping them to feel less shy about showing their face in a virtual setting. Additionally, if the classes are part of a broader course, participants may be more likely to turn on their camera so as to not feel excluded from their group.
- Some virtual classroom tools make it possible for you to turn on your camera **without seeing your own image**. This way, learners can see other participants but cannot see themselves, helping them to stay focused on the group rather than their own appearance.

c) A halfway house between in-person and remote training

By now, it should be clear that the virtual classroom is not just a tool for distance learning but a **unique method in its own right**.

It is something of a midpoint between face-to-face and distance learning, as it brings together trainers and participants and allows them to interact with one another, but does so remotely, via the means of an internet connection.

As such, it **combines the advantages of these two approaches**, enabling it to fit perfectly into a hybrid training pathway.

03 Virtual classes as part of a hybrid training programme

a) Building a multimodal programme that engages learners

While virtual classrooms can be considered a learning method in their own right, they can only reach their full potential when they are integrated into a hybrid training programme. This kind of programme may also be called multimodal, or even blended, and refers to **a course that makes use of multiple different learning methods**, including face-to-face sessions, e-learning, virtual classes, social learning and more.

The purpose of this approach is to combine the advantages of these varied methods to create a new form of training that is both engaging and adapted to learners' needs.

So, how can you create a multimodal training programme?

The idea behind hybrid learning is to combine several different learning methods. However, you need to think carefully about how you put them together.

Here's an example of what a hybrid training pathway might look like:

- First of all, if possible, it's a good idea to begin the training with a **face-to-face session**. This allows you to lay the groundwork for the rest of the course, but also helps the trainer and learners to get to know one another.

- Next, **e-learning modules** can be used as a way of providing learners with theoretical knowledge.

- After that, it's time to put theory into practice. This is where **virtual classrooms** can prove most useful. Here, learners can go back over the information they have learned and ask the trainer any questions. There is also an opportunity for participants to take part in group activities or workshops, where they can find practical applications for their knowledge.

- Finally, **assessments** may take place both during and at the end of the course, possibly in the form of online, multiple-choice tests. This allows trainers to assess and confirm the level of proficiency the learners have gained.

This is, of course, just one example of how blended learning can transform training. However, it clearly demonstrates how different learning methods can be used at varying stages of a course, combining to offer learners the best of all worlds. Remember: the whole point of training is to develop participants' skills. The methods employed and the order in which you use them will vary depending on your objectives and goals.

b) Sharing your course via an LMS

Your hybrid training course is ready to share with your learners. Now, you need to be able to **bring everything together in one place** so as to ensure all learners can easily access all of your training materials. How can you offer all of these different learning methods via a single platform? With an LMS, of course!

LMS platforms like Rise Up integrate easily with all of your existing apps. Because it specialises in blended learning, Rise Up enables you to manage in-person sessions, e-learning modules and virtual classes all via the same portal.

How does it work?

- **Managing in-person training:** Using your LMS platform, you can use the calendar to organise all your face-to-face sessions. The built-in map feature even allows you to see where the training will take place. The system also gives you the ability to generate invitations and certificates, as well as to reserve rooms and track attendance. It couldn't be more practical!

- **Virtual classes:** As with your face-to-face sessions, you can organise virtual classes within the platform itself. What's more, you can even access them without leaving the platform, as it integrates with tools such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams.

- **E-learning modules:** The platform's native authoring tool allows trainers to create content directly on the platform. Already prepared your modules on a different app? No problem—just import it! And if you'd rather skip the creation process altogether, you can access a library of ready-made content.

04

How to organise and run a good virtual class

Organising a virtual class seems simple enough in theory. In practice, though, it's a whole different story. Putting together an effective virtual class takes more than simply copying over the material you've created for in-person sessions. The role of the trainer is different in the virtual classroom, as is the training itself. They may also need to adapt their attitude so as to fit the world of multimodal learning. Though this may seem difficult, there are plenty of courses out there aiming to meet the needs of educators working in the virtual space, including **those offered by the training organisation Quilotoa**.

We're going to show you how you can get prepared, provide tips on leading a virtual class, and show you which pitfalls you need to avoid.

a) Preparation

Organising a virtual class begins with preparation. If you skip this step, then the chances are that you'll fail to live up to your learners' expectations and will lose their attention.

To get started, you need to…

- Have **the right equipment**, such as a microphone, computer, camera and internet connection.

- **Test out your tools** and ensure you know how to use them at least a day before the course is due to start. This gives you time to iron out any technical issues—and that goes for both trainers *and* learners!

- **Choose your wallpaper** ahead of time. More than just something to look at, this can set the tone for the meeting and convey the right atmosphere—so, be sure to choose well. Note that some backgrounds can slow down your connection or be off-putting to learners, and are thus best avoided.

- **Limit participant numbers,** if possible, to ensure everyone can participate.

Once your equipment is ready to use, you can start working on the content for your virtual class. As an example, you might bring your topic to life by turning it into a scenario. When preparing your material, however, remember that virtual classes function differently to those taking place in person, and that you will need to change how you run them. For instance, judging the body language and reactions of your learners is easy when face-to-face, but much harder in a virtual environment—especially since not everyone will want to turn their camera on.

When planning out the structure of your training course, you need to make informed decisions and do what you can to promote interactivity. Here are some of our top tips:

- If you want to send out any **documents** to your learners, prepare them and import them into the platform in advance. This saves you from having to do so during class time.
- Put together any **questionnaires** beforehand that you wish to send out in class, including any pop quizzes.

What's the ideal number of learners in a virtual classroom?

The answer to this question is simple: it all depends on what you're trying to achieve. For example, if you're running a lecture with the goal of helping learners to retain certain theoretical concepts, then it may be best to offer a short session with a large number of participants. On the other hand, if your aim is to put this knowledge into practice, it's better to work with smaller groups of no more than 10–15 people. Quilotoa's experts in interpersonal skills advise a **maximum of six participants** to ensure that everyone can be accommodated.

- When planning out the course, be sure to **rotate** between theory-based sessions, discussion time and workshops.
- Devote time to **creating slideshows** that engage learners and promote interaction. Images, infographics, and even videos can work well.
- Plan out group and individual exercises so that the class is **well paced**.

Finally, when scheduling in your class, consider that some time slots work better than others. If you want peak concentration from your learners, try to arrange it in the morning. Meanwhile, the end of the day is a better choice if you want participants to be more creative.

b) Hosting

Did you know that learners' attention starts to wane after just 5 minutes of a virtual class, compared to 15 minutes in person? How, then, can you keep them interested for several hours? Don't worry: it's not impossible.

First, remember that your role as a trainer is not the same as it was before the digital learning era. It's no longer a matter of imparting your knowledge to a silent group of students, and telling them what to do and how to do it. Instead, your aim is to guide learners as they develop their own skills themselves.

All the same, no training programme could exist without the presence of a trainer—including those taking place online. Nowadays, trainers must also take on a dual role as a designer, as they are in charge of digitising their material and producing computer-based educational resources. More recently, and particularly during lockdown, they've also had to act as a facilitator for virtual classes.

So, how exactly do you host a virtual classroom? Here are our **5 top tips.**

1. Find a good icebreaker!

At the start of a virtual class, it's important to get the conversation flowing and set the overall tone. The first few minutes are key!

Here are a few icebreakers you can use:

- Ask each participant to give a "**personal weather report**" at the start of the class. This might refer to their motivation or energy levels, or their mood. You can even ask them to rate this out of 5.
- Use the **MURAL app**, which enables each group member to choose their own avatar. The trainer will then ask everyone a few personal or professional questions, and the learners can move their avatar to reflect their answers.
- Check out **Range Labs' Icebreaker** site, which comes with over 300 questions designed to build interpersonal trust.
- Get everyone to **switch off their camera**. Then ask a random question, such as "Who went to the beach this summer?" If a learner's answer is yes, they turn their camera back on. The trainer then carries on asking questions until everyone is back on screen.

2. Make the right introduction

Your next job is to go over the objectives of the virtual class, as well as covering how the session will unfold. Feel free to take time to introduce yourself, and go around the room asking learners to do the same. Here are some fun and original ways to do just that:

- Asking learners to **introduce themselves using an object**. This can be something they particularly value or that says something about them, and can be real or metaphorical.
- Get everyone to say what their **superpower** is, and how it will help them during the course.
- In **pairs**, ask each learner to introduce their partner to the rest of the class.
- Play a game of 'introduction pass-the-parcel': first, ask one learner to introduce themselves, then get them to choose the next person to do so.

3. Keep your camera on

Getting everyone to switch their webcam on helps to boost interactivity during virtual classes. This is one of the reasons why small group sessions work best. In this setting, participants will be less hesitant to show their face, and won't want to feel left out when others do so. Just remember to ensure they turn off their own image so that they focus on the course and not on how they look!

4. Make time for interaction

Encourage learners to take part and work together. Ask questions, plan group activities, create online surveys and quizzes… in short, be innovative! Remember that attention spans are shorter in distance learning and plan out your learning methods carefully so as not to overwhelm your learners.

5. Don't forget sub-groups

Many virtual classroom apps now allow you to create sub-groups. This is a great option for organising workshops and exercises for a few people.

c) Evaluation

Training doesn't stop when your virtual class comes to an end. You must now assess how it went and sustain these efforts over the long term. This can be done by evaluating what worked and what needs to be improved for future sessions.

Here are some performance indicators you can use to determine the success of your virtual class:

- Were you able to stick to your lesson plan? If not, it's time to rethink how you organise your class.
- Did the learners participate as much as you had hoped?
- Did a lot of discussion take place on the web chat?
- How many participants answered your surveys?
- If there were group exercises, what was the quality of the work you got back?

By answering these questions, you can properly assess how your class went and gain valuable details on what you need to work on over the rest of the training course. You can also use these metrics to create a self-assessment matrix.

To round out your evaluation, you can also ask learners to anonymously fill out a questionnaire asking their opinions about the virtual class.

To keep learners engaged after the class ends, you can use your LMS platform to share a **summary of the topics you covered** or a **recording** of the session. You can also upload **meeting notes** via Beekast or Klaxoon, or even the **transcript** of the virtual class's web chat. Be sure to share your slideshow on your LMS platform's community page, as well as any other educational resources you used during the class. Finally, encourage learners to do more research on the topic by directing them to any relevant books, documentaries, podcasts, or other useful content.

Conclusion

It's clear that virtual classrooms come with numerous benefits and advantages, for learners, trainers and businesses alike. As with remote working, it appears that virtual classes are here to stay. However, they form only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to training, and must be part of a hybrid course in order to be truly effective. To get the most out of virtual classes, trainers need to be able to use them to generate engagement and to get learners to interact with one another. Finally, as with all learning methods, what really matters is the quality of the content and the trainer's ability to lead.

RISE UP

- E-learning, in-person and blended learning
- Customise the appearance and features of the platform
- Detailed reporting tools for tracking learner progress
- Offer training to multiple stakeholders via a single platform
- Social learning
- Micro-learning
- Gamification through badges and objectives
- Assessments and quizzes
- Mobile app
- Available in multiple languages

Rise Up allows you to create and manage e-learning, in-person and blended learning training programmes all in one place.

Available across desktop and mobile devices both online and offline, our platform is white-label and includes an built-in authoring tool. With our mobile app, employees can access training resources whenever and wherever they want. Plus, with 5, 10 or 15-minute long sessions, you can quickly review any skill. Rise Up is more than just software: it comes complete with support and provides a platform to share best practices.

Employee engagement

• Build motivation, track progress and assign goals

Regulations and reform

• Check your training compliance and certificate validity in real time

Automate your admin

• Spend more time focusing on skill development and content creation

www.riseup.ai

Founded in 1993, Quilotoa is a training company specialising in **soft skills**, and, in particular, **interpersonal skills**.

For 28 years, it has been creating **experience-based training activities** led by actors, trainers and coaches.

In the past 5 years, part of its focus has been on **supporting business development for retail brands**, with an emphasis on customer service and relations.

In 2020, Quilotoa decided to start using an LMS platform, and chose Rise Up to offer a blended programme known as the **Soft Skills Academy**, covering communication, feedback, digital learning and, notably, emotion management.

https://quilotoagroup.com/

RISE UP

Quilotoa

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