THE NEXT GENERATION CLASSROOM:
Virtual/Hybrid Instructor-Led Training
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Introduction

For decades, instructor-led training (ILT) has been the “gold standard” of training delivery methods in corporate training. Today, many companies regularly combine aspects of face-to-face and virtual ILT in what is called “hybrid” ILT. This has permitted training events where instructors, learners and support staff can be organized in a variety of combinations of co-located learning, further enhanced by the ability to leverage technology for learner collaboration and applied exercises regardless of whether learners are shoulder-to-shoulder or separated by thousands of miles. These advances have led to what can be called the “next generation” of training classrooms, where technology plays a significant role in the learning experience. These virtual/hybrid ILT learning experiences represent an evolution of the corporate classroom that accounts for the dispersion of modern workforces, the need to provide a similar training experience regardless of the modality, and harnesses the ubiquity of internet technology to connect learners and instructors from nearly any location to simultaneously participate in training.

However, implementing virtual/hybrid ILT effectively presents an array of challenges that some companies may not anticipate or prepare for. The research conducted for this report sought to provide answers to a number of questions about the utilization and impact of virtual/hybrid ILT solutions in corporate training, such as: How effectively are companies utilizing virtual and hybrid ILT? Which learning topics are being delivered in these training initiatives? What are the challenges faced by companies using these tools? And how are companies preparing L&D personnel to use such tools to achieve their desired training outcomes?

To examine these issues in greater detail, Training Industry, Inc. and MicroTek conducted a study to examine how virtual and hybrid ILT is being utilized in companies across a range of training applications. In Q3-Q4 of 2015, 261 companies completed a confidential survey reporting their organizations’ use of “next generation” virtual/hybrid classrooms to deliver training.
Key Findings

Virtual ILT Implementation
- 37 percent of companies’ training portfolios are being offered in virtual and hybrid delivery modalities
- The typical training class in 62 percent of companies contains fewer than 25 learners
- 31 percent of learners attend training in a virtual classroom setting
- 72 percent of companies were rated as “somewhat” or “very” ineffective at conducting virtual or hybrid ILT
  - 30 percent of the most effective companies at virtual training reported using virtual/hybrid ILT frequently
  - 59 percent of companies utilize virtual/hybrid ILT at least occasionally

Virtual ILT Applications
- 82 percent of virtual/hybrid ILT applications are for internal employees
  - Also used with contractors/partners (36%) and for customer education (34%)
- Common topics for hybrid ILT include certification (39%), product/service knowledge (38%), leadership development (36%), and technical/hard skills (35%)
- Common challenges when delivering virtual/hybrid ILT include evaluating effectiveness (46%), training consistency (43%), limited resources (42%), and ensuring leadership support (36%)

The Virtual Learning Environment
- Learning features that were considered a high/moderate priority for conducting virtual training include:
  - The ability to reuse training content and materials (80%)
  - Audio/visual synchronicity (77%)
  - The ability to record and archive training sessions (71%)
- Technical features that were considered a high/moderate priority for conducting virtual training include:
  - Network security (77%)
  - Integration with existing training technology (75%)
  - Training facilitator/teaching assistant capability (73%)

Training Personnel for Virtual Learning
- Training provided to those managing the virtual/hybrid learning experience includes:
  - For instructors: soft presentation skills (70%), in-person classroom management (59%), technical presentation skills (56%)
  - For learning support staff/teaching assistants: technical presentation skills (37%), virtual classroom management (35%), SME knowledge (35%)
  - For technical support staff: general IT skills (33%), virtual platform-specific IT skills (33%), technical presentation skills (22%)
Virtual/Hybrid ILT: The Next Generation of Training Classrooms

With the influx of training technology into corporate L&D, ILT in general can describe a wider range of ways to deliver training than it used to. Respondents to this survey were provided with the following definitions:

- Traditional ILT refers to training that is facilitated by an instructor in a classroom setting. ILT allows for learners and instructors or facilitators to interact and discuss the training material face-to-face, either individually or in a group setting.

- Virtual ILT refers to training that is delivered in a virtual or simulated environment, or when the instructor and each learner are in separate locations. Virtual instruction environments are designed to simulate the traditional classroom or learning experience.

- Hybrid ILT integrates both a traditional classroom setting and a virtual environment simultaneously, typically with a focus on the use of synchronous technology to deliver a consistent learning experience across both audiences. There can be a variety of instructor-learner arrangements with hybrid learning, each dependent upon the learners and instructors involved.

While training professionals often use “hybrid” and “blended” interchangeably when describing hybrid ILT, most blended learning environments represent a mixture of a traditional classroom with an e-learning environment. E-learning involves the use of technology to deliver or access training or education-oriented content and courseware. E-learning can be both synchronous and asynchronous, on standalone computers or devices, or on web-based networks. This is distinct from hybrid ILT, which incorporates features of both traditional ILT and virtual ILT in a training session to facilitate instructor delivery and learner interaction.

As shown in Figure 1 on the following page, companies are offering virtual or hybrid ILT a combined 37 percent of the time. Although traditional ILT is still the most common single delivery modality for training, it appears to be cumulatively outpaced by the utilization of learning technologies. While virtual platforms may require investment in IT infrastructure on the part of some companies to ensure a fluid virtual training experience, the reasons many companies are moving away from traditional ILT often involve aspects of cost per training session. Though already widely known, costs can compound quickly when bringing learners together in a single physical location. Hybrid ILT provides the best of both worlds, where the instructor and/or learners (either all learners or a portion thereof) can capitalize on co-location for a training when feasible without excluding an instructor or learners who are attending a
To that effect, Figure 1 indicates the shift that many organizations are making away from the traditional classroom.

**Figure 1. Proportion of Training Offerings by Modality**

Next, respondents were asked to indicate the typical number of students in a training class in their organization. As shown below in Figure 2, 62 percent indicated that their average class size is below 25 learners. Although 38 percent of training classes had greater than 25 learners, it is notable that over half of these larger classes had between 26 and 50 learners. This indicates that the vast majority of training classes are small, independent of delivery modality. Although 17 percent of training classes contained more than 50 learners, by dominant use case these were clearly the exception rather than the rule.

**Figure 2. Typical Class Size**
Of interest is whether the combination of results from Figures 1 and 2 reveal any differences between modalities when it comes to class sizes. To accomplish this, companies using traditional ILT for at least 50 percent of their training offerings (N = 94) were compared with companies using virtual/hybrid ILT combined for at least 50 percent of their training offerings (N = 89). For traditional ILT, results found that 17 percent of class sizes were below 10 learners and 55 percent of classes contained between 11 and 25 learners, compared to 19 percent (less than 10 learners) and 42 percent (11 to 25 learners) for virtual/hybrid ILT. In sum, 72 percent of traditional ILT classes and 61 percent of virtual/hybrid ILT classes contain 25 or fewer learners, reiterating that smaller class sizes comprise the majority of training offerings regardless of the dominant classroom modality.

Although the size of the training class can play a large role in the learner experience, the context of training is also important. Figure 3 shows that although half of trainings occur on-site in a classroom, nearly a third are conducted in virtual classrooms. While this does not represent the majority of training classes, it shows that the alternative of virtual training is gaining ground as a very viable option for corporate training.

**Figure 3.** Proportion of Learners by Training Site

Virtual/Hybrid ILT Delivery

As virtual and hybrid ILT gains popularity as a viable training delivery option for many companies, the next logical question is whether the companies currently exercising this option are actualizing success. Respondents were asked how effective their companies were at
conducting virtual or hybrid ILT. As shown in Figure 4, a combined 72 percent of organizations were rated as “somewhat” or “very” ineffective at delivering hybrid ILT to learners, compared to 13 percent of companies who received effective ratings.

**Figure 4. Effectiveness of Virtual/Hybrid ILT Utilization**

Although nearly two-thirds of companies are not effective at hybrid ILT, it is arguably a delivery method that is relatively new to some companies. Figure 5 shows that 42 percent of companies never or almost never utilize hybrid ILT. Conversely, 20 percent of companies are frequently deploying hybrid ILT to learners.

**Figure 5. Frequency of Virtual/Hybrid ILT Utilization**
Traditional ILT can be used by companies for a variety of purposes, and this is no less true of virtual and hybrid applications. However, a traditional classroom often carries costs and expenses that can be mitigated by the use of a virtual or hybrid delivery, as alluded to previously, such as travel time away from the office for training participants, securing adequate classroom space, or providing catering and other ancillary services. Virtual/hybrid ILT also permits L&D to easily reach a range of learning audiences for whom the company wants to provide training. As shown below in Figure 6, the majority of virtual/hybrid ILT applications are being utilized to train internal employees. While this is the dominant audience, at least a third of companies are also using virtual/hybrid ILT to train external partners as well as to educate customers.

Figure 6. Learning Audiences for Virtual/Hybrid ILT

Having established that many companies currently use virtual/hybrid ILT training, the next logical question is: what for? Figure 7 on the following page shows the range of use cases as reported by survey respondents. It is clear that the potential content areas for which virtual/hybrid ILT is being applied includes a variety of topics. As can be seen, the most common applications were workplace certification programs, product/service knowledge training, leadership development and hard/technical skills training. However, virtual/hybrid ILT is also used by roughly a third of companies for customer service training, new employee orientation and onboarding programs, IT training, HR-related topics such as diversity and harassment training, and workplace safety training. The utilization of virtual/hybrid ILT is seldom limited by the nature of the content.
As discussed earlier in this section, many organizations are not effective at delivering virtual/hybrid ILT. Figure 8 shows the most common obstacles faced by companies seeking to deliver training on such platforms. As can be seen, the most frequent challenges were evaluating the effectiveness of training, maintaining a level of consistency in delivery and the learning experience, and grappling with limited resources to deliver training such as time, budget or personnel. Although the impact of these challenges to virtual ILT may manifest differently when compared to traditional ILT, many of the challenges noted are not necessarily unique to the virtual environment.
Survey respondents were also asked about what, in their experiences, enhances the virtual/hybrid learning experience. Figure 9 shows that an interactive and engaging learning experience, through such things as the course structure or the inclusion of individual and group activities, was most often identified as an enriching aspect of training. Although to a lesser extent, competent technical support and easy-to-use learning technologies, in addition to cohesive and relevant training content, also enhanced respondents’ experiences with virtual training. Of particular note is that instructor quality was not a more prominent theme in the responses to this question. This could possibly be due to the instructor being more removed from learners compared to traditional ILT, or from an acknowledgment that interactivity and engagement with the training content is a more important component of the virtual learning experience than the individual delivering the training.

**Figure 9. Enhancers to the Virtual/Hybrid ILT Learner Experience**

Next, respondents were asked a question about what, in their experiences, detracts from the virtual/hybrid learning experience. As seen in Figure 10, there were two primary factors that diminish the impact of virtual learning. The first was learner boredom and associated issues with the content, and the second concerned distractions in the learner’s environment while he or she is participating in a training session. To a lesser extent, technical issues with the platform itself (and with individual’s ability to successfully navigate it) also had a negative impact on the virtual learning experience. Lastly, it is notable that instructor quality was seen as a potential detractor to training in roughly the same measure that it was an enhancer, implying yet again that content trumps the instructor in the context of a virtual/hybrid ILT program.
**Virtual/Hybrid ILT Features**

Although virtual/hybrid ILT can be construed as a single overarching delivery modality, there are a variety of features available to companies wishing to deliver this type of training. In this research study, two general categories of features were identified: features related to the learning experience itself, and features related to technical aspects of a virtual/hybrid platform. These two categories can be construed as separate sets of features that support the learner experience and the ability to deploy an organized virtual training portfolio, respectively.

As shown in Figure 11 on the following page, there are a number of learning features that are priorities for organizations. Some of the most pressing include the ability to repurpose and reuse existing training content, a seamless virtual audio/visual experience for all learners, the ability to record training sessions to make them available to learners in the future, and the ability to flexibly share computer screens between the instructor and training participants.

While some combination of these features that support the learning experience may be commonplace across many existing platforms, it should be noted that all the features in Figure 11 were rated as a high/moderate priority by over half of respondents. Further, no single feature was found to be a low priority for more than a quarter of companies.
While the above priorities shed some light into the likely direction that companies want to take virtual/hybrid ILT, they may not perfectly reflect what the same companies are actively using in current training initiatives. Figure 12 displays the current reported frequency with which these features are being used in the course of training. As can be seen, the ability to reuse training content, audio/visual synchronicity, recording training sessions and sharing computer screens were utilized frequently, along with video and chat functionality. However, comparison of Figure 11 with Figure 12 shows some interesting contrasts when considering the low end of the response spectrum. For instance, while 6 percent of respondents said that the ability to reuse training content was a low priority for their organization (or not a priority at all) in Figure 11, twice that amount (12 percent) reported that they rarely or never use this feature.
For technical features of a virtual/hybrid platform, Figure 13 shows the priority level reported by respondents as to how important such features are in their company. As shown, network security in training platforms and the ability to integrate such platforms with existing learning technologies are the top technical priorities for three quarters of companies. No less important is the capability to have an individual in a training facilitator role (e.g., a teaching assistant), the ability to distribute learning materials through employer email servers, and a robust learner registration and training scheduling capacity. Similar to the results for Figure 11, it is noteworthy that the features shown in Figure 13, with the exception of support for Mac devices, were rated as a high/moderate priority by over half of respondents.

**Figure 13. Prioritization of Technical Features for Virtual/Hybrid ILT**

As before, these priorities may not be aligned with the current utilization of technical features. Figure 14 shows that the ability to distribute learning materials to employees’ email addresses, the capability for a teaching assistant, and the ability to distribute learning materials via a learning management system were utilized by at least half of respondents’ companies when considering the technical features of a virtual/hybrid ILT platform. Of note is the convergence between the two figures when it comes to features that are simultaneously low priority and infrequently utilized, specifically with respect to distributing learning materials via a cloud solution and (more drastically) ensuring cross-compatibility of the virtual/hybrid ILT platform with a Mac operating system.
Collectively, Figures 12 through 14 provide insight into the nature of virtual/hybrid platforms that companies are using for training, insofar as which features may be critical (and which may be less so) to ensuring a high quality experience for learners participating in hybrid ILT. Beyond these features, however, companies consider a range of factors when deciding to convert or create training programs to a virtual platform. As shown in Figure 15, a combination of overall cost and cost flexibility, customization, and the quality of sales and support are the primary decision levers when a company is selecting a virtual/hybrid ILT solution provider.
Training for Instructional Personnel

Although the virtual/hybrid platforms that have been discussed to this point may promise a multitude of features and benefits to learners, no less important is the skill of instructional personnel. An ineffective instructor, or technical support, can potentially derail a training for learners despite the use of cutting-edge learning technology. In this section, the types of training companies are providing to instructional personnel will be summarized.

First, the types of training provided for instructors and trainers was examined. As shown below in Figure 16, the focus of training offerings for instructors tend to focus on two key areas: presentation skills and classroom management. As can be seen, training on soft presentation skills around communication and engagement is offered in over two-thirds of companies. Over half of organizations are providing training on how to manage either an in-person or virtual classroom. It should also be noted that nearly half of survey respondents indicated that their company provides training to build expertise in a topic area, as well as how to effectively introduce learning activities into a training. Lastly, Figure 16 suggests that IT skills, whether specific or general, may be viewed as least integral for an instructor to develop, particularly in instances where other support personnel assist with training.

**Figure 16. Training for Trainers – Instructors**

Next, the types of training provided for learning support staff was explored. Learning support staff can be conceptualized as the role of a “teaching assistant,” or an individual that does not directly deliver the training content, but plays a vital role in supporting learning objectives and outcomes. An individual in this role may answer questions from learners, administer activities,
prepare materials before or during the training, and otherwise assist the instructor in conducting a virtual session. As shown in Figure 17, learning support staff are offered a variety of training, although it is notable that there was only an 8 percent difference between the most and least endorsed types of training. This implies that the role of the teaching assistant can be construed as somewhat of a “catch-all,” to assist in whatever capacity is needed. Notable is that soft presentation skills training was identified as being offered the least, in contrast with it being offered frequently to instructors. It should also be recognized that the overall level of endorsement for any item was significantly lower than for instructors, indicating that companies either do not utilize learning support staff regularly for training initiatives or that such staff are not prevalent across all companies.

**Figure 17.** Training for Trainers – Learning Support Staff

Lastly, the types of training provided for technical support staff was examined. As opposed to a teaching assistant role, the technical support role often provides technology troubleshooting, set-up, and other technical logistics to facilitate a smooth learning experience within the interface or platform being used. As seen in Figure 18 on the following page, the training offered for individuals in this role are predominantly related to handling general IT issues and problems with the specific platform being utilized for a training effort. In contrast to the instructor and learning support roles, it is especially notable that classroom management and soft presentation skills are least likely to be offered to personnel in a technical support role.
Figure 18. Training for Trainers – Technical Support Staff

Best Practices for Virtual/Hybrid ILT

In summary, this research demonstrates that while many organizations are not yet effective at virtual/hybrid ILT, the utilization of such platforms have been on the rise as an effective method to conduct ILT sessions. To that end, several best practices can be derived from the results of this research. For a company to be successful at virtual/hybrid ILT, an L&D organization should consider the following six practices:

1. **Keep class sizes relatively small** (less than 25 learners).

   Not only is a smaller virtual/hybrid class size consistent with many traditional ILT class sizes, but it better facilitates interaction between the learner with both the instructor and with other learners. A larger class may prohibit meaningful communication between the learner and participants, to the extent that a training may resemble a webinar or lecture more than a collaborative, interactive classroom experience.

2. **Conduct virtual/hybrid ILT regularly to inoculate learners to the learning experience and facilitate delivery consistency.**

   It should come as no surprise that most people are resistant to change—it is the reason change management is seldom an easy or painless process. When learners are accustomed to virtual/hybrid ILT, their expectations are better aligned with their experience, allowing them to focus on learning rather than figuring out how to navigate a training session. For both
instructors and learners, familiarity with the modality closes the aperture of variability for the delivery and flow of training.

3. Select topics that will translate well to a virtual/hybrid ILT setting.

The virtual/hybrid ILT setting lends itself to higher levels of interactivity and discussion compared to a lecture or webinar. However, successful training comes from an amalgamation of considering the modality, topic and learning audience. Does the subject of training lend itself to being interactive for the audience in attendance? Some topics may not need interaction depending on the audience, whereas others may require more interaction than can be included in a virtual/hybrid ILT setting.

4. Ensure training material contains interactive activities for learners to participate with others in the classroom.

Without the chance to interact with the instructor and other learners, overall participation and engagement with a training can suffer, particularly for virtual learners who are not “captive” in a face-to-face classroom environment. Interactivity may take the form of polls, chat, virtual breakout rooms, webcams or other means through which learners can collaborate. Respondents to this research repeatedly called out interaction as a consistent enhancer of virtual/hybrid ILT.

5. Ensure content is engaging to learners and virtual participants’ environments are as free from distraction as possible.

A clear advantage of traditional ILT over virtual ILT is control of the learner’s environment. Smartphones notwithstanding, the face-to-face setting lacks environmental distractions that may be in the virtual learner’s surroundings, such as other co-workers, email, etc. Although it is a common best practice for an instructor not to merely recite the text on presentation slides, making the delivery of content as engaging as possible helps to combat distractions and keep learners present in the training session.

6. Provide training to all instructional personnel on presentation skills, classroom management or IT skills appropriate to their role in the learning experience.

Effective use of technology can enhance a training session as much as technology can be a hindrance in unskilled hands. Ensuring the instructor, teaching assistants, and technical support are trained in classroom management, presentation skills, and relevant IT skills prior to delivering virtual/hybrid ILT best makes it more likely that the learner experience will be as seamless and conducive to learning as possible.
Study Demographics

Figures 18 through 21 provide context on the 168 survey respondents who participated in this research. The figures that follow summarize the companies the respondents represent and the functional areas/departments supported by their roles within the organization.

**Figure 19. Organizational Size**

![Bar chart showing organizational size distribution](chart)

**Figure 20. Industries Represented**

![Bar chart showing industries represented](chart)
Figure 21. Functional Areas Represented

- IT: 23%
- Learning and Development: 19%
- HR: 15%
- Operations: 14%
- Sales: 6%
- Customer Service: 6%
- R&D: 2%
- Marketing/Advertising: 2%
- Finance/Accounting: 2%
- Other: 12%

Figure 22. Organizational Roles Represented

- Manager: 62%
- Specialist: 7%
- Instructor: 7%
- Instructional Designer: 7%
- Trainer: 5%
- Associate: 5%
- Analyst: 4%
- Consultant: 3%
- Executive Level: 0%
About This Research

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Our client list extends across all industries and company sizes, which is why we never use a “one-size-fits-all” solution. We tailor our resources to provide each of our clients with just the right amount of support, enabling them and their students to have the optimal learning experience. Whether you’re planning a one-day meeting or a year-long training rollout, you can rely on MicroTek to build a comprehensive roadmap of your event. Finding the right solution is complicated. We make it simple.

For more information, go to www.mclabs.com.

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