



# VIRTUAL DELIVERY BEST PRACTICES

## It Has Been Over Two Years Since the Beginning of Covid – What Have We Learned?

Virtual Delivery of ICS training was expected to remain until COVID 19 passed us by. Well COVID is still here, and virtual delivery of ICS training, although the platforms presents their own challenges, I think is here to stay regardless. Virtual training is not for everybody, but those that do it well, are always looking for ways to do it better. Here is a collection of my own observations and content from others I have found skimming the internet.

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## 1. Set Expectations up Front

As you kick off the session, let learners know that they should plan to actively participate throughout the program. Have them to turn off notifications and close other applications on their browser. You have limited time together, and they'll make the most of it by focusing. Let them know that there will be periodic breaks built into the training and they can follow up on any notifications they receive at that time.

This information is also helpful to include in a pre-event email. It sets the tone for the training and reminds the audience to focus.

## 2. Turn on Video

Simply having their video on improves learners' engagement in training sessions, because they will want to appear attentive and engaged. However, encouraging participants to use video can be tricky. Here are three tips that can help:

- **Set this expectation in advance in an email.** Some people like to be "camera-ready," and this advance notice helps them to be sure they have the right setup.
- Ask participants to turn on their video at the beginning of the session, and give them a reason why it is important.
- Thank participants by name who have turned on their video. This positive reinforcement works wonders.

## 3. Engage Within First Five Minutes

The key to an interactive training session is participation and engagement. Integrate opportunities for participation in the first five minutes (ideally in the opening) to set the expectation that you will be requesting engagement throughout the session.

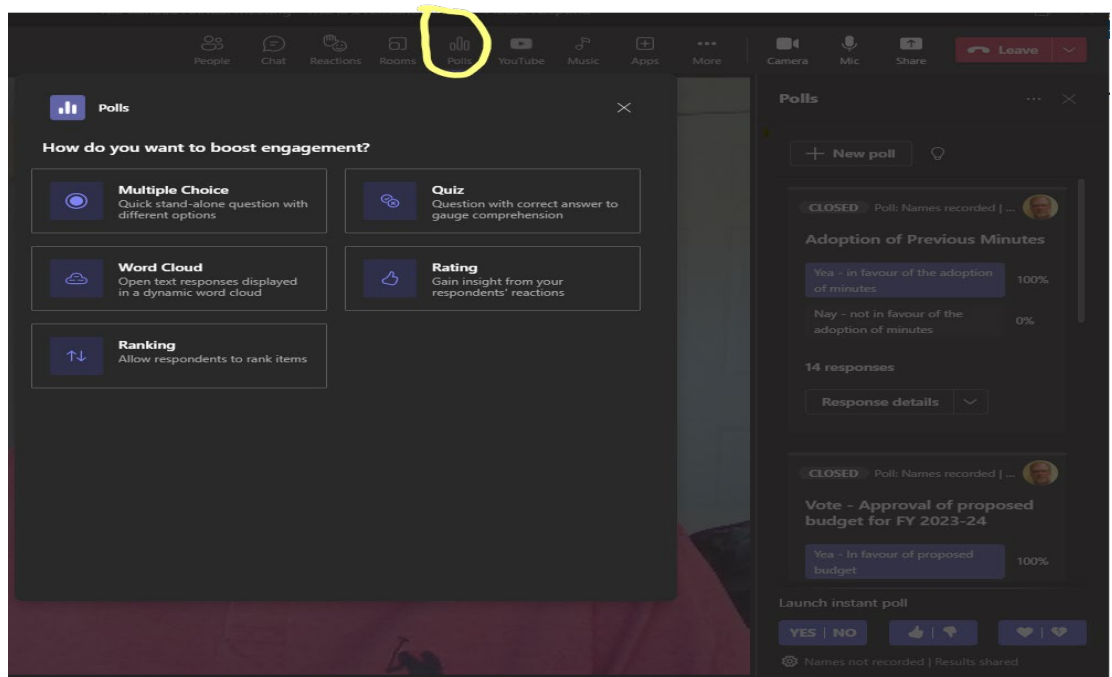
## 4. Ask for Engagement Every 10 Minutes

To keep participants engaged throughout the session, aim to engage them every 10 minutes. While it may seem like a lot, the engagements don't have to be formal; in fact, casual engagements work best. This cadence will keep learners paying attention, since they know you could ask a question at any time. Conduct oral "Knowledge Retained" quizzes at the end of each unit. Let them know at the beginning of the training that "pop" quizzes will be used and students will be called on periodically to answer questions or to provide feedback.

Here are some examples:

- How many of you have experience with this topic? Share in the chat. Instructor can call on random student to open their microphone and ask them to expand on their comments.
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how much do you already know about this subject? Use a poll or interactive feature on your platform to have them using the tools.

- What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think about this topic? Call directly on students for comments and mix your selection with students that have been moderately engaged to those that have been quiet or distracted during the session.
- Use the “Raise your hand” if you’ve done this before. Again using tools and you can also call on individuals to elaborate.
- What is your biggest takeaway from this section. Often during ICS courses we introduce the Form 214 and have students complete them daily and note any “Aha” moments regarding something they have learned today. You can also use white board or other interactive presentation tools available on your application.



- Learn how to integrate other forms of multimedia into your plan. It is not as easy as uploading a video or playing something from the internet, so before you do build it into your presentation, test it with a practice run with people participating as students to assess its value and if it even works for you.
- The above graphic shows the different interactive tools available in MS Teams that can be incorporated into any virtual delivery. These interactions can be prepared prior to the session and launched when needed or they can be created on the fly during training. Again some of these functionalities may be disabled by your organizations so check with your IT department if you don't see this available on your device.

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## 5. Wait for Responses

Sometimes, you may have learners who are difficult to draw out. If you ask for participation and don't receive responses, don't be quick to answer if you are hearing 'crickets'. You'll need to wait until someone responds. If you just move on without a response, you are telling participants that they don't have to answer your questions.

Instead of moving on when you lack responses, try these three tips:

- Let the audience know that it can take some time to type their responses, so you are happy to wait a few minutes to share.
- Reframe the question; perhaps it wasn't clear.
- Make the question easier to answer — for example, a “yes/no” question. Sometimes, it is difficult to answer more complex or vague questions in a chat.

## 6. Use First Names to Acknowledge Participants

Create a list of attendees and make a conscience effort to make sure you engage each student at least once per lesson. Print off a spreadsheet and add check boxes to track who you haven't engaged recently. When people respond, it is important to acknowledge their responses. For example, “John says he's done this before. Mary is saying she is a beginner.” Using learners' names rewards them with attention and positively reinforces that you care about responses.

## 7. Create Feedback Loops

If you ask for feedback or questions, integrating learners' responses into the training shows them that their feedback matters. For example, at the beginning of a topic, ask participants to rate their knowledge in that topic from a 1 to a 10. If most people respond between a 2 and a 4, you can say, “I see that a lot of you are just starting out; that's great! I have some excellent tips for you.” Find ways to loop back to the feedback from your audience so they know that it matters, and use it to shape the way you conduct the training.

## 8. Begin and End in Full-screen Presenter Mode

It can be challenging for attendees to feel engaged when looking at a slide deck. Most virtual presentation software highlights the slides and shows the presenter in a smaller view. When you stop sharing your slides, your video becomes the full-screen focus. Beginning and ending the training session with yourself in full screen will help you build a connection with your audience. There have been some advancement in presentation modes that will allow a “talking head” image to be overlaid onto the slide. Test this functionality first before using it for



the first time. Sometimes these functions may be disabled or limited by your IT department and you will need to make a request to activate the function. Sometimes students using web or phone versions vs an installed version on a PC of the training application may not have this functionality so test it first with a friend using the different methods of joining a session

## 9. Be Conversational With Predictive Reactiveness

A conversational tone and style will help you build a deeper connection with the audience. You want your learners to feel like you are speaking *to* them, not *at* them. One of the ways to build a conversational tone is with predictive reactions — reacting based on how you predict your audience will react.

For example, if you tell a joke, laugh as though participants are laughing with you. If you speak about something that is difficult, assume they've just nodded at you, and nod back. The idea is to predict or assume their response and react accordingly. This approach creates a conversational style and acknowledges the audience.

## 10. Use Breakouts

Breakout sessions are a great way to drive participation in virtual training. Some participants don't feel comfortable speaking out in a larger group, and breakouts give everyone the opportunity to participate. Here are a few tips for effective breakouts:

- Give clear and detailed instructions so the groups know exactly what to do in their breakout.
- Appoint a leader to avoid awkwardness at the start of the discussion or activity. It could be a formal leader or someone selected randomly, like the person whose first name is closest to the top of the alphabet.
- If groups are working on a task, it can be helpful to give participants time to think in advance of a group discussion. Try five minutes of solo preparation, 15 minutes of group discussion and 10 minutes of sharing insights with the whole group.
- It is highly recommended for each breakout room a mentor or instructor should attend to support the exercise. The instructor is not there to complete the exercise or to provide answers, but to ensure the deliverables are completed and that people are engaged. If they get bogged down and stuck on items, then the instructor can be there to prop them up and get them back on track. Exercises in the breakouts have to be meaningful and engaging and ensuring they understand the objectives and outcome is important because if they don't, they will likely not engage in the discussion.

Virtual training is a powerful delivery format. As a virtual trainer, you must be deliberate in creating an engaging environment to drive participation and keep the audience motivated. The good news is that virtual training experiences can exceed the quality of in-person sessions when they're structured properly with the right strategies. If you ask for feedback or questions, integrating learners' responses into the training shows them that their feedback matters.

## 11. IT Support

It can be very difficult to be a 1 person show during a virtual training session. Not only are you presenting and exercising, but you are also troubleshooting and fixing connectivity issues, software and configuration challenges, log-in and functionality issues. Having to stop training to deal with an individual that may not have a good background in this style or training or may be not very receptive to the format being used, can consume a lot of time and you will start losing students. This is why co-teaching with another instructor who can either deal with the problem while you carry on training, or having a person designated to handle logistics of keeping people connected and moving back and forth between breakout rooms will go a long way to keeping the plan moving and not losing people who are having to wait and wait for the individual who is having problems.

Good operators will run a pre-course check with students to put them through an orientation of the learning environment and to ensure all systems connect and that they know where to go and what to do. It takes a little more work. Those who have serious investment into virtual training can circumvent a lot of problems by hosting training on their own systems and servers without having to battle through another agency's IT restrictions and firewalls.

## 12. Class Preparation, Exercise Design and Professional Development

The ICS Canada program was not developed with virtual delivery in mind. Therefore the manuals and exercises may present certain challenges when running a virtual class.

**Manuals:** Recommend distributing hard copy of Student Manuals to participants prior to attending training for those without large format screens or multiple screen configurations. Trying to display a student manual, student supplementary manual, exercise materials, presentation slides and note taking, all simultaneously on a 13 inch laptop screen is not a happy place for a student to spend several days training. At least distribute the exercise files to print off before training so that they can easily work the exercise with hard copy and not have to worry how to navigate drawing apps or fillable forms. As an instructor, you will be wise to attempt to identify a person with a strong knowledge of navigating around the training environment to be "that" person that will be designated to consolidate group exercise responses for presentation after the exercise.

**Exercise Design:** Instructors should run the exercise as if you are a participant before the course to understand how it is to play out. You may find other methods to run the exercise that will facilitate a better experience by using other exercising/whiteboarding apps and programs and you may need to rebuild the exercise to work on other platforms. The key is to ensure that the learning objectives are met, deliverables are delivered and everyone becomes part of an engaging learning experience.

**Professional Development:** There are so many opportunities to improve your virtual processes through learning and coaching provided by professionals that provide training for those in the virtual environment. There are many free resources on YouTube and often these resources can provide one-on-one lessons or work with your organization to provide this specialized training.

Do not attempt any virtual training on your own until you have received some sort of workshop or coaching from another experienced instructor.

Using the virtual environment will not make a star performer out of a mediocre classroom instructor. In fact I have seen star-performer-in-the-classroom instructors fail and struggle miserably in a virtual environment. Virtual delivery is absolutely and by no means an easy way out to instruction. Do yourself and your students a favour, because first impressions can make or break an instructor's credibility, be prepared for anything that can be expected to happen. Learn from others, use best practices, practice, work with a team, invest in training for yourself and use quality equipment. How you look and how your sound can make or break a student's experience during your delivery.