# Live But Not in the Flesh:
# An Overview of Synchronous E-Learning

by Charles Fox

> *Interactive, group e-learning can be a valuable addition to a law firm's arsenal of training methods, but its effectiveness depends on understanding how it is different from in-person training.*

The future is already here: simultaneous interactive workplace training for learners in multiple locations. Compared to traditional live classroom learning, this approach is cheaper, easier to administer, and, contrary to most expectations, can actually provide a superior and more consistent learning experience for law firm associates than some traditional classroom training.

First, let's address the confusing mishmash of terms that are used to describe learning involving electronic communications: webcast, webinar, virtual learning, e-learning, distance learning, online learning, synchronous and asynchronous learning, and videoconferencing. Unfortunately, many of these terms are used interchangeably.

This article will address the benefits, limitations, and logistics of interactive group learning using the internet. I will refer to it here simply as *e-learning*. It involves multiple learners and one or more teachers simultaneously joining together in a virtual environment that permits voice and computer-aided interaction among all of the participants. It is definitely *not* the typical "webinar" involving an unseen speaker narrating a series of PowerPoint slides with extremely limited or no interaction or communication between the attendees and the presenter.

In a typical e-learning class, there are three types of participants: the host, who manages the technology; the presenter; and the learners. (The presenter can also be the host, but for reasons that will be described later, this is not advisable.) All the participants enter an online meeting room in which the presenter conducts the class in a manner that in many ways closely duplicates what would happen in a live classroom: the presenter addresses the class (and can appear on live video in the classroom); converses with the learners, who can also talk with each other, in all cases both via audio and text; shows PowerPoint and other slides; and has the learners work with each other in breakout sessions.

The terms "synchronous" and "asynchronous" describe the two basic approaches to non-live learning. A synchronous learning program is one where all of the participants are present (virtually) at the same time, permitting the types of interactivity that will be covered in greater detail in this article. Asynchronous learning is material that is recorded, and that can be accessed by participants at any time. *"The Changing Face of E-Learning in Law Firms (and Why That's a Good Thing),"* by Steve Gluckman in the February 2014 issue of *PD Quarterly* discussed asynchronous learning — ways for law firms to record their internal training and create a library of learning resources.

These classes are conducted using virtual classroom software programs such as Adobe Connect, Cisco WebEx, and Go To Meeting, among others. These applications are all relatively inexpensive and user-friendly. I have experimented with various of these tools and now exclusively use Adobe Connect. Most of these programs have similar features, so even though what I describe is going to be based on my experience with Adobe Connect, most of it will have general application.

Two of the benefits of these platforms are their ease of use and their low cost. They do not require participants to download any software; with a mere click of a web link, one is in the virtual classroom. They are also inexpensive: my Adobe Connect license fee is $55.00 per month, and for that I can hold an unlimited number of meetings of up to 100 participants each. The cost of the other applications is comparable.

The e-learning applications that are discussed here should be distinguished from learning management systems, or LMSs. An LMS is a program that acts as a framework for multiple aspects of organizational learning, including such functions as cataloging, administering, tracking, and recording an organization's training programs and materials. Training programs conducted using Adobe Connect and other e-learning programs can usually be integrated within a firm's LMS.

## A Typical E-learning Class

Let's look at the ways that an e-learning class is different from a live class. Participants are sent clear instructions at least several weeks in advance on how to log in to the e-learning session and to connect to the audio. One or more reminders should be sent to the participants as the time for the class approaches, suggesting that they log in a few minutes early. The log-in is easy — participants just click a web link. As they log in, the host may chat with them, primarily to confirm that their audio is working.

There are two choices for audio: the participants can connect through their computers (this is called VOIP, for voice over internet protocol) or through a conference call. My experience is that since many lawyers do not have a telephone headset that plugs into their computers, which is necessary for the use of VOIP, the conference-call approach is preferable.

For the first session with a group of learners who are not familiar with the technology, it is a good idea to spend five minutes or so having them try out some of the interactivity features. (These features are discussed in greater detail below.) I typically ask the learners to "raise their hands" if they can hear me, for example. I ask them to type into the chat box the name of a movie they really like — not only does it give them a chance to use the chat feature but it is also acts as an icebreaker. I might also ask them to take a poll that is either just for fun or that will help me to gauge the knowledge level of the group.

When the session begins, a typical classroom configuration would be what is illustrated below.
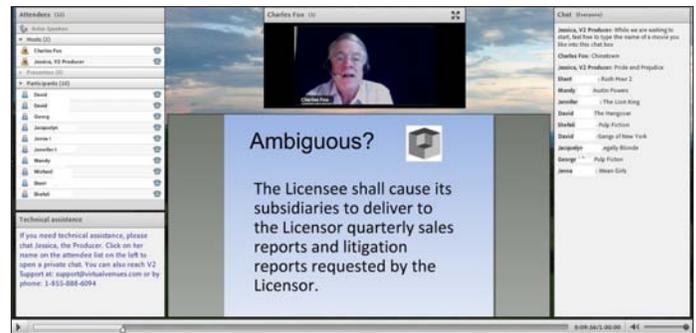


The participants, host, and presenter are listed in the attendee box (called a "pod") that appears at the left. Icons will appear next to each attendee's name indicating when they are speaking, when their phone is muted, if they have stepped away, if they are raising their hand, etc. On the right is the chat pod. Participants can type messages into the chat pod, and they can specify whether they will be seen only by specified individuals or by all participants. In this example, the presenter is seen through a live video feed appearing in the upper middle of the screen, and beneath that is a pod showing written content (which here is a PowerPoint presentation). Whether or not the video of the presenter should be shown for the entire class is a decision for the host and the presenter. Some people think that this better simulates a live classroom; others (myself included) believe that most often there are better uses for the screen "real estate."

Part of the challenge of conducting e-learning is maintaining the attention of the learners. One way to achieve this is to change the look of the classroom periodically. This can be done by using templates, which are preset configurations of pods in different formats. In addition to the pods just mentioned, other choices include timers, graphics, notepads, whiteboards (more on that later), and links to downloadable documents. Both the host and the presenter have the ability to change the location and size of each pod and to add or remove pods, either through the use of preconfigured templates, or on the fly.

## Interactivity Tools

The key to a successful e-learning class is effective use of the interactivity tools in order to build rapport, reinforce learning, and obtain feedback as to the level of engagement and learning on the part of the participants. What follows is an overview of the primary interactivity tools.

> *The key to a successful e-learning class is effective use of the interactivity tools in order to build rapport, reinforce learning, and obtain feedback….*

**Voice interaction**. All of the participants in the classroom can speak with each other via their phone connection. Participants are encouraged to mute their phones if they are in a noisy environment, and when participants want to say something, they are asked to first "raise their hands" — which they do by clicking on an icon at the top of their screen.

**Polls**. These are questions that the learners are asked to respond to using either a multiple-choice, multiple-answer, or short-answer format. They provide an ideal way to quickly assess whether the participants have absorbed specific content. The results of a poll can be shared on-screen without indicating which learners gave which answers. This anonymity feature makes it much easier to get participants to respond. It permits on-the-spot assessment of how well a learning goal has been

achieved without the risk of embarrassing anyone. In addition, I find that in going through the results of a poll it can be very effective to discuss why the wrong answers are wrong, which reinforces why the right answer is the correct one.

**Chat**. The participants and the presenter can text each other using the chat function. Chats can be sent to the entire group or can be directed to particular individuals.

**Document sharing**. I have found this to be one of the most powerful tools for experiential learning. The software permits presenters to share either a specific application on their computers, or their entire desktops. I use this tool to teach contract drafting skills, for example. I will display a contract that contains ambiguities and other problems and solicit input from the learners as to both what the problems are, and how specifically to fix them. As a part of this dialogue, I will revise the document in real time, sometimes writing and rewriting language as the discussion ensues. Using the track changes feature in Word, it is easy for the learners to see the changes being made. (Paradoxically, I have been much less successful in using this technique in a live classroom. Why? Because when I sit down and devote all my attention to a computer screen in a live classroom, I tend to lose my connection with the students. In the e-learning context I am doing the same thing, but the learners don't know it — from their perspective nothing has changed.)

**Whiteboards**. I use this tool primarily to display PowerPoint slides. In addition, participants can be given the ability to draw or type directly onto a blank whiteboard, so it can be used to create a wide variety of learning activities.

**Breakout rooms**. It is easy to divide the class up into small groups and move them into virtual breakout rooms. Once they are in a breakout session, the participants' voice and text communications are shared only with the other participants in their breakout room. The breakout rooms can also be set up for the participants to work collaboratively on a document, as if they were using a flipchart to gather their comments in a live

breakout room. The host and/or presenter control how the participants are grouped together and when the breakout sessions begin and end.

## The Benefits of E-learning

E-learning that is well designed and effectively delivered can provide significant benefits to everyone involved in law firm training: the learners, the presenters and subject matter experts, and the professional development staff.

Over the last 20 years, the trend (which shows no sign of abating) has been for law firms to expand geographically. This creates a training challenge: how can live training be provided to lawyers in multiple offices? Put another way, what is the "scalability" of law firm training? Two of the ways that this issue is traditionally addressed — shipping the trainer to do training sessions at multiple offices, or bringing the participants to a single location — both create significant financial and logistical burdens. The other two methods — videotaping the live session for later viewing by lawyers in other locations, or simultaneous videoconferencing the live session to other locations — create widely disparate learning experiences and outcomes for the live and remote participants. This tends to create morale problems for the remote participants, who may feel like second-class citizens when asked to passively observe training being provided to associates in other offices.

E-learning effectively addresses this problem. All of the learners in an e-learning session have exactly the same experience. Everyone has the same ability to participate and interact.

Another huge advantage of e-learning is that it generates operational efficiencies and cost savings. There are no travel arrangements or expenses. There are no conference rooms to book and equip.

How often have you seen enthusiastic enrollment for a training program at which only a small fraction of the class actually shows up? Lawyers get busy, conflicts develop, and in some cases a training session that sounded great to a lawyer when it was announced seems less compelling when the lawyer realizes that her work day is likely to get longer by the amount of time she spends in a classroom. Of course, those issues are just as true, in theory, for an e-learning class as for a live class. However —

- It is easier to break virtual training up into smaller segments, because the logistics of live classes are unnecessary for virtual classes. A lawyer is less likely to feel that three separate one-hour e-learning sessions are an unacceptable incursion into his time than he would in the case of a three-hour live class. And, the learning benefits of breaking training up into smaller chunks spread out over time are well known.

- Psychologically, since the learners don't have to leave their desks to attend the class, it feels less like a chunk taken out of their day. Of course, part of this is their feeling that they can continue to perform other work tasks while the training is in progress, which is a challenge that is discussed below.

## The Challenges of E-learning

Any discussion of e-learning would be incomplete without reference to some of the challenges that must be addressed when using this technology. The good news is that these challenges are manageable with a moderate amount of effort.

**The technology itself.** Even though e-learning technology is relatively user-friendly, it still involves a learning curve for a presenter or a host. (The learning curve for the learners, however, is extremely short.) If either the presenter or the host is not extremely conversant with the software, there is a good chance that the class will not go smoothly. In theory, it is possible for one person to be both the presenter and the host, simultaneously providing the content and managing the technology. But it is not advisable. A best practice in e-learning is to have the presenter and host roles handled separately. (Obviously, if the presenter is going to be someone such as a partner in a law firm

who isn't familiar with the technology, a host is essential in any event.) The host (sometimes also called a producer or moderator) has a role analogous to the producer of a radio program, performing a number of important functions:

- Greeting the participants when they enter the virtual classroom, and ensuring their visual and audio connections are working properly.
- Changing pods and templates when required.
- Setting up and managing breakout rooms.
- Handling any technical issues.

**Lack of direct feedback**. One of my favorite tricks in getting students in a live class to "volunteer" is to look for the person who is silently mouthing an answer to the question I just asked, or whose hand starts to twitch as if it wants to raise itself. This student is silently asking to be called on, and I happily oblige him. Unfortunately, this technique is not available in an e-learning class. With e-learning, the various kinds of visual and other feedback that an experienced teacher can get in a live classroom setting is missing. You don't have the ability to visually gauge the level of the class's engagement or understanding.

This may be the biggest adjustment for a trainer to make when getting used to the virtual learning environment. You are talking to a video camera, or to your computer, and it can initially feel like you are delivering content into a void.

This is one reason why it is so important to engage the learners as frequently as possible. (The other reason is to keep the learners engaged.) Polls, document sharing, chat, and voice interaction can all be used as a continuing check on the engagement of the learners and their grasp of the material that is being presented. Ironically, the absence of direct feedback necessitates a high degree of interactivity, so it is fairly common for learners in e-learning classes to be more engaged than they would be in a live classroom where less interactivity is the norm.

**E-learning can make bad training worse**. We are all unfortunately aware of the things that can make a training session boring, painful, and counterproductive. Unfortunately, these issues are magnified in an e-learning environment. What happens when presenters are not prepared, are disorganized, speak in a monotone, and talk over the heads of their learners? In a live classroom, the students may zone out. In e-learning, the participants will very quickly start doing other things at their desks. PowerPoint slides with 50 words each? Because the PowerPoint is using only a portion of the screen, these slides will be almost impossible to read. Presenters who read their PowerPoint slides? See above re learners who will begin to multitask. Presenters who monopolize the session without engaging the learners? Ditto.

> *The good news is that subject matter experts who may mistakenly believe that their expertise will allow them to just show up and magically impart their wisdom to a live classroom will be more amenable to guidance on their teaching techniques….*

The good news is that subject matter experts who may mistakenly believe that their expertise will allow them to just show up and magically impart their wisdom to a live classroom will be more amenable to guidance on their teaching techniques if they are asked to provide e-learning. Use this opportunity to help them become better teachers.

**Getting people to volunteer**. I have always found it ironic how difficult it is in a classroom of lawyers — not only first-year lawyers but even senior associates — to get anyone to talk. Most of the readers of this article know the deafening silence that can follow a request for a volunteer to answer a question. This problem can be worse in an e-learning context, because in an online class the awkwardness of a silent room isn't as painful. There's an easy fix, however. Instead of asking for volunteers to "raise their hands" or speak, ask the class to answer a question using the chat function. Not everyone will do so, but you will get enough answers to work with. You can then telephonically ask one of the responders a follow-up question, or ask him or

her to expand on the answer, and voila: you are engaged in a dialogue. In a way, this works better than getting a single volunteer, because if you get several chat responses you can choose the best ones to pursue, and so can avoid embarrassing anyone whose answer is flat-out wrong.

## Conclusion

E-learning is not a substitute either for traditional live classroom teaching or for asynchronous recorded teaching tools. However, due to its ease of use and its ability to involve students in multiple locations in a truly interactive learning experience, it is a valuable addition to the arsenal of methods that can be used to provide effective learning to professionals.

## Additional Resources

**Books:**
*The Virtual Training Guidebook,* Cindy Huggett, ASTD Press, 2013. This book clearly and concisely provides concrete guidance on technological and pedagogical e-learning issues.

*The Webinar Manifesto*, Treion Muller and Matthew Murdoch, Rosetta Books, 2013. This is a hip, somewhat irreverent thrashing of the traditional teaching methods that get worse when employed in online learning.

*The Virtual Presenter's Handbook*, Roger Courville, 1080 Group LLC, 2009. This book offers a lot of good practical advice on developing effective e-learning.

### Websites/blogs:

The Virtual Presenter: http://thevirtualpresenter.com

E-learning Industry: http://elearningindustry.com

## About the Author

After practicing law for 22 years, Charles Fox launched his own training and consulting business, Fox Professional Development LLC, in 2005. He has conducted hundreds of training programs on transactional practice for Am Law 200 law firms and Fortune 500 companies across the U.S. and internationally. An adjunct professor at Cornell Law School and The University of Alabama School of Law, he is the author of *Working with Contracts: What Law School Doesn't Teach You* (2nd edition, 2008), which has sold more than 30,000 copies.