



Yearning for E-Learning? The Pros and Cons of the Virtual Classroom for Your Call Center

By Penny Reynolds
The Call Center School

Call center professionals today face a mind-numbing array of training choices. You can choose from dozens of traditional classroom seminars on a wide variety of topics. Or take a class via the web with other students from across the country from the comfort of your own office. Or choose your own time and pace and take an e-learning module via CD or the web. So many choices for you and your staff....so, how do you decide?

This article looks at the wide variety of training options available today and helps define the pros and cons of each training medium.

ILT Classroom Programs

Your first choice is doing training the old-fashioned way -- traditional, classroom training with a live instructor. This is referred to as ILT, or instructor-led training. It's worked for years and still is the most common way to deliver training in most call centers. Training can be developed and delivered by in-house staff or can be done through professional training firms, either at a public site, or as in-house training.

Much of its success depends upon development of good courseware, with the most successful programs being built upon adult learning principles. A knowledgeable instructor who's adept at facilitation is also key to successful knowledge transfer and learning. If both courseware and facilitation are good, then ILT programs are very effective. And they have the benefit of immediate question/answer, interaction with an instructor and other students, and the leveraging of class questions for further learning.

Classroom training does have its drawbacks however. It's the most expensive type of training and can be quite costly for one-to-few training. Training often happens too late or too soon, with training happening based upon a calendar or schedule plan, instead of the student's immediate needs.

It's best for organizations that have multiple students at a single location at a similar skill level. Classroom training is the top choice when learning needs to involve highly interactive knowledge sharing, or where new skills need to be practiced and observed with feedback.

Self-Paced E-Learning



E-learning focuses on delivery of training via an electronic medium --typically either from CD, from a training program residing on an internal server or intranet, or via the web. On-line learning offers an obvious range of benefits, such as self-paced learning, consistency of delivery, approved content, speed of delivery, and 24 x 7 accessibility.

And depending upon how it's developed and delivered, it can be quite cost-effective when compared to traditional ILT programs. IBM, for example, estimates that for every 1,000 classroom days of training replaced by e-learning methodology, the company saves nearly a half-million dollars. And that doesn't even include the savings in travel costs.

But it's not for everyone. E-learning requires some level of self-directed motivation which can be problematic for many employees. And the collaboration and interaction with a teacher and other students in a traditional classroom environment is often difficult to replicate in the on-line learning experience.

It's perhaps best utilized in a "basic training" mode where it's necessary to "teach" certain knowledge. And it's also an obvious choice when there are many students that need to participate stretched over multiple locations.

Real-Time Web Training

There's one other solution that manages to combine the best of both training worlds into one solution. Synchronous, or real-time, training via the web (or intranet) is a nice "in between choice" for many training applications. It combines the live instruction from the classroom with the cost benefits of the on-line training.

In most web training scenarios, training is scheduled and the student participates via a web connection for the training visuals, and by telephone or VoIP for the instructor audio portion.

Blended Learning: The Optimal Solution for Most Call Centers

Thankfully, it's not an "either/or" decision between the three previous choices. While on-line learning offers an attractive range of benefits, the successful learning organization understands that the social aspects of traditional classroom training are an essential element in effective learning. The use of a wide range of training methods and media to enhance and maximize learning opportunities is known as "blended learning."

Let's take a look at how blended learning fits into the many aspects of call center training and professional development, beginning with the front-line staff. We begin by looking at the three different areas of knowledge and skills needed by most call center agents. See if you can determine which medium is the best approach for each area.

Product Knowledge. Much will be basic information that is simply a "data dump." And some students will absorb this information faster than others. This is probably a good place to port basic training information to an on-line, self-paced training.



Have new agents go through the basics with e-learning, and save your instructors to present the more advanced material and to facilitate interaction as students fine-tune and test out their new knowledge about the company and products. If the students are all in one place, then regular classroom training is probably the best solution to accomplish the latter, but if your students are geographically dispersed, then a web training solution may better fit your needs.

Soft Skills. There are some basic rules of telephone etiquette and some communications skills that can be “e-learned” – no doubt about it. But keep in mind that while it may be easy to master the basic concepts, it’s actually much harder to perform the skills once your representative is live on a call! To get it right, these reps need a lot of practice. And this practice should preferably be in a social context, since what they’re learning are social skills after all. There’s a big difference in learning the concepts (which may be done through e-learning), and actually experiencing and practicing those new skills (which lends itself to classroom instruction, peer learning, and one-to-one coaching.) Make sure when deciding upon which medium to use here, you’re making a distinction between the theory (what they need to know) versus the practice (of demonstrating the skill).

Call Center Operations. Every employee in the call center needs a basic frame of reference about the overall operations of the center. Each person needs a basic understanding of how call center performance is measured and why, how overall call center goals translate down to individual goals and how performance will be monitored and measured, how staffing levels are determined and what the impact is of just one person being out of place, what technologies are at work to deliver a call to the desktop, and so on. All this is pretty basic information, and just like the product information, could be delivered effectively via an e-learning medium. This is a case where classroom activity and one-to-one instruction is probably not needed. (So let’s save it for the soft skills training!)

The following chart ranks the various training methodologies in delivering the critical components of a front-line agent training program:

	Product Training		Soft Skills		Call Center Operations	
	Basic	Advanced	Theory	Practice	General	Specialty
1 st Choice	E	C	E	C	E	C
2 nd Choice	W	W	W	W	W	W
3 rd Choice	C	E	C	E	C	E

E= e-learning

W = web seminar(eILT)

C = classroom(ILT)



As you can see in the table above, a blended approach to learning is the ideal choice for training your front-line staff. Some aspects of the training lend themselves to students working on their own. Other parts of the training may happen at their own pace, but in more of a directed environment, such as elearning for basic content, followed by a group activities and debrief activities led by an instructor. Other aspects will be better covered by social learning, where students learn by participation with an instructor and fellow students.

Yearning for E-Learning?

As you begin to evaluate e-learning options, it's important to beware of "techno-lust" – the desire to implement the latest and greatest technology to address your training needs. Too many call centers have failed with their e-learning initiatives by trying to force too much content into the on-line medium. A safer approach involves taking small steps into e-learning conversion and realizing that not all aspects of your current training are appropriate for the virtual classroom.

Using on-line learning in a preparatory way to teach fundamental concepts followed by the participatory environment of the web class or traditional classroom ILT program has the following benefits:

- Optimal use of student time, since early learning can take place anytime, anywhere
- Solidifies the concepts in students' minds before practicing/discussing in social context
- Frees up more expensive classroom instruction for the practice and polishing of skills
- Saves money by shortening (but not eliminating!) classroom time

So when developing your training curriculum and deciding upon the medium, let your content, your message, and your students guide you in identifying the best fit for e-learning in your call center.

About the Author....

Penny Reynolds is a Founding Partner of **The Call Center School**, a Nashville, Tennessee based consulting and education company. The company provides a wide range of educational offerings for call center professionals, including traditional classroom courses, web-based seminars, and self-paced e-learning programs at the manager, supervisor, and front-line staff level. For more information, see www.thecallcenterschool.com or call 615-812-8400