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THIS WEEK: Design Strategies

Using Radio Production Techniques to Improve Synchronous Communication

By Marc Gamble

Six years ago I produced my first synchronous e-Learning event. I took a well-received classroom presentation and converted it to an online synchronous presentation. I did what most people would do in this situation – I took the classroom PowerPoint slides and put them online with little or no redesign. I added some online surveys, but for the most part, the presentation was unchanged from the way it was delivered in the classroom.

When the event ran, I went back to my desk and logged on to the synchronous sessions so I could experience it as a user. Overall, the event disappointed me. It was a very different experience from seeing it in person. I found myself much less engaged as a learner than when I heard the same presentation in a classroom. In short, it was boring.

Ever since that day, I have been looking for ways to improve online synchronous events. My goal is to make them more interesting and engaging. I struggled with this until I hired a radio producer from Chicago Public Radio to review one of my synchronous sessions, critique it, and suggest ways to make synchronous events more engaging, using radio broadcast techniques. From his input came several techniques and strategies that can improve any synchronous event.

Many synchronous e-Learning designs assume that online instruction is primarily a visual medium. This may be due to the dependence of so many designs on slide-like visuals for support. But in fact the audio component often carries much of the information that you wish to teach. In this week's article, an experienced producer explains how techniques from radio broadcasting can transform your virtual presentations into engaging, compelling, highly effective instruction.

A publication of



What is lost by leaving the classroom?

To start to improve synchronous events, first analyze and appreciate what you lose by leaving the classroom. Once you know what you lose, you can design to overcome these deficits. So what is lost when you leave the classroom? I count five important features.

Eye contact. Eye contact is a powerful two-way force between human beings. Eye contact between strangers is not a comfortable behavior. If someone is looking directly at you, especially someone you don't know very well, that person does get your attention. If you are looking someone directly in the eyes, you want him to give you all of his attention. Good public speakers use eye contact to hold an audience's attention.

In addition, a speaker can read the audience and see if they are paying attention. She can also read their body language to see if they understand the content, or if she is moving too fast.

Do not underestimate how much is lost once the instructor cannot see the audience, and vice versa.

Non-verbal communication. As anyone who has taken a public speaking class can tell you, your non-verbal communication reinforces your verbal content. Visible non-verbal communication, that is, facial ex-

pressions, body posture, and gestures can help you emphasize points. Good non-verbals (visible and audible) can help you "sell" the emotional side of your message. A speaker who is appropriately animated can hold an audience's attention much more effectively than a speaker who stands still and who does not show any movement.

In a synchronous environment, you lose the ability to use the visible non-verbal communication channels. So you lose key tools in your speaker's toolbox to grab and hold people's attention.

Freedom from distractions. In a classroom the learners may have relatively little to distract them from the instructor. In a synchronous session, however, participants are most likely at their desks at work, taking the session on their computers. This environment is rife with distractions. Learners could have people talking to them, emails coming in, voice mails to check, Instant Messaging etc. You get the picture. Maybe you have experienced it.

Controlled environment. In addition to external distractions, participants in synchronous communication also have a degree of freedom that they never had in a classroom. They are not just victims of external distractions. If your session is not engaging them, they

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will exercise this new freedom by **initiating** emails, phone calls, conversations, etc ... they might never think of doing these things in the classroom.

Peer pressure. Imagine that you are at a conference and you see in the conference guide a presentation that sounds really interesting. You go to the presentation early and sit in the front row. Three minutes into the presentation, you realize that it is not what you expected and that this presentation will just be a waste of your time. What to do? You want to stand up and leave. But you think twice about standing up and leaving because you don't want to be rude to the speaker and the other people in the room.

In a synchronous environment this "peer pressure," or need to be polite, that holds people in their seats is gone. Now people can leave your session guilt-free with one click of their mouse because no one is watching them.

So, without redesign, your synchronous event is in danger of being inferior compared to the same presentation in the classroom because you lose eye contact and the visible non-verbal cues that help you maintain attention, and you lose support from peer pressure. At the same time, if you produce an inferior product, the audience has new distractions, freedom, and the ability to leave your session unnoticed.

What tools can you leverage online?

This is a serious problem. What are organizations doing about it as they produce synchronous events? The answer: not much!

The biggest mistake I see is that people are doing what I did the first time I produced with this technology. They are taking PowerPoint presentations that worked in the classroom, and broadcasting them online, with little or no redesign for this medium.

To be successful we need to design synchronous sessions that will overcome what is lost when you leave the classroom. To do this, we need to emphasize and make the most of what we have **NOT** lost, and take advantage of what we have gained to engage the learner.

So, let's take a look at what we have not lost, to determine what we can use to improve synchronous events. At the highest level, a synchronous event uses these four components to communicate with and engage the audience.

- Visuals
- Interactivity
- Chat
- Audio

All of these are important in any synchronous event. But of these four techniques, which is the most important? That is, which one holds learners in your session every second of the presentation? Which is the com-

ponent that you could least afford to lose? To answer these questions let's analyze them one by one.

Visual elements

When I first started to develop synchronous e-Learning, I considered it a visual medium. I don't anymore. Don't get me wrong, the right graphics in synchronous communications, or PowerPoint for that matter, are important. A good visual can illustrate a point or organize content. But this is not TV, or even a photograph. As visual information display expert Edward Tufte points out, "PowerPoint slides projected up on a wall are very low resolution – compared to paper, 35 mm slides, and the immensely greater capacities of the human eye-brain system." Since synchronous graphics are PowerPoint based, you can expect to have the same, or less, resolution in your presentation. In reality, you can't effectively have much text and graphics on a slide. This limits the amount of information you can communicate visually.

Also, compared to video, the visuals in synchronous communication are static. The frames in video change approximately every 1/24th of a second. How often do the slides in a synchronous session change? This depends on the speaker, but it can be as infrequently as once every five minutes, and it is rare if it is less than every two minutes. Are these slides communicating for the entire time they appear? The human brain can take in visual information in seconds. A PowerPoint slide containing 40 words may require as little as eight seconds to read silently. So, if one of your slides appears for three minutes in a presentation, your audience "got it" in the first few seconds. At this point, we have to ask ourselves, what purpose is the visual serving during the rest of the time?

I am not proposing that you ignore your graphics, or that you show more graphics at a faster rate to attempt to emulate video. Just understand the limits of this technology in displaying information visually. Your graphics may help you make a point, but they will not engage your audience throughout your session.

Interactivity

We can give the learner much more interactivity in a synchronous event than we normally can (or do) in the classroom. This is actually a big advantage of synchronous communication over the classroom. Most classrooms do not have the technology support needed to take polls and surveys, and then collate the data instantaneously as we can online. Interactivity provides many opportunities to engage the learner and improve any presentation. For example, you can use interactivity to gain information from the audience so you can tailor the content on the fly in order to make sure it meets their needs. Good interactivity stimulates

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users and leads to good questions for the instructor, as well as good discussion in the chat area.

However, it is difficult to have meaningful interactions for the audience more often than once every five minutes. If you have interactive exercises too frequently, it will break up the flow of your presentation. Interactivity will not hold your audience in your session second by second.

Chat

Since the first grade, we have been told to sit in our chairs, listen to the teacher, and to not talk in class. That would disrupt the presentation and distract the other learners. In a classroom, this is still true today. But, once you go into a synchronous environment, all of this changes. Now your participants can use the chat feature in most synchronous tools to carry on conversations and it will not distract the speaker. Like interactivity, this is an advantage that synchronous training has over the classroom, and even over asynchronous training. The potential to engage your audience with chat is great. If you can make it one-fourth as interesting as teenagers find Instant Messaging and texting, then your presentation and the sideline discussions will so occupy your audience that they will not think of checking their emails.

Although chat is constant, it is, unfortunately, your participants who drive its content. It is out of your control, so you can't depend on it to deliver your key messages. Chat is great at holding your audience in a session, but it is not the most important of the four components in your synchronous event.

Audio

Unlike visuals and interactivity in a synchronous session, audio is constantly present. Imagine that the audio in a synchronous session stopped for 15 seconds. That "dead air" could be a disaster for your session. If you went 10 minutes with the same graphics, it would be boring but might not be a disaster. If an entire synchronous event contained no interactivity or chat it would be a shame, but it would not necessarily be a disaster. The reality is that the audio of a synchronous event never stops, and should never stop.

Audio delivers the vast majority of your content in synchronous sessions. This is even true with the majority of TV news broadcasts. Ask yourself, is your experience of a TV news broadcast a visual or an auditory experience? Let's do a quick thought experiment to illustrate the power of audio in TV, and how we take it for granted.

First, imagine that you are on a treadmill at a health club. Above the treadmill a TV is tuned to CNN, but the audio is off. You watch the TV and see foreign soldiers walking through a rainforest. You see some wreckage.

You see a man talking whom you have never seen before, and then you see Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice talking. What have you learned by just seeing this news and not hearing a word? You don't really know what happened. You don't know where. You don't know a whole lot more than you did before you saw the news.

Now let's experience this same video clip in a different way. You are preparing dinner in the kitchen with the TV on. You are cutting an onion, and you can't watch the TV because your eyes are watering and you need to concentrate so you do not cut your fingers. While you listen to the TV, you hear that rebels in Columbia have bombed an oil pipeline. You learned that the blast was in retaliation for a recent crackdown from the Columbian government. You learned what the Columbian government's planned response would be from the Columbian Interior Minister. You learn, from a woman that sounds like Condoleezza Rice, the specifics of the State Department's plans to help the Columbian government. What have you learned by just hearing the news and not seeing any of it? You know what happened. You know where. You know more about the whole story than you would have gained from watching the video without sound.

In this example, you learned much more from the audio alone than you did from the visuals alone. You learned details of the story that just don't come across in the visuals. Yes, there are TV news stories where the visuals are crucial and will tell you more than the audio. Think about the visual images of the floodwaters after hurricane Katrina. Words could not do justice to that story the way a few seconds of video did. But in all news stories, the audio plays a crucial role, and in many cases is clearly the more important of the two media.

Ask yourself what kind of content you need to communicate with a synchronous event. A majority of topics in corporate training are not visual in nature. How visual (relatively) is sales training, project management, C++ updates or teaching accountants about Sarbanes-Oxley revisions? Many content areas in corporate or adult education will not be primarily visual, and so audio will be the workhorse method for communicating your content.

The bottom line

Audio is extremely important in any broadcast communication. Audio is the main technology that can hold participants in a synchronous e-Learning session, and it is the medium conveying a majority of your content.

But, what is being done to improve audio in synchronous sessions? Not much. Most people take the audio for granted, and do not make the effort to improve it.

Audio is extremely important in any broadcast communication. Audio is the main technology that can hold participants in a synchronous e-Learning session, and it is the medium that conveys a majority of your content.

Luckily, there is a technology that has successfully been attracting and holding audiences for more than 90 years. Radio has been a very successful means of communication and entertainment without eye contact or visible non-verbal behaviors. Because of this, in my opinion, radio is a better model for developing synchronous sessions than the corporate PowerPoint presentation.

Radio broadcast techniques

We need to appreciate the audio in our synchronous sessions and take steps to improve it. Here are several techniques used by radio producers that you can use to improve your synchronous communication.

Find great speakers

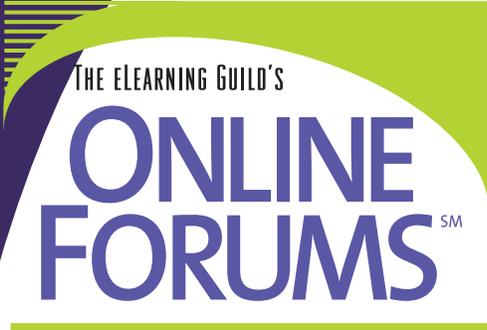
In radio, producers put a premium on the talent they allow to go on the air. Radio producers know that great content, interviews, and scripts can all go to waste if not presented well.

In order to present your content well, it is extremely important that you have an instructor who is a strong speaker. In the online environment, instructors who are adequate speakers in the classroom can quickly seem mediocre. And it gets worse: mediocre speakers quickly become intolerable to listen to. So take extra care when you select individuals to deliver your content in synchronous events.

If you have a good speaker, and you want to improve his or her performance, there are some steps you can take. Robert McLeish, who wrote *Radio Production* (See References at the end of this article), names the following skills that radio talent needs to be conscious of, and to work on constantly to improve:

- **Projection** – Is the vocal energy of the speaker's voice appropriate?
- **Voice Inflection** – Does your speaker have the appropriate rise and fall in his or her voice? As McLeish says, "It is the predictability of the vocal pattern that becomes boring." Not enough rise and fall in the voice will become monotonous. Too predictable a rise and fall becomes too rhythmic.
- **Pause** – Does your speaker stop at appropriate times to separate ideas and allow the audience time to absorb thoughts?
- **Personality** – How does the broadcaster come across as a person? What visual image is the speaker creating in the listener's minds?
- **Vocal stressing** – Is there emphasis on the appropriate words in each sentence to communicate the desired meaning?

The simplest way to improve the speech style of your presenter is to record her (or him) delivering your content in a dry run. Then replay this recording for your speaker and the synchronous development team to



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critique. Everyone, including the speaker, can learn a lot from listening to these replays, and will have ideas on how to improve them. Do several different takes and encourage your speaker to vary projection, inflection, and vocal stressing. By experimenting, you can optimize the speaker's voice. Encourage your speaker to exaggerate or even "ham up" the delivery in some takes. Many times when a speaker believes the performance is "over the top," the delivery actually comes across as clear, animated, and engaging. It takes the replay to demonstrate this to the speaker.

Create dialogue

Currently, a majority of synchronous events just consist of a basic monologue. This is the effect of thinking of your synchronous event as a corporate PowerPoint presentation online. This is a mistake.

How many monologues, lasting more than three minutes, do you hear on radio or TV? The answer is very few. Maybe the President's State of the Union address, but that is because it is beyond the control of radio and TV producers.

Look at successful radio and TV formats. All but the smallest TV markets always have two news anchors. Why? So the audience never hears one person for more than two minutes.

Try to think of professional football with one announcer. One person could easily announce the entire game and describe every play to the audience, but that is not enough for the producers. Ultimately, these producers need to prevent the audience from changing the channel or going to bed. The producers create a dialogue so the broadcast is more interesting and easier to listen to. They want each speaker to build off what the other is saying. The producers want banter, laughter, reaction, and even disagreement.

Let's look at Howard Stern. Does Howard entertain with a monologue? No. Love him or loathe him, he surrounds himself with characters and then encourages dialogue between them. He wants banter and he wants his team to build on a topic.

The rule of thumb in radio is to keep speakers speaking for no more than two and a half minutes at a time, and preferably to hold them to a minute and a half.

Why dialogue? Monologues or lectures are one person, talking unchecked for a long time. Lecturers know they won't hear a challenge to their message until the Q&A session at the end of the presentation. They know it is unlikely that someone will disagree or ask them to reiterate something right away.

Compare this to a dialogue. In a dialogue, you are talking to someone, so every word can be challenged immediately. The listener can and will ask the speaker to clarify or reiterate the speaker's statements. Therefore, speakers are more careful about how they phrase

things. That is, *speakers tend to use simpler language in dialogues*. They speak more slowly and deliberately. They speak in conversational tones instead of the monotone of a rigid lecture.

Vary voice types

I once produced a synchronous event in which there were two British men, of the same age and accent, having a dialogue. For my US-based audience, and for me, it became very difficult to tell who was talking because their voices were so similar. The flow of the conversation became confusing because listeners did not know who was talking. All the benefits of a dialogue were lost.

When you look for two or more people to be in your synchronous event, try to find individuals with different-sounding voices. The easiest way to do this is to vary the gender of your speakers. It is not coincidental that most radio and TV news teams consist of a man and a woman. Another option is to look for speakers with distinct accents from each other. In my event, a British accent would have been perfect, if paired with any non-British accent. Also, try to vary the tone level of your speakers. By varying the voices, you will have clear distinction between the speakers, and thus better dialogue.

Interview

Interviewing is not only a great way to create dialogue; it also focuses the presentation on the audience's needs. Let me explain. Experts tend to think about content differently than novices, and they are usually unaware of this fact. Experts may not explain the topic in a way best understood by novices. For example, the expert may stay too abstract. Radio and TV producers are aware of this, and they try not to put an expert in any topic on the air without "supervision." They normally will have someone interview the expert.

In radio and TV, the job of an interviewer is to represent the listeners: to be an advocate for the listener, to ask the questions the listener wants to ask but can't, and to keep the speaker focused on what is important or relevant to the audience.

A good interviewer will get the speaker to:

- Reiterate points for better clarification;
- Support assertions with real world examples and stories to make it more tangible for the listener;
- Stay concrete and not get so abstract the audience can't relate to the content;
- Relax and thus create a more casual and understandable discourse;
- Stay on schedule to make the best use of time; and
- Maintain an appropriate pace. (This is especially important in a synchronous event. Without eye

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contact, an expert can forget that the audience even exists and charge through the content.)

Who makes a good interviewer? You want someone who is a good speaker and who can think on his or her feet. You also want someone who knows enough about the topic “to be dangerous.” That is, they know enough to ask the right questions but not enough to be able to answer those questions. For example, if the interviewer is an expert in the field and can answer the right questions, then they will not ask the relevant questions for a novice audience. On the other end of the spectrum, you might be tempted to get someone who has radio or TV experience. This is a mistake if they do not know anything about your content. They will not be able to ask the right questions. Even if you feed them good questions, they will not be able to ask the appropriate follow-up questions.

The best person to be an interviewer knows enough about your content to ask the right questions, but doesn't know the content so well that they ignore the needs of the novice audience. That is why I recommend getting someone from your target audience to be the interviewer.

Here are two techniques used in radio that will help you improve interviews right away.

Pre-interview

Before you go into your synchronous session, always do a pre-interview between the interviewer and the interviewee. This will build familiarity and trust between the two, and that will help to make the interview more relaxed and thus promote natural dialogue.

In the pre-interview, they each find out where the other wants to take the interview. The interviewer explains what he believes the audience wants to get out of the interview – the person being interviewed states what message he or she wants to convey to the audience. They also must agree on what graphics to show and when. It is NOT a time for the interviewer to ask the exact questions planned for the interview. This could lead to the interviewee preparing rote responses, which tend to develop into the monologues that you are trying so hard to avoid.

Politely interrupt

Another important skill an interviewer needs is the ability to politely interrupt the speaker. If an interviewer is to represent the audience, he or she needs to guide the speaker in a direction that is helpful to the audience. This means it may be necessary to stop the guest occasionally to clarify a point or to get them back on track. Doing this live in front of an audience is a skill that takes tact and politeness.

Keep audio quality high

Radio producers have a keen ear and are always conscious of the audio quality of their broadcasts. They know that the quality of the audio makes their session more pleasurable for the listener. When I had the radio producer critique my synchronous session, I had my speaker talking through a speakerphone instead of a microphone close to his mouth. The audio quality appalled the radio producer. He felt that the speakerphone, with its background noise and less than optimal voice clarity, was degrading the audio and making it “scratchy.” He felt strongly that for an hour-long presentation this would eventually “grate on the listeners’ ears.”

We do not want to have an unpleasant presentation. To guarantee that we have pleasing presentations we must do everything we can to improve their sound quality. Make sure your speakers have high quality microphones and that they are the appropriate distance from them. If you are choosing between IP audio or a telephone conference call, please test them out first and consider the audio quality of each before you make your decision.

Pre-recorded sessions

In my experience, one executive normally starts and sponsors good training initiatives. I have always tried to get these sponsors to kick off the training events they created. They could explain why this training is valuable to the organization and is a good use of the audience's time.

The problem is that these executives' schedules prevented them from being at the synchronous event when I needed them. So I started to record them prior to the events, and then used their recordings to kick off my synchronous training session. This worked out for everyone. The executive wasn't inconvenienced, and the learner received a compelling and motivating message that explained the purpose of the training.

Pre-recorded segments are a powerful tool used in radio and TV that brings control and flexibility to the producer. The majority of a National Public Radio (NPR) broadcast consists of pre-recorded segments. If you interview someone live, you have 10 or 15 minutes to get it right and no second chance. If you interview someone for a pre-recorded segment, you have as much time as the interviewee will give you. Once done with the interview, you edit out the fluff, and reconstruct the audio to tell a coherent, concise story that delivers the message you want. Pre-recorded sessions give you a second chance.

The other advantage of a pre-recorded interview is that it allows you to have individuals in your presenta-

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tion that you would have a hard time getting during your synchronous event. If you can get your sponsor in your presentation, think of whom else you could get. Think of how testimonials from members of your target audience, customers, vendors, suppliers, clients, and high-level executives would improve your synchronous event.

Also, think of the control you have. Now you can interview several individuals and go with the ones that deliver the best message. If you pre-record someone, and he says a few great things but lots of inappropriate things, you can choose not to play the segment at all or edit it down to deliver just the great things.

What makes pre-recording sessions work is the editing. This used to be the domain of the sound engineers. Now, with low cost editing software, you can have novices create effective audio presentations.

People do not realize how much is edited out of a professional radio pre-recorded interview. For example, at Chicago Public Radio an eight-minute pre-recorded segment normally is the result of editing down an hour-plus interview.

Other radio techniques

Here are three more techniques that radio producers use that may benefit your synchronous session.

Formats – Many radio shows are arranged into multiple segments consisting of various types of presentation. This magazine format makes the broadcast more interesting by adding variety and breaking up your session.

Music – Use music to start and close a segment or your entire program. This adds a professional touch to your synchronous event.

Host – Having a host adds a level of consistency and professionalism to your programs.

Conclusion

Organizations like synchronous communication because of the money they save on travel, lodging, and lost productivity. All of these are good reasons. There is potential to save money by using synchronous communication. However, what good is saving money if you are not meeting your communication or training objectives? If you do not have your audience's full attention, how can you reach your goals? Also, your goal should not be to save money once with one presentation. Your goal should be to save money over the long term by using synchronous events repeatedly. Can you achieve this long-term goal if you create a product that users are reluctant to return to?

Corporate PowerPoint presentations work in the classroom because the instructor has control over the audience. In a synchronous event, we cannot see our audience and thus we have much less control over them. Radio producers have never seen their audience, but have done a great job engaging them. Radio producers know their listeners can and will change the station quickly if the program gets monotonous. And now, your audience can basically change "stations" as easily as any radio listener.

There is potential to make synchronous sessions compelling experiences without adding significant costs to your development budget. Instead of thinking of yourself as producing a PowerPoint presentation online, start to believe that you are a radio producer, creating a radio show with the supporting ability to show graphics, and have interactivity. This will lead to engaging audio that anchors your audience in your sessions from start to finish, and that will have them coming back to future synchronous events. 

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Resource Directory – Access & Post	✓	✓	✓	✓
Info Exchange – Access & Post	✓	✓	✓	✓
Job Board – Access Jobs & Resumes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Job Board – Post Resumes	✓	✓	✓	✓
Job Board – Post Jobs	✗	✓	✓	✓
Guild Research – Online Briefings	✓	✓	✓	✓
Guild Research – Reports	✗*	✓	✓	✓
Guild Research – Archives	✗	✓	✓	✓
Learning Solutions e-Magazine	✗*	✓	✓	✓
Online Forums – Archive	✗	✗	✓	✓
Online Forums	\$	\$	✓	✓
Face-to-Face Conferences	\$	\$	\$	✓*
Pre-Conference Workshops	\$	\$	\$	✓*
Event Fee Discounts	✗	20%	20%	20%
Other Event Site License Discounts	✗	✗	20%	20%

*See www.eLearningGuild.com for details

✓ = Included in Membership

✗ = Not available

\$ = Separate fee required

The eLearning Guild organizes a variety of important industry events...



April 10 - 13, 2007
BOSTON



April 11 & 12, 2007
BOSTON



CHECK ONLINE
for topics and dates!



Fall 2007 Dates TBD
WEST COAST, USA