I’ve been teaching virtual and in-person classes for a few years, I didn’t go into my last job thinking of myself as a “trainer”, but the opportunity presented itself and I found myself enjoying the experience. At that job I was a developer playing non-development roles, I learned a lot, at times I took on too much responsibility, but by the end of the run learned a few things about what I’m good at and what I’m not good at. There’s a lot that I’m not good at.

The initial training effort I was involved with was content focused, and it was an emergency. A class had been sold, the original authors (two capable developers who I still talk to today) delivered an awful Keynote deck that didn’t meet our quality standards, and as the guy writing the book it made sense at the time for me to dive on it. I forget why I was originally in Mountain View, but my two-day trip to California turned into a two-week trip, I skipped Thanksgiving, and ended up teaching a class a day after the material was finished. For a short time I was “the trainer” and I taught a number of in-person classes for that company.

I forget why, but there was a sense that “Tim shouldn’t be doing training” at the time. We eventually found some other trainers to teach classes, and while I still played a role in both content and teaching. Eventually that same company started to experiment with virtual training classes that became very popular. As the global economy tanked in 2008 it was clear that companies had a limited appetite for travel expenditures and virtual classes were also an easier way to get a whole team trained quickly without having to wait until the next scheduled class. So, over the past 5-6 years I’ve probably taught on the order of 200-300 students and maybe 10-20 classes. Maybe it’s more than that, but that estimate feels right.

Some things I learned from the experience:

**Good trainers can be a handful.** It’s tough to find developers who can communicate, and it is even more difficult to find trainers who are experts in the particular topic you are teaching. One common trait is that many trainers are often over-confident to a fault. This was evident in a few interactions over the past few years, and it was only manageable because training coordinators and sales people knew how to manage egos.

**If you enjoy training and want to do it every day you might not be the right person to teach the class.** Training can be a lucrative occupation. If you taught a full training class every day, you’ll make good money, but if you taught a training class every day you’d also have no time to use and understand the stuff you are trying to teach. This is sort of how I feel about the No Fluff Just Stuff circuit. Some of these people are really good at what they do, they all seem capable, they all seem charismatic, but more than a few of them give off a poseur vibe. There’s a spectrum here, but after watching people do this, I’m skeptical of people who profess to love teaching training classes every week. How then do they have time to invest in actually “doing”? Part of the appeal, or at least, part of what I think the appeal of our classes should be that they are taught by members of the community that is actually creating and supporting the software (I was never a Maven committer, but I could wheel out the book as evidence that I was at least a supporting cast member.)

**If you are doing your job right as an instructor it should be exhausting.** Maybe not as true for virtual classes, but if you are invested in teaching a class you are going after the students to trying to keep them engaged. This class should be exhausting. If you think that training is just reading the slides, that’s not the class we should be delivering. Students should feel like there was a lot of information to digest and you should feel like taking a nap.

**Every trainer wants to tell you what’s wrong with the class.** There are few exceptions to this rule, and, admittedly, the class I was teaching was thrown around like an expensive football for many years. First it was the Coloradans sending us a crappy Keynote, then it was my emergency version in Keynote, then that company paid someone from New Zealand to redo the slides, our most successful trainer then decided to redo the slides and add Zen imagery, and lastly we moved the training to Asciidoc. Every time a new person got involve I learned to brace for the impact of an email that told us our course sucked.

Along the way we had maybe ten people giving feedback about what changes needed to be made to the training. One of the reasons for this is because we didn’t do a good job agreeing on objectives and an outline up front. We also maybe didn’t do a good job structuring the effort. While there was a training coordinator and while training at that company generated revenue, the management always made every feel bad for wanting to spend any money on the effort. Don’t get me started.

**Many students want to tell you what’s wrong with the class.** Without exception, I’d get to the end of an in-person class only to have a couple of students stick around to tell me that they had a few, better ideas for how to teach the class. Some of them are good ideas, many are not.

**Many virtual students are not paying close attention.** So, don’t put people on the spot.

**Lab manuals are always broken.** To the point where I never had faith that the labs were actually going to work.

**Your content will never be done.** If you think that content is a one-time investment for a training class, think again. If you teach a class, plan on updating it at least once a year.

Typos affect the credibility of the trainer. When you are standing in front of a class of 20 students and there’s something wrong with a slide. Or, when you hit on a slide that has a typo it looks very sloppy. In an in-person class, if you’ve got the students in a good place, you’ll notice that they tend to take you less seriously if your slides tell lies.

**Material was rarely targeted at the right audience.** I never taught a class in which I thought; “this material is perfect for these students.” It is usually either way too basic or far too complex. The class I taught never did a good job of providing context for the information it delivered either. It really was akin to reading from a book.

**You never teach the same audience twice.** Here are two examples:

1. I had a class in California at a eCommerce company that consisted of me standing in-front of 10 students for two days answering the more complex questions you could imagine. Not one slide was delivered. It was a good class, but there was no outline for that one.
2. I had another class a few months later at a large government agency during which, over the course of two days, I only had two questions. One of them was “How do I set a windows environment variable?”

This varied experience is much more likely with dedicated in-person training, but you can also experience this with virtual training.

**Students engage examples and demonstrations, not slides.** As a team we focused on two “artifacts” the slides and the lab manual. The one thing we didn’t do was create a series of good, “live” examples that people could dive into. This is something we need to talk about, but a “lab manual” focus is a mistake for virtual. Also, in terms of teaching, it’s more rewarding for students and instructors to work through examples early on rather than to deliver multiple hours of slides.

**Advanced topic classes started to feel like marketing.** The training coordinator and I worked in the marketing department, so it isn’t surprising that our content started to tilt toward the promotional. This may be related to the fact that I was being paid to write the promotional copy in our documentation and that this book formed the basis for the advanced class (and that people were being really cheap about content at the time because everyone involved with training was being told that the work was worthless…. Sound like fun?)

Anyway, I’m not opposed to delivering promotional messages during training, but they have to be framed correctly and it can’t be heavy-handed. Training shouldn’t be a part of the marketing “function”.

**In-person training classes and Virtual are very different.** There are many problems with applying an in-person training approach to virtual training. The most obvious problem is that you can’t interact with students the same way.

In an in-person class you can see how students are responding to the material, and this gives you an opportunity to engage people directly. In a virtual environment you are talking to your laptop for a few hours. If you are lucky you’ll have a class that isn’t shy about interrupting you and you can start to elicit questions from them that help fill out the class.