



**Genius.** When the leaders of a United Way chapter wanted their staff to learn the organization's elevator speech, guess where they posted it?

John Ray, a communications VP at the Columbia-Willamette chapter in Oregon, had the inspiration. After a colleague complained that many on staff didn't

know the organization's 30-second pitch, Ray made an executive decision: "If we have an elevator speech, it should be in our elevator. I [posted] it without letting anyone know I was doing it," he said. "When folks came to work the next day, we got applause from staff who liked a reminder done in a humorous way." And use of the pitch, presumably, is going up. ■

**CHOOSE THE WAY.**  
THE ELEVATOR SPEECH

[www.unitedway-pdx.org](http://www.unitedway-pdx.org)

**Why United Way?**  
A 30-second introduction

United Way understands that you really want to make a difference right in your own community.

We want to help you do that.

Our experience tells us that the best way to help the most people is to focus on the underlying causes of the most serious problems. Here in the Portland/Vancouver metro area, we're focused on ending homelessness, helping kids succeed, education, stronger families, and access to healthcare.

It takes the whole community working together to reach our goals in these areas. So we bring together people from all across the community – from government, business, faith groups, nonprofits, and ordinary citizens. If it requires fundraising, going to City Hall, or just getting people to work together, that's what we do.

Your United Way contribution goes to work bringing lasting change, right where you live. In the end, it's all about helping people and building a stronger community for everyone.

United Way of the Columbia-Willamette

# What I Learned in iSchool

**Gathering people over the web is easy. Keeping them engaged is not.**

Conceptually speaking, convening meetings and conducting classes over the Internet is a model of efficiency. It cuts down on travel, saves time and money, and lets people learn in the comfort and convenience of their homes and offices. If only we lived in a conceptual world.

Back on Earth, virtual meetings and distance learning classes are frequently exercises in futility for all concerned. Session leaders are often left wondering if the networked participants (whom they usually cannot see) are paying attention or playing Sudoku. And said participants are often required to stare at static PowerPoint slides

while far-off voices drone endlessly in their earpieces. In Nonprofit Land, where saving money is always a priority, listless LiveMeetings and woeful Webex classes are on the rise.



Last year, I launched Storytelling iSchool – my first chance to design and run an online gathering. Since students pay to participate, I knew attention levels would be higher than normal. What I did not know, however, was how much the online format can alter the dynamic between teacher and student. So inside this

month: what one teacher learned from his class, and how you can apply those lessons to your next gathering in cyberspace.

**a goodman**  
GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

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Newsletter edited by Lori Matsumoto.

► **Lesson #1:**  
**Do not underestimate the loss of eye contact.**

While there are several different choices for web conferencing (e.g., Microsoft LiveMeeting, Webex, ReadyTalk), if you strip away the bells and whistles, the three elements that generally define the form are:

- An online network in which participants can simultaneously see the same image on their computer screens (most typically slides from a PowerPoint presentation);
- A telephone conference line;
- A chat box that allows participants to address questions or comments to the session leader and to other participants.

In short, you have a reasonable replica of a face-to-face meeting minus one critical ingredient: faces. Without a live, two-way video connection, there is no eye contact, and that poses an immense challenge for the person at the front of the virtual room.

In his book, *Lend Me Your Ears*, speech and presentation coach Max Atkinson writes, "The more you look at the audience, the greater the pressure is on them to pay attention." Eliminate eye contact and down goes the pressure. Consequently, when new email arrives, a co-worker stops by, or another line rings, the temptation to briefly duck out of the meeting can be irresistible. So, to help students follow their better angels...

**Lesson #2:**  
**Call on people.**

In a virtual meeting or classroom, calling on participants by name is the moral equivalent of eye contact. It compels attention and sends a signal to others that their participation may be required at any

moment. And when participants start speaking up, their voices break up the monotony of one person droning on and on.

A word of caution, though: since many participants in online meetings are used to being ignored, this technique may come as a bit of a shock. So tell them up front what's coming and explain that your intent is to keep the session as lively and interactive as possible (as opposed to embarrassing somebody who's clearly been catching up on his crossword).

**Lesson #3:**  
**Put their faces on the screen.**

You've already seen this technique in practice on CNN. When a reporter calls in with news so hot that CNN didn't have time to set up a video feed, the network will put the reporter's picture on the screen, usually accompanied with text such as "Anderson Cooper reporting from Tikrit." The slide is a small touch, but it can help viewers feel more of a connection to the person covering the story.

To achieve a similar effect during Storytelling iSchool, we created slides for each student such as the one you see here for Esther Butler of PATH. Whenever I called on Esther or she asked a question, this slide would appear on everyone's screen. This provides yet another way to compel attention ("Yikes, that's me up there!"), and it also allows students to "see" their classmates despite the limitations of the technology.

**Lesson #4:**  
**Change the visuals frequently.**

This is sound advice in face-to-face settings as well, but when you're all together in one room, people who are bored staring at a

single slide or flip-chart page can always look at the speaker. In an online environment, turning away from the screen means tuning out the meeting. So look for ways to keep the visuals changing, whether that means having graphs or charts build gradually over successive slides (as opposed to presenting one slide with all the pieces in place), breaking up lists or data into several slides, or – as we do in iSchool – interspersing slides that identify participants (students, panelists, et al.) as they chime in.

**Lesson #5:**  
**Keep those phone lines open.**

If you accept the premise that lively conversation makes for a better online meeting or class, then be prepared to go one step farther: leave all phone lines un-muted and ask participants to keep the noise at their end to a minimum. This avoids the constant muting and un-muting process that can clip off the beginnings and ends of comments and impede conversational flow. Yes, you run the risk of hearing other phones ringing or voices chatting in the background, but a little ambient noise can be a welcome change from the eerie quiet of a completely muted meeting. (And you can always resort to the "Mute All" button if the background noise becomes excessive.)



## What I Learned in iSchool

**Lesson 6:**  
**Respect the butt-in-place limit.**

When people are asked to sit and stare at a computer screen – and no matter how fascinating your class or meeting may be, that's basically what they're doing – always remember that brevity is your friend. Each Storytelling iSchool class runs for one hour, and even with plenty of interaction throughout, it's still a minute-by-minute struggle to keep all 20-25 students engaged.

If you have more than an hour's worth of material to cover, break the meeting or class into shorter sessions. It may require more work on your part, but your colleagues will be more attentive as a result. ■

The February 2007 session of Storytelling iSchool is still enrolling, but space is limited. Visit [www.agoodmanonline.com](http://www.agoodmanonline.com) to learn more.

