Learning leaders have to be concerned about keeping pace in a fast-changing business environment, rapid innovation in the learning industry, their department’s relevance, and a changing economic environment. The virtual classroom represents an ideal technology solution for modern high-impact learning organizations and distance education programs.

Virtual learning can take place synchronously or asynchronously. In synchronous systems, attendees meet in real time and instructors conduct live classes. In an asynchronous system, students learn at their own pace and work independently with the system.

The Saba Real-Time Collaboration platform delivers the most cost-effective online meetings on the market, an interactive virtual classroom, and engaging webinars that simplify audience participation and maximize the impact of every event. Saba (via acquisition of Centra) pioneered virtual classrooms in the late 90s by bringing true interactive classroom experience to the Internet.

With simple creation, management, and delivery of classroom content, top-quality recordings, and one-click accessibility from users’ work environments, Saba drives higher user adoption and knowledge transfer across the global ecosystem of employees, customers, partners, and suppliers.

Recognizing the advantages of virtual classrooms is important. Deciphering the key criteria to consider when looking for a virtual classroom solution is vital. A successful choice delivers both immediate payback and long-term strategic value.

Consider the following questions when looking for a virtual classroom solution verses online meeting and web conferencing solutions.

Does your virtual learning environment need to:

- Provide an interactive user experience that is tailored to participants’ roles in a virtual classroom?
- Be easy to use and easy to implement, while still providing an advanced range of tools to support a virtual classroom?
- Support different learning styles, provide mobile support, and utilize a variety of media?
- Include interactive training and learning, as well as participant management, immediate feedback, and polling?
- Support large groups on mobile, PC, Mac, and Linux devices?
- Provide high quality HD video, VoIP, and fully integrated, one-click accessibility across your network and devices?
- Encourage classroom attendees to participate in the class with activities such as text chat, polling, problem solving and attendee/teacher reviews?
- Easily integrate with any Learning Management System?
- Be battle tested, and is it proven and mature (scalable, reliable, and secure)?
- Provide detailed reports and analytics?
- Allow sessions to be recorded, stored in the cloud for future access with interactive tests still live?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, this Buyer’s Guide is for you. In it, we discuss the key criteria to consider when looking for a virtual classroom environment that can deliver both immediate payback and long-term strategic value.

Saba Classroom offers:

- An interactive user experience
- An agenda builder that prepares you for your virtual classroom
- Pre-class resource management that allows you to manage and browse content
- Features during your virtual classroom session
- Classroom mode – appshare, whiteboard, desktop sharing, and breakout rooms
- Mobile applications for effective learning on the go
- Post-class reporting, analytics, and viewing recordings
- Integrations and open APIs
- Social networking for informal learning and collaboration
- Single unified platform for online meetings, webinars, and virtual classes
- Available in localized languages such as French, Spanish, Chinese, and so on

Saba Classroom: Engaging Virtual Learning Environment
1. User Experience: Interactivity

Just as with a classroom in the physical world, users want to interact with others within a virtual classroom. They want to share their ideas at a point in the discussion when those ideas are relevant. They want to express themselves non-verbally, and they want to see how other participants feel about the discussion taking place.

Saba’s virtual classroom tools provide users an easy way to alert the instructor that they want to ask a question or make a point by raising their hands. Contribute to what goes up on the team whiteboard during a classroom and express opinions and emotions with the emoticons provided. The check mark, raise hand, smile, applaud, step-out, and x-mark buttons allow the participant to actively take part in the virtual classroom.

With audio alerts, classroom leaders can quickly see in which order participants raised their hands so that they can orchestrate a natural conversation. If a student has something to share, audio alerts notify the teacher, so he or she can give that attendee presenter rights without losing control of the classroom or interrupting its flow.

With a virtual classroom environment that provides an interactive, role-based experience, students can have the same spontaneous flow of ideas that happen in a physical classroom.

Emoticons to encourage student participation, instant sharing of specific applications or the entire desktop, real-time creation of polls with instant results, easy-to-use whiteboard and markup tools, export of presentations to PDF, and online evaluations and testing all make Saba virtual classrooms as effective as face-to-face sessions. Class retention is increased with breakout rooms and appshare where students can participate in the Saba session as a group while having their own hands-on practice space.

2. Easy to Administer Classes

Be prepared for your virtual classroom before it starts. With agenda builder, you can import content before your virtual classroom is scheduled to begin. Identify content properties and organize the sequence of the content being shared. Add placeholders for application, web and whiteboard sharing. Creating evaluations, polls, tests, and surveys to measure learning, progress, and opinions are critical for establishing an interactive and collaborative classroom.

Before the class, you can streamline event setup and enrollment with wizard-based scheduling and registration capabilities. Assembly of class content is simplified with the capability to easily drag and drop presentation materials, in multiple formats, into a class agenda that can be saved and reused. Create custom evaluation forms using agenda creation tools. Users can post training notices to their online calendar, and attend the session with a single click from the calendar listing.

Finally, all new users should be able to get up to speed through quick, in-seminar help resources for common tasks tailored to classroom phase and the role of the classroom participant.
3. Advanced Security Brings the Most Sensitive Topics Online and Supports Compliance Requirements

Given the potential for anonymity on the Internet, unauthorized access to a classroom session presents a real risk. Sensitive classes require robust user-level security that puts your chief security officer at ease. You need to be able to restrict classroom attendance to a specific set of invited participants and prevent unauthorized users or hackers from finding or accessing classes or recorded sessions. Classroom leaders should be able to eject unwanted participants from a session at any time. After the event has ended, they should know exactly who was logged into the session and when.

During a session, data and content should be protected with strong, 128-bit encryption. If the virtual classroom tool uses caching or pre-downloading of content, it should automatically delete all cached or pre-downloaded content from the end-user’s PC or Mac, including viewed recordings.

Security features are not just an issue for on-premise deployments. Today, it is possible to access some cloud-based virtual classroom tools and see classes that were set up by individual customers. Even in the cloud, the virtual classroom tool should have mechanisms in place to ensure that classes are not viewed by unauthorized third parties. This includes pre-enrollment of participants for virtual classes and validation upon entry.

If you are in a regulated industry, make sure that your virtual learning solution provider can conform to your compliance guidelines. For example, pharmaceutical companies should understand if the vendor has the appropriate processes in place to support validation.

4. Reliability and Performance Build User Confidence

How many times have you attended a virtual classroom session that ended unexpectedly for what appeared to be technical reasons? Or was cut short because the leader had to leave early? Or never got off the ground because the audio didn’t work?

If your users are conducting business-critical activities using a virtual learning solution, they need to be able to count on it to be there for them. Look for proven virtual conferencing solutions that are focused on keeping sessions up — both live sessions and recorded ones. For example, when a session leader’s computer crashes, the virtual classroom session should not be terminated. Regardless of whether the solution is deployed on-premise or in the cloud, it should offer automated failover. Furthermore, the solution should be able to recognize network issues and address them before they affect the user experience.

Virtual classroom buyers often overlook the performance of recorded sessions when evaluating a solution. However, keep in mind that if the performance quality of recordings is low, people will not use them. Period.

5. Look for High-Quality Voice and Video That Work

If you want voice and video to work, they need to work on your network. While many organizations are embracing voice over IP (VoIP) because of its cost advantages, poor sound quality will send users looking for alternate solutions. VoIP should be crystal clear, even if your participants are working in remote, bandwidth-constrained locations. When you are evaluating solutions, you should test the sound quality from a variety of locations to be sure that what you are experiencing in demonstrations is representative of what your users will get in real life. You should also determine what happens when user counts grow. Will your session stay up if you have 1,000 webinar participants using VoIP?

Finally, you should consider what will happen in scenarios where you cannot use VoIP, for whatever reason. Will you be able to offer some participants a teleconference bridge while others stay on VoIP? Will you be able to use the teleconferencing provider of your choice, or will you be forced to use a more expensive option offered by the virtual classroom vendor?
Live video feeds of participants and presenters give classes an even higher level of interactivity. However, many virtual conferencing products don’t work well on the networks that most enterprises have in place today. Vendors may try to convince you that purchasing expensive hardware is the only effective way to run video over corporate networks. But don’t assume that video has to be expensive!

Virtual learning environments should offer broad webcam support and allow users to send and receive video over existing networks, even in low-bandwidth environments. Technologies like multicast can minimize the impact on your network when broadcasting video to a large number of participants. Try using your prospective virtual classroom vendor’s video capabilities on a wireless 3G connection, and you’ll see the difference between products. Your virtual classroom solution should leverage the latest HD video technology like H.264 SVC.

6. A Quality Experience Demands a Scalable Solution
As VoIP, video, and other interactive features are used more frequently, the scalability demands of virtual classroom solutions increase for IT and end-users alike.

Many virtual classroom solutions build assumptions into their technology that end-users will be on a broadband connection. In reality, your users are not always going to have good connections, particularly when they are mobile. This “Achilles heel” of virtual classrooms is becoming a huge problem for some vendors with the proliferation of mobile devices.

As a result of the false premise that broadband is everywhere, users in remote locations or on mobile devices may wait minutes for graphics to load. Some products even load rich graphics slowly on high-bandwidth connections, testing users’ patience.

And worse yet, large-scale virtual events that utilize video and other interactive features may bring your network to its knees, seriously disrupting the course of business.

You should look for the following capabilities in your virtual classroom solution:

- Full functionality that works with low bandwidths
- Robust VoIP that can serve large user populations
- Full IP multicast support for core features in addition to IP audio and video
- Other technologies that improve scalability in a network that is not fully multicast-enabled
- Proven deployments that reach national and international user populations

7. Effective Content Management
Across all types of meetings and training activities, the most critical point of failure is poor content. Whether physical or virtual, the people who know how to create good content don’t just share PowerPoint slides. They come in with a clear agenda, proactively manage the classroom flow, use multiple techniques to structure a discussion that accomplishes each meeting goal, and follow up after the classroom. But too frequently, these “content superstars” have no way to share their successful practices with others in their organizations.

A virtual classroom solution can be much more than a tool for sharing PowerPoint. It should be able to bring together slides, videos, whiteboarding, applications, recordings, surveys, and assessments into a single, clearly defined agenda. Leaders should be able to quickly distribute media post-event, including recordings.

Great classroom content should never be isolated to a single leader or presenter; this content should be available to everyone who could benefit from it. Everyone should be able to access it, repackage it, and reuse it to its fullest.
8. Recordings Monetize Your Knowhow

Recordings of virtual classes are the unheralded heroes of organizations. In the learning realm, educators and corporate learning professionals have long recognized the value of reuse. This same concept — that virtual classes are knowledge assets — applies to all types of interactions. If you do not have a way to manage, share, and reuse the content of virtual classrooms sessions, you are losing the critical knowhow that makes your business run.

Most products do not have a centralized repository where non-administrative users can access recorded sessions. Their editing tools are only practical for expert users. And, users have limited ways to access and interact with recordings. These three capabilities are the key to transforming virtual sessions into valuable knowledge.

Capturing a recording should be a very simple process: a user should click one button to record and one button to publish. This may seem like a silly buying criterion, but some organizations have not been able to take advantage of recordings because too many users can’t find the “record” button when they need it!

In addition, non-technical users should have a quick and easy way to make edits to their recordings. No one wants to throw away an hour of valuable knowledge just because the discussion went off topic for a few minutes.

Finally, monetizing your recordings means that people need to be able to find them and play them back. Leaders should be able to easily distribute recordings to both classroom attendees and non-attendees. They should be able to publish them in locations where their colleagues are already working. People should be able to access recordings wherever they are and regardless of what type of device they are using — a PC, a Mac, a smartphone, or a tablet. Finally, they should be able to interact with the recordings if appropriate, for example, to take a test.

9. Mobile Is the New Dial Tone

Increasingly, the devices that are powering your business are not the ones that your corporate IT department purchased. Employees’ iPads, iPhones, Androids, and other consumer mobile devices are making their way onto enterprise networks by the millions and are rapidly becoming an integral part of how work gets done. Watch your executives when they travel — it is likely that the majority of them are using tablets exclusively. Is your web conferencing solution going to let them attend their next virtual classroom?

Whether it’s participating in a classroom, commenting on the class action items, or watching a replay between sales calls, your users want a virtual classroom solution that is as flexible and mobile as they are. Be sure that your vendor supports the devices that your users are bringing in today. Think about whether the vendor will be able to support tomorrow’s devices as well. Finally, the mobile user experience should be a critical part of your vendor evaluation. Look specifically at:

- Ease of access on a mobile device
- Ease of interactivity throughout the session
- Ease of participation, with VoIP in particular
- Ease of playback for recorded knowhow

10. Capture More Value by Socializing Virtual Learning

Similar to the trend with other types of collaboration, the days of stand-alone virtual learning are waning as people demand more contextual capabilities. A virtual classroom is an integral part of blended learning, not a separate activity. By enabling users to approach virtual classrooms as part of their connected corporate communities — from scheduling, organizing, and attending to reviewing and sharing — you will create significantly more value for your organization. More people will attend, more people will view recordings, more people will share, and more people will benefit from the knowhow that was captured.

“When I’m in Saba Classroom, I feel like I’m right there.... Amazingly, I’ve had more classroom interaction over Saba than in a regular classroom.”

Bryan
Stanford University
Class of 2011
Virtual classrooms do not just have to be about facilitating classes and online training sessions to eliminate travel. By bringing virtual classrooms into your social network and fully integrating them into your workplace environment, you can revolutionize how knowledge gets shared.

Whether a virtual classroom starts out as a spontaneous conversation or a formal knowledge transfer, the process of socializing it takes just a few clicks. Start a session, record it, and publish it. Make it accessible to everyone or select a specific group that would benefit from it. Let your people rate the recording, tag it, comment on it, and share it with their colleagues. Capture these ratings and comments and use them as a way to measure the content contributor’s value to your organization. Take this approach, and you will see deeper connections and more involvement across the business network.

Unfortunately, most virtual classroom tools operate in a meeting-centric model. You go to the virtual classroom tool to set up and conduct a class. The classroom might be recorded for the participants’ future reference, but in most cases the knowledge that was shared in the session does not reach any further than those few people.

Look for a virtual learning solution that not only manages formal sessions efficiently, but also operates in the social network.

### Summary
While Web conferencing and virtual learning projects create tactical cost savings by cutting travel, they offer much greater business value when you take a strategic approach to deployment. This Buyer’s Guide arms you with the information you need when selecting a strategic virtual learning environment for your organization.

Use our key criteria during your evaluation process, and you will find a solution that:

- Drives higher user adoption
- Grows with you, no matter where you go
- Fosters the cultural shift that makes virtual classrooms a fundamental part of how you increase knowledge transfer
- Increases knowhow capture and reuse across learners
- Increases retention
- Is fun and interactive

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Get ready to take the next step today. Try Saba Classroom at [www.sabameeting.com](http://www.sabameeting.com).