Principles of Learning

Assorted Principles for More Effective Training

Pluralistic Ignorance
People are Afraid to Ask Questions

Fancy word: Pluralistic ignorance
A false impression of how other people are thinking, feeling, or responding.

Think of a time when you were in a learning situation and it seemed as though all others in the class understood the material, except you! You thought "I must be dumb!" "What am I missing?" "Did I fall asleep for a few minutes, and miss the key that would make sense of what I'm hearing?"

Because of a phenomenon known as *social comparison*, we tend to evaluate our opinions and abilities by comparing ourselves to others. In a situation where training participants may have questions, but no one speaks up; some individuals may attribute the silence to full understanding on the part of their classmates, when it could be that no one has a full understanding of the material. The result will be more silence and unasked important questions.

If someone in the group would break the ice, and ask a question, revealing that they do not fully understand all of what has been presented, it might open up the process for everyone in the room.

What's a trainer to do?

Look for ways to allow participants to get their questions out safely, without feeling dumb. Here are some ideas, you may have more:

- Periodically assign small groups to generate a list of questions. Small groups help safeguard participant's fear of asking questions in front of a large group, and the assignment requires them to come up with questions.

- Say something like, "Some of the common questions that come up at this point are… What are your questions?"

Other ideas:

Source: Myers, D. (1999). *Social psychology* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill. p. 271

Learning Defined

Learning and Changing Behavior

A definition: Learning
Learning is a relatively permanent change in behavior or knowledge that comes from experience or training.

Learning is a fundamental human process. It permits us to adapt to our environment by building on previous experience. Psychologists have traditionally defined learning in terms of three criteria:

- There must be some change in behavior.

- This change must be relatively stable.

- The change must result from experience.

What's a trainer to do?

- Encourage training participants to leave class and *do* something with what they've learned. Unless a change in behavior occurs, they have learned nothing.

- Put the responsibility of learning on them. They are the only ones who can do something with what they learn.

- Point out that learning from experience is what leads to true and lasting change. Encourage them to experiment with what they've learned on the job. This will provide real life experience from which the best learning comes.

Other ideas:

> How it happens: We change when
> We are convinced our present behavior is not getting us what we want.
> When we believe we can choose the behaviors that will get us closer to what we want.

If learners are not getting the results they want, or what the organization needs, they must be convinced that their behaviors are ineffective. Once they understand that their behaviors are in need of change, they need to be presented with a set of new behaviors that *will* result in effectiveness.

For example: consider a detailer that uses an outdated or cumbersome process for a specific task in VP Command. The ineffectiveness of that process needs to be clearly explained, or explored to see if the results are satisfactory according to the desires of the employee, the needs of the organization, and ultimately the needs of the customer/s (internal and external). Once the ineffectiveness is revealed, a new process can be presented that gains the desired results.

Another example: when teaching core skills (soft skills), if participants can think through the results their getting when working with others they may find some areas that are lacking. Maybe the learner finds himself or herself in conflict with a certain individual on a regular basis. They must realize that their current behavior is not getting them what they want (regardless of whose at fault). Then a set of alternative behaviors can be presented from which they can choose to experiment with and see if better results follow.

What's a trainer to do?

- Help people to think through their current methods and ways of doing things – their current behaviors. Ask them to examine the results they are getting.
  - In some cases, the employee will not realize the results they get are not satisfactory, or can be improved.
  - In the case of core skills, it may be best to let these thought processes remain private.
- Once they've considered their current behavior, and recognize a lack of good results, propose new behaviors that will aid them in getting better results.

Other ideas:

Sources:
Psychology Glossary. (n.d.). *Alleydog.com*. Retrieved July 21, 2003 from: http://www.alleydog.com/.
Zanden, J. (2000). *Human Development*. McGraw-Hill: 7th Edition. Revised by Thomas L. Crandell and Corinne Haines Crandell.

Connecting Learned Content with Application
Learning Theory Applied to Training

Fancy term: Learning
A relatively permanent change in behavior or knowledge that comes from experience or training.

In order for learning to be effective, learners need to know what to do with the information or skills they've learned in the classroom. Many people find it difficult to see exactly how what they've learned applies to their real life on-the-job. With some topics the application is obvious and self-evident such as with technical skills or job processes. But with more abstract topics many don't quite make the connection.

Training is most effective when a learner leaves the classroom with a solid set of ideas for application and a plan to put those ideas to work. If they don't put their new knowledge or skills to work immediately, the change in behavior or knowledge will not become "relatively permanent" and true learning will not have occurred.

What's a trainer to do?

Consider these ideas for connecting learned content with real life application:

- The trainer can point out examples of applications or explain how the content is personally applied by the trainer.
- Small groups can be assigned to spend time generating application ideas and then share them with the larger group.
- Specific assignments for application can be made at the end of class with follow-up as appropriate.

Other ideas:

Source: Bettinghaus, E. P. (1980). *Persuasive communication* (3rd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Expressed Attitudes and Behavior Change

Apparent attitude changes don't always lead to changes in behavior

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Traditional belief: Attitude Change Equals Behavior Change

Reality: Expressed Attitudes do NOT Necessarily Lead to Behavior Change

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It makes sense that a change in attitude must happen before a change in behavior can take place. The statement by itself is probably true, but experienced trainers know that a student can express their belief in a newly learned concept (an expressed change in attitude) and then leave the classroom and never make the change in behavior. The issue is much more complex. Behavior change is greatly influenced by real-life on-the-job situations (see example next page), as well as attitude. Trainers must work hard to achieve a change in attitude (a belief that a newly learned skill or piece of knowledge is of value and usable), but also anticipate the real-life situations that will be encountered by the training participant.

What's a trainer to do?

- Know your audience and what situations they will encounter when trying to apply learned content. Anticipate their difficulties in application and address them in training.

- Create a safe environment for participants to openly express their attitudes and concerns about real-life application of the material.

- Design training activities that help participants think through and plan their application of training material and explore possible obstacles that may be encountered.

Other ideas:

Source: Wilson, T. (2003). *Lessons from the study of persuasion: Applications for corporate training.* p. 13

Example of a change in attitude, but not a change in behavior:

Consider a class that teaches new procedures for compliance with a quality program that requires technicians to use a set of checklists as they complete job processes. In the classroom the training participants see the value of the checklists and express such. Once they return to work and are about to use the checklist, they find that the checklist documents are difficult to use and that deadlines and pressing customer issues seem to be higher priorities than complying with the new procedure. If this happens regularly they do not adopt the habit and have not changed behavior, even though when asked they may say the checklist would help reduce errors and omissions from their work.

Credibility of the Trainer

Personal credibility is one of the most effective tools a trainer has

Almost famous quote: "Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. ...his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses." Aristotle

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Some fancy terms:

Ethos
The image a training participant has of the source (trainer).

Extrinsic Ethos
The image a participant has of a trainer prior to the training event.

Intrinsic Ethos
The image a participant develops of a trainer as it is created during the training event.

A large body of research concludes that the credibility of a communicator (trainer) is of extreme importance. There are many important factors that contribute to a communicator's credibility, but the most important boil down to these: *competence* and *trustworthiness*. A trainer in any given topic must know it well and be able to answer questions that go beyond the scope of the learning content. This is not to say that a trainer cannot ever answer, "I don't know" and then offer to research the question. In fact, wisdom would tell us that giving an answer that one does not truly know is many times found out and trustworthiness is decreased dramatically.

A third factor that contributes to credibility is that of showmanship or dynamism. But, researchers agree that this factor is considerably less important than those of competence and trustworthiness. In other words, what trainers know as "creative training techniques" are important but rank only third and well behind, true knowledge of a topic and a high, trustworthy personal character.

Other factors that lead to a perception of credibility are *attractiveness*, *similarity*, and *likeability*. Attractive people are automatically seen as more credible in many situations. The author of this document is personally unaware of any trainer within this organization's training department who qualifies as "attractive" (with the obvious exception of the author's boss and those blessed with follicle challenges). Appropriate personal grooming and care in dressing is the adequate for most.

Similarity and *liking* though are principles a trainer can use to increase effectiveness. People tend to like those whom they perceive as similar to themselves. Liking leads to compliance and improves persuasion.

The lesson for trainers here is to be aware of the role their credibility plays in the effectiveness of the training experience. Diligence to maintain their reputation, to continually raise their competence, and to build relationships (trustworthiness) are activities of higher than usual value to their profession.

What's a trainer to do?

- Maintain and improve competence by reading widely and studying your topics.

- Maintain and improve trustworthiness by building relationships and by taking a sincere interest in training participants.

- Use "creative training techniques" where appropriate, but do not rely on these to establish your credibility.

- Dress similar to training participants. Dress "up" when training management and wear jeans or more casual attire when training in the departments that dress that way.

- Highlight portions of your background and interests that are similar to training participants. Identify with them, but always with sincerity and in a genuine way.

Other ideas:

Source: Wilson, T. (2003). *Lessons from the study of persuasion: Applications for corporate training.* p. 17

Differences in Ability to Respond

Learning Theory Applied to Training

Fancy term: Stimulus-Organism-Response Theory
A learning theory that considers the individuality of the organism responding to the stimulus.

Some theories of learning consider the ability of the "organism", training participant, to respond to a stimulus which will hopefully result in learning. Some individuals have greater ability to act on what they've heard due to circumstances or other attributes such as education, knowledge of the subject, background, intelligence, or capacity. Some may need repetition of the message in order to understand the message; others may understand it after hearing it only once. It's important to know the audience in order to appropriately match the training methods with the learner's ability to respond.

Most often training groups consist of individual with varying needs and abilities for response. With mixed groups, the trainer is challenged to use a variety of presentation and teaching methods that allow those in need to slowly absorb repeated messages while not losing the attention of those who are ready to move on.

What's a trainer to do?

One method is to divide the class into small groups or "learning teams" which are made up of diverse learners. Learning tasks can be assigned to the small groups that allow the more advanced and faster learning students to assist those who are struggling. The involvement works well for all, those with less capacity receive the assistance they need and those who learn faster also learn more as they teach others.

It should also be noted that when circumstances are such that a learner cannot respond to the training material with immediate and direct application, those individuals are best served by attending the class at a time more proximate to their ability to apply content. This is a factor that must be coordinated with management and supervisors before the class participants are invited.

Other ideas:

Source: Bettinghaus, E. P. (1980). *Persuasive communication* (3rd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

The Effect of Good Feelings

Peripheral Cues Put to Work

Fancy term: Peripheral Cues
Elements of the training environment that may influence learning, such as physical surroundings and appearance of the trainer.

Training messages become more persuasive when associated with good feelings. In an experiment at Yale students were more convinced by a persuasive message when they were allowed to enjoy snacks while they read. A similar study showed that song lyrics are more persuasive when sung with pleasant music than when read alone.

Good feelings enhance persuasion, and training, in two ways: first by stimulating positive thinking, and second, by linking good feelings with the content of the training session. Putting training participants in a good mood makes training more effective.

What's a trainer to do?

Create a positive, relaxed, upbeat, happy training environment.

- Arrange for a training site that is comfortable, appropriately lit, and a quality atmosphere. Avoid company training rooms that are unsightly, ugly, dingy and dirty. Use a quality hotel or meeting facility when possible and budgets allow.

- Use the most comfortable chairs and physical set-up possible, especially for longer training sessions.

- Provide good food and drink (within budget). Donuts are always good.

- Use posters and other training aids, even as "decorations."

- Keep the training room clean and neat and well organized.

These things *do* make a difference.

Other ideas:

Source: Myers, D. (1999). *Social psychology* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill. p. 263

Hurdles to Persuasion

For learning to take place there are a number of obstacles that must be overcome

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Hurdles to Persuasion
Attention – Comprehension – Belief – Remembering – Behavior Change

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If the goal of learning is to change behavior, there is a series of hurdles that trainers must deal with before that can happen. First, learners must pay attention. If you never get their attention or lose it during the delivery, nothing will happen. Second, learners must comprehend what is being presented. Third, they must believe it. They must believe the suggested change is right and worth doing. Fourth, learners must be able to remember what they've learned in order to apply it.

What's a trainer to do?

- Make the most of creative training techniques to gain and maintain *attention*. Also making the message relevant to learners' needs and helping them think through the application and benefits of such will increase their feeling of need for the topic.

- Use the principles of adult learning to improve *comprehension* and *recall*. Become a student of learning theories and look for applications in your presentations. Be aware that learning theories and the principles of adult learning are more than creative presentation techniques and require teaching methods that intellectually engage learners and make connections to applications.

- Be open about the opinions being presented within your topic and allow for safe and open discussions to explore the *beliefs* of the learners where appropriate.

Other ideas:

Source: Myers, D. (1999). *Social psychology* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill. p. 269

Order of Persuasion

Effective Medium of Comprehension and Recall

Order of Persuasion
Live – video-taped – audio-taped - written. Caveat: When the message is complex, a written message enhances comprehension and recall.

When considering the mediums trainers have to choose from for delivering a message, studies have shown that the more lifelike a medium is, the more effective. So presenting material is best done in person, or via video tape as a second best choice.

But, when the message is complex, a presentation in writing brings greater comprehension and recall.

What's a trainer to do?

Take advantage of face-to-face training whenever possible and feasible, and know that the use of video-tape in combination with a personal presentation is also effective. But when the topic is difficult and complex, consider utilizing a written piece of text to enhance understanding.

For example, ask participants to read an explanation of a difficult portion of your topic from their training manual. Then use an illustration or group discussion to explore applications. The combination of the written medium, as well as the personal presentation will result in effective learning for most.

Other ideas:

Source: Myers, D. (1999). *Social psychology* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill. p. 315

Routes to Persuasion and Learning
Central and Peripheral Routes to Persuasion

Fancy word: Peripheral route persuasion
Persuasion that occurs when people are influenced by incidental cues, such as a speaker's attractiveness

Another fancy word: Central route persuasion
Persuasion that occurs when interested people focus on the arguments and respond with favorable thoughts

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When a topic is presented that does not cause people to critically think through the logic, or when presenting to an audience that is not analytical or motivated, the peripheral route is an effective means of persuasion. Here people are distracted by images and familiar statements that allow for acceptance without much thinking. The effects of this type of persuasion can be temporary.

When presenting a topic that stimulates critical thinking or to an audience that is motivated and intellectually engaged, the central route to persuasion if most effective. This route involves the learner in a high degree of mental processing and requires them to agree or present arguments. This more thoughtful form of persuasion is more long-term and more likely to lead to positive changes in behavior.

What's a trainer to do?

Peripheral route persuasion is what's generally used in commercial advertising and political campaigns. It is short-term and does not rely on critical thinking. For training, the central route, which requires thinking and analysis, should be more effective and bring long-term learning and changes in behavior. Therefore, trainers should work to engage their class participants to use critical thinking skills, analyze the material, ask good questions, and present their arguments so they can be openly discussed and dealt with.

To get people thinking:

- Use content relevant activities that require information processing and planning of applications.

- Pose challenging questions and assign small groups to solve problems.

- Allow differing points of view to be presented for open discussion.

Other ideas:

Source: Myers, D. (1999). *Social psychology* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill. p. 254

Self-Disclosure & Disclosure Reciprocity
Priming Group Discussions

> **Fancy term: Self-Disclosure**
> Revealing intimate aspects of oneself to others.
>
> **Another fancy term: Disclosure Reciprocity**
> The tendency for one person's intimacy of self-disclosure to match that of a conversational partner.

For a trainer, self-disclosure amounts to telling your training group something about yourself or your experiences, maybe even something personal. Doing so will increase the likelihood that the learners will in turn open up and appropriately share their feelings or experiences. Self-disclosure with the aim of reciprocity can be a useful training tool when learning can be gained from the experience of the learners.

Consider using self-disclosure to prime group discussions. This could be used to bring out challenges people have with using systems and processes, or with core skill training issues of a more personal, human interaction struggle or challenge. In cases of a more personal nature, consider that the group discussions will be more fruitful if they are done in small groups of three to six people rather than in a large group discussion (people will be even more apt to open up with just a few).

What's a trainer to do?

Here is one process to use when attempting to pull lessons from personal experiences:

- Introduce and explain the topic of concept.

- Tell learner's they may have a related experience that can be learned from.

- Tell the entire training group of your own experience regarding the issue. This is your turn for self-disclosure. It also gives them time to think about their own experiences.

- Assign small groups to write down (privately) a specific time or two when they had a similar experience. Provide a few minutes for silent writing.

- Divide the group into small groups of three to six people. Assign them to give each person two or three minutes to share their experience with the issue. (If the issue is one regarding human interaction or of a personal nature, tell everyone that it's OK if some do not share their experience.)

- Assign the small groups to answer some specific questions about the issue, and then ask that those be shared in a large group discussion with the entire class.

Other ideas:

Source: Myers, D. (1999). *Social psychology* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill. p. 465