

This Is Your Brain On Training

Why classroom-based ILT is still popular

By Ben Eubanks

I've been reading a slew of books lately focused on neuroscience. One line in the latest hit me, and I thought it would be interesting to pull together some of the thoughts from a few to share. Here's the tidbit (emphasis mine):

What do [scientific] studies show, viewed as a whole? Mostly this: if you wanted to create an education environment that was **directly opposed** to what the brain was good at doing, you would probably design something like a classroom. If you wanted to create a business environment that was directly opposed to what the brain was good at doing, you would probably design something like a cubicle. Source: [Brain Rules](#)

Wow! We have known for a while that classroom training was losing its luster compared to social, video, mobile, and other [informal delivery methods](#). However, this is a stern indictment of the [most commonly used method of training](#), with 40% of companies using classroom-based instructor led training (ILT) more than half the time.

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Attention, Focus, and Work

Another book that quickly hooked me was [Two Awesome Hours](#). The basic premise is that we were not meant to sit at a computer for eight plus hours a day working at a single repetitive task without breaks. That's what robots are for. Josh Davis, PhD, says some people can get as much done in two good, productive hours as others can in an entire day. The concept has to do with a few different elements of work, but the part that has been most interesting for me is working on focused activities when I'm most "on."

Making decisions isn't a limitless activity. We have a finite amount of willpower and every small decision we make chips away at that reserve. In the book, [Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard](#) by Chip and Dan Heath, the authors examine the metaphor of the elephant and rider. The elephant (our subconscious) makes many small underlying decisions in our daily work and life. The rider (our conscious brain) makes larger, more complex decisions, but it has a limited amount of power to guide the elephant when tired, overtaxed, etc. That applies in the context of our work, where we make hundreds of decisions every day.

In other words, when you have that golden hour of focus and intensity in your workday, use it for critical thinking and other thought-heavy tasks, not for responding to emails, making phone calls, or chatting with coworkers. Then fit in those more routine/

mundane tasks when needed. All too often we waste that precious time doing things that require little brainpower but ultimately leave us unprepared to handle strenuous mental work.

I recently read that more workers are opting to work from home as a way to avoid distractions and focus more intently on projects. Always seen as a nuisance, we now realize that interruptions of any kind have a more profound impact on work than previously believed. [This experiment](#) shows that it's not just time that is affected by distractions, but **overall work quality** as well.

The Learning Impact

What does this have to do with learning? Pretty much everything. Brandon Hall Group's principal learning analyst, David Wentworth, recently shared some amazing insights into [how companies are transforming the classroom environment](#) to be less traditional and more interactive. The way we structure our classes, for the most part, hasn't changed over the years. But there are now [phenomenal examples of companies](#) pursuing more interactive methods of training, whether blended with the classroom approach or entirely separate. Like it or not, the most effective method for training, according to those organizations we surveyed, is still classroom-based ILT. But that doesn't mean it has to stay the same as it was 10 years ago.

These principles that apply to work in general apply to the world of learning and development. Here are a few examples of how neuroscience can help us make better training decisions:

- Don't put people in a lecture for three hours and expect them to be attentive, alert, and engaged. Break up the session with discussions, opportunities for application, peer interactions, etc. This helps to ensure the content not only sticks, but has some real-world examples to make it more concrete.
- What we see is more powerful than any other sense. Expecting people to multitask and read your slides while you talk is going to limit the effectiveness by forcing learners to split attention among your words and your text. In fact, John Medina, author of [Brain Rules](#), suggests tossing your text-laden PowerPoint slides in favor of image-based ones that support your topics without overshadowing them. Studies show that we have an amazing capability to remember imagery, but only a mediocre recall rate for text.

I'm not sure that I will be ready to throw away my beloved slides anytime soon, but these ideas have given me something to consider next time I'm putting together a deck for a presentation. **TEL**

This article first appeared on [Brandon Hall's blog](#).



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