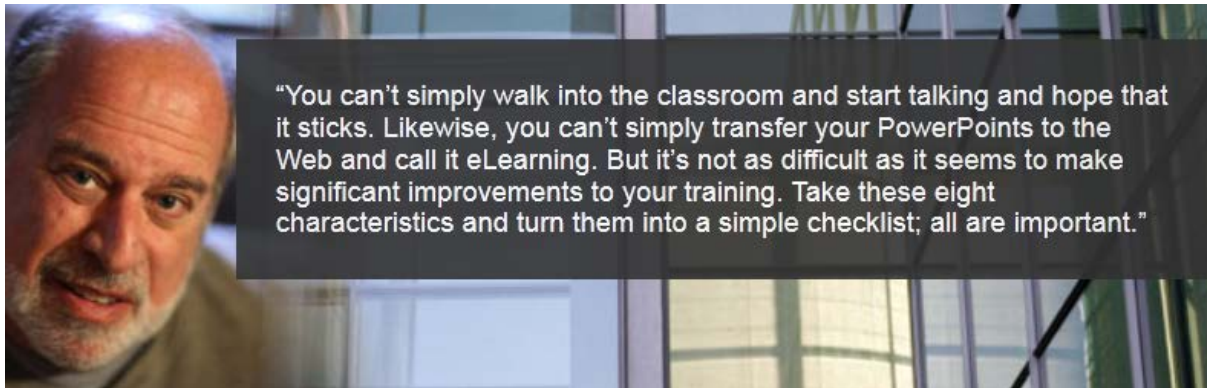


Back to Basics - When Training Is the Answer (Aug 11)

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[Last month](#), I talked about the many alternatives we have when training is *not* the answer, and why we should look at those options first. But training remains a linchpin to most performance improvement strategies, and there is no indication that training — classroom or online — is going away anytime soon.

The fundamentals

To be sure, learning is more complex than I can discuss here. But, assuming we've done our due-diligence to confirm that a learning strategy is appropriate, and assuring that the training will work whether we are developing a classroom course (including virtual classrooms) or an online (eLearning) program requires, at a minimum, that we make sure it reflects eight fundamental characteristics:

1. **The right content** — Of course, this is a primary concern. But the right content for the instructor or the training department may not be the right content for the learner or the sponsoring organization. Content should be more than just accurate; learners should see it as relevant and authentic as well. Take the time to find out exactly what you need to teach; no more and no less. Learners usually perceive courses that get the content wrong to be a waste of time.
2. **Motivate beyond objectives** — Instructional objectives are not enough. Knowing what people should be able to do at the end of training is useful, but objectives don't always answer learners' two primary questions, "Why am I here?" and "What's in it for me?" Every lesson should reinforce the course's essential value proposition – to the learner *and* to the organization. Those who value their training will likely learn more and retain it longer.
3. **Interactivity and Practice** — This is not just following along with the slides (no matter how "interactive" they are) or pressing "next" to continue when online. Nor is it simply note-taking or asking questions, although both are sound instructional techniques. Great interactive courses involve learners in a variety of exercises that test their higher-order thinking, analytical, and creative abilities in addition to more baseline skills of remembering and understanding (thinking about interactivity along [Bloom's Taxonomy](#) is a great way to get started). Well-designed courses also provide adequate time for learners to practice newly acquired skills so they become more fluid and agile in their performance, and learn "how to learn" on their own. Case studies, simulations and games, role-plays, action learning, and problem solving are just a few of the many instructional techniques that you can employ.
4. **Collaboration** — Sometimes, a better way for learners to master new knowledge and skills is from each other, rather than from the instructor. Teamwork, experimentation, and group research and presentations (with the instructor as a "guide on the side," rather than a "sage on the stage") can reinforce new learning much better than more traditional one-way presentations.
5. **Feedback** — Not just, "You're right" or "Sorry, you're wrong," but meaningful, timely feedback provided by instructors, fellow learners, or the instructional program itself is essential for effective learning. Great feedback helps learners understand *why* a particular response was

correct or not; it provides *guidance* to help them make appropriate adjustments before going too far in the wrong direction, and is as important to learning success as the interactivity you employ and the content you present.

6. **Balance** — Speaking of content presentation, interactivity, practice, and feedback, one of the best things you can do is create the right balance between them. In most cases, try not to spend more than 50% of your instructional time presenting content. Take approximately the next 35% of your instructional time to provide opportunities for learners to exercise and improve their capabilities through interactivity, practice, and meaningful feedback. And use the remaining 15% to implement evaluation strategies that measure achievement and skill gain. Too often, courses suffer because the instructional design and delivery is out of balance, usually with too much presenting and not enough genuine learner involvement. Rebalancing can go a long way to significantly improve your instructional outcomes. (I based this suggestion on the “Balanced Instruction Technique (BIT)” developed by Dr. Charles Martinetz .)
7. **Transfer** — The more value learners see in what they are learning (see #2, above), the more they will take it back to the job. But that’s not enough. Helping learners become comfortable with the tools and processes they will use on the job, and providing additional learning and performance resources in the workplace, helps them apply new capabilities with less forgetting and increased confidence. The more a training program looks and feels like the work they do, the better.
8. **Great Teaching** — The first seven characteristics are outputs of quality instructional design. This last one is more personal. A great instructor-led course will go nowhere if ineffective teaching holds it back. Great courseware can’t fix poor teaching, but exemplary teaching can’t overcome lousy courses either. You need both. The best training is both art and science. The science of learning and instructional design comes alive with the art of great teaching. Many things, such as expertise, experience (not necessarily the same as expertise), credibility, communication skills, empathy, authenticity, classroom management, and observational skills characterize outstanding instructors. But if you really want to know what makes a great instructor in your organization, ask your learners.

Harold Stolovitch famously says, “[Telling ain’t training](#).” You can’t simply walk into the classroom and start talking, and hope that it sticks. Likewise, you can’t simply transfer your PowerPoints to the Web and call it eLearning. But it’s not as difficult as it seems to make significant improvements to your training. Take these eight characteristics and turn them into a simple checklist; all are important. Talk them through with your team and you will be amazed at all the improvement opportunities you will find.

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