Innovations in Learning Design:
Learning Experiences That Transform

Peak learning experiences have the capacity to transform us, help us to grow, and, ultimately, optimize our lives. In a professional setting, learning gives individuals a chance to accelerate their success and expand beyond their current knowledge and skills. Yet so often those who teach—whether in a classroom, a meeting, or a virtual setting—don't understand how to effectively transfer the knowledge or content in a way that learners can effectively integrate it, utilize it, and sustain it after the learning experience.

But the business of learning is shifting. Learners are running the show; they're demanding that learning and development be done differently, and they're upping the ante in regard to how they learn and the experiences that support their learning journey.

For these reasons, the way we teach and the way we learn must undergo a radical shift. Learning must become an experience—an ecosystem of interwoven components that create a learning experience that unleashes passion from the learner, inspires positive behavior change, and creates results for the organization. When learners are actively drawn into and immersed in the content, they are then engaged and prepared to retain and apply it long after the learning experience is over. And when people are given the tools to reinforce and sustain what they've learned, they are also better equipped to teach others in the organization.

The process begins by understanding the audience—identifying who they are and what they need—and then designing content that not only fulfills those needs but is delivered in a way that meets learners where they are by using approaches, methods, and tools to engage them in the learning experience.

It's important for the facilitator to understand that whoever is doing the teaching is doing the learning. Ask yourself, how smart are *you* after you finish teaching something? Facilitators must enable learners to work with and practice the content in order to reinforce the content. In this model, the facilitator becomes coach, guide, and mentor rather than teacher.

Making this shift relies on three key factors–the "70/30 Rules"

1. Learners do 70 percent of the talking and 30 percent of the listening. Learners need to feel that they are at the center of the learning session and actively learning.

2. Facilitators focus 70 percent of their prep time on *how* they are going to share content and 30 percent of their time on *what* content they are going to share. Facilitators need to spend time and energy thinking about how to create activities that embed best practices for learning— lessons that are packed with interactive learning support and activities.

3. Learners need to spend 30 percent of their time learning and 70 percent of their time practicing what they've learned. Practice helps learners review and cement the concepts and can be done in a classroom or informal setting with other learners.

Table 1—Making the Shift

Shift	From	To
#1	70% of time spent on teacher/facilitator talking and teaching	70% of time spent on learner talking and doing
#2	70% of teacher/facilitator prep time focused on what content they will teach	70% of teacher/facilitator prep time focused on how to teach the content
#3	70% of teacher/facilitator time spent teaching skills	70% of time spent on learner practicing and building skills

Best Practices for Making the Shift

How do you make these shifts? You ENGAGE your learners and use a model for bringing out their brilliance and focusing them on what they need to do to achieve their goals. These *doing* objectives (versus learning objectives) drive your learning curriculum so that when the learning experience is over, people can actually *do* what they need to do to succeed in their jobs. Learning to do something new is not easy or automatic. It takes time, focus, meaning, and activities that inspire, ENGAGE, and connect. The ENGAGE acronym provides an excellent starting point when thinking about how to provide a meaningful learning experience that delivers results.

E——Energize learners—Before and after they attend a learning experience

N——Navigate content—Teach what is needed to know and do in order to be able to be successful at the "Doing" objectives

G——Generate meaning—Move learning to long-term retention by asking about the importance of the new content

A——Apply to real world—Put new information or skill into practice in the real-world application

G——Gauge and celebrate—Deepen neural connections by showing how much was learned and experienced

E——Extend learning to action—Keep deepening the connection to new behaviors by helping people act on their intentions with consistent follow-up activities

Engage and Energize the Learner

No one wants to be in a room full of learners who don't want to be there. To create excitement before and during the class, make sure that you communicate value for the learner and get people excited about and asking for the content before the learning event occurs. Learners need to be stimulated in order to learn, they need to have their curiosity piqued by the content they are about to experience, and they need to be able to connect that experience to their own needs for meaning and relevance. In fact, studies by researchers Deslauriers and Wieman found that active learning is far more effective than lecture: active learning improves attendance by as much as 81 percent, learning by as much as 74 percent, and engagement by 85 percent. In the classroom, make sure that you adhere to the 70/30 rules mentioned previously to keep learners engaged.

Before the training occurs:

• Entice learners with genuine benefits they'll experience from participating in the learning process—whether it's a classroom, virtual, or blended experience.

• Think about what motivates you when learning something new and incorporate those practices.

• Incorporate testimonials from previous participants. Endorsements are a great way to build excitement and buzz and to help build future enrollment.

• Send personalized invitations to the learning event and create multiple touch points prior to the event.

• Send prereading content like articles, portions of the content, and questions to think about before the session to introduce people to the content and pique their interest.

• Assign prework during which you ask learners to think of real work problems and create solutions and goals around those problems. This not only reduces time spent away from the job but also maximizes the use of that time.

• Create overviews and welcome messages that can be viewed prior to the event that will inspire learners, share learning outcomes, and invite participants to do prework.

Questions to ask yourself when developing prework content:

- What core information, ideas, and takeaways are you hoping to impart?
- What research will you share?
- What activities will you use to reinforce the learning process?
- What beliefs do you want the participants to leave with?
- What teaching modalities will you use?
- How will you make the learning process active?
- How will you address learning preferences?

During training:

- Deliver real work application. This helps speed the transition from knowing to doing to getting results.
- For classroom learning, prepare the room as though you were setting up for a party. Place art supplies, paper, and kinesthetic toys and art puzzles on tabletops to create a sense of celebration and fun.
- Ask learners what they want to be, feel, and do as a result of the program to get them thinking about how they will apply what they've learned.
- Shake up the learning delivery. Learning must be experienced via one's personal learning preferences, so use a variety of delivery options. Consider designs that can appeal to visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learners.
- Get people talking right away and keep them talking to break up the delivery of content. Ask questions that reinforce your content. For example: "Who was your best boss?" or "What was the best team experience you've ever had?"
- Build mutual commitment and make connections between your learners. Helping people see their common strengths builds communities of practice that unite people during training and create cohort groups that can support each other after training.
- Create content with universal appeal. Great content must work effectively and engage the learner regardless of culture, location, or language.
- Phase the delivery of knowledge and learning and meet people where they are. Learners need content to be delivered in absorbable chunks that they can navigate and consume at their own pace and in ways that match their learning preferences.

Ensure That Your Content Generates Meaning for the Learner

Learning is a relationship between the learner and the content. As facilitator, it is your role to help your learners identify and articulate a compelling reason to choose to move beyond simply engaging with the content and to *act* on their learning by transferring it to long-term retention and behavior.

The brain is like a switchboard—it decides which path information takes. If an individual decides the information is nice to know but not important to retain, the information goes down one path and is often forgotten. If an individual decides the information is important, it goes down a different path—one of long-term retention and commitment to future use. In order to choose the latter, individuals need to understand the relevancy and meaning of the information.

It's important to ask learners up front to identify the meaning for themselves. This creates power and relevancy that allows them to retain and later act on the information. Facilitators can help learners find meaning by asking them to have discussions that surface the relevancy and value of the content before and after the learning experience. Asking questions, such as, "What could be the importance of moving this learning to action?" and having them brainstorm outcomes with other learners can help accomplish this.

As humans, we have a tendency to repeat behaviors that have worked for us in the past. We find comfort in the familiar and are more invested in holding on to old behaviors and repeating patterns than in exchanging them for new, less-familiar behaviors. It's important to help learners visualize how changing their behavior could result in meaningful change. Build a line of sight to business outcomes and have learners think about how their learnings can impact their organization—this drives accountability for training and links training to results while creating meaning for the learner. It can be helpful for learners to work through this step with their leaders so that they are on the same page about the meaning, relevance, and impact of creating behavior change and how that change will drive business objectives.

Another way to help your learners unlock the path for change is to recruit the subconscious mind. According to neuroscientist Dr. Emile Donchin, learning happens to us all the time—and more than 99 percent of learning is unconscious. Some ideas to consider when trying to reach that part of the mind include

- Post students' work and ideas where they can be seen by others. This tells learners that the content is important without saying it.
- Share success stories of well-known and respected people that are linked to learning experiences. Identification with successful people and situations is a strong motivator.
- Tie some aspect of your content as a solution to a problem or challenge your learners surfaced earlier in the learning session.

Learners need to create a commitment to applying the learning. Generating meaning and linking that meaning to closely held values gives learners the best chance at following through and acting upon their commitments. By asking people to reflect on what they learned; what it means to them; and the benefits that they, their team, and their organization will gain; and also asking them to make a commitment to follow through with behavior, you are helping them to create the neural connections that feed meaning and satisfaction. They will then be fired up and ready to transition from learning to practice and application.

Create the Foundation for Real-World Application

Making the transition from learning to doing requires a focus on application beyond the classroom. It's important to provide robust practice and feedback. Feedback allows learners to assess where they are and course correct for quicker improvement. You can ask a coach or colleague to watch learners practice in real settings using real issues in a safe environment. It's important to have learners model the behavior as closely as possible to what you would like them to do with your content after they enter the real world. The more real you can make the practice sessions the stronger the neural connections will be and the more likely the learners will have success when they are on their own. One strategy is to use the SHARE method:

S—Show a model or job aid and review ideal performance.

H—Have the learner, and then the coach, share positives and what they would add in the next practice to improve.

A—Ask the feedback receiver to share the impact of these additions.

R—Realistically create agreements for next steps.

E—Evaluate the benefits of new behaviors and give each other additional feedback.

Other strategies include roleplaying with a partner, cross-training with other participants, and using real-life scenarios or case studies for learners to practice with. Or you might choose to create a video of participants practicing a roleplay to offer insight before they work one-on-one with an individual or team in a real situation.

If you're pairing your learners with a coach or buddy it's important to have a clear action plan and create a support network. Creating an action plan allows participants to articulate clearly and specifically what their next steps are for using the content. Have them target key areas and focus on moving forward by thinking about how to leverage their strengths and also mitigate behaviors that may have a negative impact on the situation. Creating support networks during the learning experience enables transfer of learning to be dramatically increased. It's like having an instant coach—someone who is already familiar with the learner's situation and the real-life issues they are addressing.

Gauge, Celebrate, and Extend Learning

Let's face it, none of us plans a learning engagement or training session for no reason. The purpose of training and learning is to change behavior and get results. Studies show that learners will forget 50 percent of what they learned within 24 hours if the new knowledge and skills are not reviewed and reinforced. But to extend learning to actual positive behavior change, facilitators and coaches must begin to assess what the individual has retained. This can include assessments of knowledge, comprehension, applications, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—derived from Bloom's Taxonomy, which psychologist Benjamin Bloom developed to assess learning in the affective, psychomotor, and cognitive domains.

Table 2—Questioning Rubric based on Bloom's Taxonomy

What to test	Ways to test	How to test
Knowledge (facts, data, research)	Label, list, name	• Who, what, when, where? • What do you know about x? • What do you recall about x?
Comprehension (understanding, paraphrasing, recall)	Describe, explain, identify	• In your own words …. • Outline steps you would take. • What was the main idea of x?
Application (demonstrating facts, rules, and principles)	Apply, demonstrate, solve, show	• How would you show you could apply x? • Roleplay with your new skills. • How would you teach this information?
Analysis (logic, obstacles, wisdom)	Examine, differentiate, calculate, question	• What obstacles might get in the way of you implementing x? • What is the benefit or value of applying x?
Synthesis (creativity, innovation)	Arrange, assemble, construct	• Write a case study that illustrates the concepts in a new setting. • If you could use any resources, how would you implement x?
Evaluation (feelings, emotions, gut instinct)	Judge, appraise, assess, defend	• How do you feel about x? • How would you judge your performance about x? • What criteria would you use to evaluate your desired outcome of x?

In addition to Bloom's Taxonomy, there are many other ways to reinforce and imbed learning. Have learners use the 3-2-1 method where they list 3 key terms from what they've learned, 2 ideas they would like to learn more about, and 1 concept or skill they think they've mastered. Or you can also have learners create mind maps, share learnings, create acronyms, or list five visible signs that would indicate a change in behavior. Other ideas to reinforce and extend the learning experience include the following:

• **Make it easy for learners to access the content for review**—People tend to prepare, learn, and review in a time frame that works for them. So it's important to develop tools that allow this to happen in ways that work for each learner. Try to make content available via online portals that can be accessed anytime and anywhere so people can refresh their memories and tap into content easily. If online accessibility isn't an option, make sure people have easily accessible hard copies of key portions of the content they'll need to reinforce what they've learned.

- **Build in and leverage manager support**—It's important to train teams, not just people. Doing so creates buzz, excitement, and groundswell momentum for keeping the concepts alive and dynamic. Create tools that allow managers to easily teach their people what they've learned and provide direct reports with tools that make it easy to learn the concepts that their manager has just been exposed to. Encourage managers to have conversations with their people about what they've just learned and ask for feedback about how they're using new content and skills. Set up informal learning groups during training so managers have built-in cohort groups to help them solve problems and use as a sounding board for issues they are getting ready to face.

- **Link learning to business outcomes**—While it's critical to set this up from the beginning of the learning event, getting people thinking about it in the reinforcement stage is critical, too. Connect with your learners after the learning event to find out how they are applying new content and skills to their real-world issues. Reach out to learners after training or learning sessions and ask them how they are applying the learning. Using online surveys can speed the process for everyone. Consider hosting focus groups or informal discussion groups to have individuals share how they are applying the learning to their work experiences and how they are seeing return on investment.

- **Create critical mass**—Organizations need to train an appropriate population in order to create critical mass and need excitement in order to effectively create change. Extend the learning by making the content that the learners experienced available and accessible to the learners' managers and peers. This way learners, their managers, peers, and direct reports begin using the content together and creating a shared language. Lastly, by creating robust collaboration, interaction, and practice in the classroom or virtual learning experience, informal cohort groups and support networks tend to take hold. Individuals in these support groups can serve as advisors and sounding boards to each other on real-life situations and experiences long after the learning experience.

- **Host lunch and learns**—Bring learners back together to share experiences, watch reinforcement videos, engage in skill reinforcement, and use roleplays. You can host face-to-face or virtual meetings. Have individuals watch videos, read articles, or do an activity over lunch, then share their experiences (successes and failures) regarding the application of the concepts presented in the video or activity. Create small group discussions around the learnings and have the groups brainstorm strategies to help overcome obstacles. Break the content into smaller concepts and have groups tackle one or more concepts in each lunch and learn. If you can't get groups back together, consider creating and offering podcasts that review key content, showcase interactive examples and roleplays, and talk through stumbling blocks.

- **Provide coaches and mentors**—Performance improves with coaching and mentoring. Before you begin to prepare people for the learning experience, identify coaches who can support each group of learners. Individuals who have experienced the content and have been practicing the concepts successfully can make excellent mentors, as can individuals who may serve in the role of formal coaches. Having the coaches and mentors create formal learning agreements prior to the learning experience is also helpful. Once these agreements are in place, the coach can help the learners focus on their goals, act on their intentions, and move learning to action.

Learning is a journey and must be supported through strategies and tools that allow learners to absorb the knowledge and extend it to successful application. Once the learning journey is set in motion, it must ignite passion in the learners. It must inspire and engage them to connect with the content and share it with others. If the learning journey is set up and supported well, people will be eager and impatient for more. The challenge for trainers, facilitators, and coaches is to capture the attention and passion of learners and teach them to use new content in a fully engaged way that creates lasting results. The system shared in this paper offers an approach to setting up the learning experience in a way that will unleash the learning energy and create enthusiasm, openness, involvement, meaning, and lasting results for the learner and the organization.

About the author

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