

Learning Trends Briefing

September, 2008

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to highlight recent trends in adult learning and to suggest some implications for the training functions which make up the responsibilities of the Leadership Development group. This information should be useful for all IMB trainers and others interested in the lifelong learning experience for our personnel.

The State of the Class

Today's adult class is likely comprised of at least three different generations and quite possibly four. Each of the generations has a preferred learning style and widely varying experiences. Education levels range from high school through multiple graduate degrees, and comfort with technology will be just as diverse. Some of the learners will have a hard time using a cell phone, while others will be multi-tasking with four electronic devices at once. Older learners generally react better to classroom instruction¹. Our traditional ways of teaching were designed for them. What about the newest generation? They can be characterized as impatient, wanting only what they need when they need it. They want smaller chunks of learning in a collaborative setting. They are multitaskers who expect more from technology. They want to be challenged, and they need to be held accountable.

How can we find common ground?

One way is to figure out what we want them to know—a learning strategy. What is a learning strategy? Our 7Dimensions x 4 Phases Technical Document is an excellent example of a learning strategy. It lists the desired characteristics for our learners at each of four development levels in each of the identified dimensions. It does not say how the learner will arrive at these outcomes. That is the work of the instructional designers who develop the necessary curriculum with the target class in mind. The key is getting everyone throughout the organization to recognize and follow this document as they develop training so that we are consistently striving for the same goals.

As an organization, we value learning. One of the characteristics of the Disciple Dimension is “being a lifelong learner.” Jane Vella encourages “quantum thinking” in order to see the big picture and understand that everything affects everything else². Nothing exists in a vacuum or in a discrete thread, but everything is woven into the tapestry that makes up our organization. The best learning experiences will situate the learning and help the learners recognize the applications to their individual ministry contexts.

¹ Bridget Botelho, “The New Work Force of ‘Generation Y’ or ‘Millennials’ Need Special Handling, *Mass High Tech* (09/05/08), quoted in *ASTD Buzz*, 9/22/08.

² Jane Vella, *Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002, 29.

Can't we all just get along?

The most successful individuals—those who do well with happiness, values, achievement, and relationships— possess a set of personality qualities and practice lifestyle behaviors that facilitate continuous growth and learning.³ These behaviors include understanding and using your strengths, showing less anger and more forgiveness, using stress-reduction techniques, using peer support, taking care of yourself physically and emotionally, and learning for a lifetime. These characteristics are all part of our learning strategy, but perhaps we could be more intentional about incorporating them into the learning experiences we provide.

Understanding your preferred behaviors and how they affect others is also important. The next step is being versatile and adapting your behaviors to meet the needs of others instead of imposing your own needs. A willingness to change is the beginning of this process, but as my mom always said, knowing how and doing are two different things. Just learning *about* the needed change is no substitute for actually behaving that way.

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation—Behavior (FIRO-B), Situational Leadership II, the Birkman Method, and Sharpening Your Interpersonal Skills all speak to the issues of behavioral change. ICEL helps to make these opportunities available to all our personnel. Throughout these trainings it is important to be practitioner-oriented, giving real life examples and explaining how to put the information into practice in addition to providing accountability and driving follow-through to help insure that the desired change occurs.

Mentoring—Just do it

Probably the most difficult part of developing a mentoring program is the first step: deciding what it needs to look like. What is the goal of the mentoring program? What is supposed to happen? What does a successfully mentored person look like?

A mentoring program can be beneficial to both the mentor and the protégé, particularly in a learner-centered setting. The mentor can find a renewed enthusiasm about the role he plays in the organization. The protégé can develop a sense of confidence about the job he is doing, allowing for experimentation and risk-taking to develop new ways of doing that job.

Because of the nature of the relationship it is important that both mentor and protégé have good interpersonal relationship skills and be allowed a “trial run” of the match before there is a formal assignment made. In our setting this could be difficult on both counts, particularly with the possibility of great distances between the ideal pair.

Twenty to sixty percent of the current U.S. workforce is eligible to retire in the next ten years. Without planning for these retirements, much of the institutional memory will be lost. It is vital to tap into this generation’s wisdom before it is too late. The relationships developed during mentoring can help to preserve this kind of knowledge.

³ Agatha Gilmore, “Lifestyle Learning,” *Chief Learning Officer*, September 2008, 23.

Do what?

Change is all around us. Our organizational structure is changing, our learners are changing, our communications are changing, and our work is changing. Do we need to change our training methods? “The amount of information needed to be effective, combined with the rate at which that information changes, makes many well-intended training efforts flawed before they are ever released.”⁴

Bob Mosher, a leading trainer, says “We need to get better at maximizing class time for what it does best” and then use other tools to support performance on the job.⁵ This alone can reduce the amount of class time by more than half.

He also says that large binders are a thing of the past, particularly since “few are opened once the [student] leaves the classroom.” His recommendations for training focus on “performance support” — making information and resources available to learners where they need them instead of trying to teach them everything in a classroom setting.

Lindsay Edmonds Wickman, associate editor for Chief Learning Officer magazine, is a member of the Millennial generation. “Don’t assume that young workers are dumb. They may just learn differently...Organizations should provide learning that covers the spectrum...[so] each employee can identify with at least one modality, regardless of what generation they might fall into...obviously, what didn’t work in high school and college isn’t suddenly going to work when they get to the workplace.”⁶

This all amounts to a huge challenge for designers and trainers. The task mushrooms into creating content for all the generations, capitalizing on the strengths of each one and accommodating their needs as much as possible. John Ambrose, senior vice-president of SkillSoft Corp., recommends a “multi-model” training approach, using interesting graphics, podcasts, and online courses.⁷

Easier said than done, right? Let’s consider a few things that can help us grow gently into these practices.

Simulations

But be doers...James 1:22

While many of the trainers and designers are Intuitives, the majority of our learners (64%) prefer Sensing⁸. What they see and experience is their reality. Because of that, and because it’s just really more fun and interesting, we should try to augment our training with simulations and case studies. The ideal classroom situation is for the learner to discover situated background and baseline knowledge before class and then put it into practice during the formal classroom time. In this safe, controlled setting students have the opportunity to test their understanding and experiment with ways to use the

⁴ Bob Mosher and Frank Nguyen, “Training is Broken,” *T+D*, August 2008, 23.

⁵ Bob Mosher, “Learning’s Sacred Cows,” *Chief Learning Officer*, September 2008, 16.

⁶ Lindsay Edmonds Wickman, “Generational Generalizations,” *CLO-Blog*, July 2008.

⁷ Botelho, op cit.

⁸ Lloyd Rodgers, “Response to Change,” September, 2008. Information based on MBTI testing of FPO participants.

information. Failures are just opportunities to learn even deeper as they can be debriefed and remedied without doing damage.

Thiagi's Law of Practice and Feedback says "Learners cannot master skills without repeated practice and relevant feedback."⁹ What would it look like if we gave introductory material ahead of time and then used classroom time for practicing the skills? Kind of a blended learning situation where the learners are expected to go beyond knowledge and comprehension to the higher order skills.

Second Life (www.secondlife.com) is an online simulated world, created by the users. I wonder if it would be beneficial to practice church planting situations there? There are all kinds of communities and private islands and some companies hold virtual meetings there.

Web-Based Mentoring

ICEL has recently contracted with Friday5s to follow up on the instruction that takes place in the Focus on Leadership workshop. During the ten weeks that follow the in-class meetings, participants are asked to work on two leadership goals, logging bi-weekly progress and checking in with a leadership coach. While this is not true mentoring, it is a start toward developing an online program that can maximize the benefits of mentoring while minimizing the challenges of widely dispersed personnel. Both mentors and protégés in a general program would need training on how to go about forging the relationship and achieving the goals.

Web 2.0

"Also known as the two-way web, you could say that Web 2.0 is the Internet being used as it was originally intended—for sharing and collaborating."¹⁰ The tools for Web 2.0 include blogs, wikis, podcasts, social networks, and something else new every week. These tools enable the sharing of information but even more important they encourage the building of relationships. Silos break down as we build new relationships and share the collective knowledge of our community.

This means giving up control, empowering the learners, learning from the learners, and being transparent as we set the learning examples. "As new tools are introduced, learning professionals should be early adopters, leading the way in testing them out. We are in an age of 'walking the talk.'"¹¹

So how do they work? The easiest of the tools is the blog. A weblog is a place to record your thoughts or post information and get reactions from your readers. Most are free to use. Ask a Millennial if you need help getting started. Quite a few missionaries are regular bloggers.

The best known wiki is probably Wikipedia. (<http://en.wikipedia.com> for the English version). A wiki allows visitors to post and edit information. The entire community contributes to the materials found there. I can imagine a missionary wiki where people post best practices and give foundational

⁹ <http://www.thiagi.com/laws-of-learning.html>

¹⁰ Harold Jarcho, "Skills 2.0," *T+D*, April 2008, 22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

information that embodies the organizational record. There could be an orientation wiki where people add information that will assist new missionaries assigned to particular affinity groups and geographical locations. There could be a teaming wiki that would help personnel understand how teams work and the best practices for managing geographically separated teams and clusters. There might be more consistency from team to team as information and knowledge is shared.

Podcasts and vodcasts (videos) provide just-in-time training and performance support. Imagine needing to fill out a form for reimbursement. You probably covered the procedure in orientation, but that was months ago and you haven't thought about it since then. With a well-structured podcast, all you have to do is put on your headphones and follow the directions as you are guided through filling in the blanks and submitting the required form electronically. This is a very basic example. Imagine the possibilities for practical application to church planting, adapting to a new culture, and theological education. The issues that usually arise have to do with production mechanics. The best podcasts are recorded live using the tools available on a personal computer. Nothing fancy or "professional" is required. The goal is to make the information available. Videos are a bit more technical, but again, just basic digital video equipment without a lot of editing (YouTube quality) will make the information available.

What about social networking? Sites like FaceBook, MySpace, and LinkedIn are created for this purpose. It is possible to post information, interact with others, and present a public face to everyone there. In our situations we would need to be a bit more discreet and pay attention to the security tools available there. The interaction is the main thing with these sites.

What next?

For all of these trends, relationships seem to be of paramount importance. Everything is about bringing people together in new ways in order to share knowledge and skills.

Soon we will have access to Sharepoint and all the interactivity that environment brings. The possibilities are endless. As learning professionals, let's covenant to break down our silos and set the example for collaboration and cooperation throughout our organic organization. Ask for and share information. Experiment with new ways of facilitating learning. Require accountability. Respect the learner. Reach the world.

Susan Atkinson
September, 2008

Recommended Resources

Chief Learning Officer electronic publications: www.clomedia.com

ASTD resources: www.astd.org. T+D magazine

www.learningcircuits.org

www.thiagi.com Free trainer resources and monthly newsletter.