

Experiencing Learning: The Whys and Hows of Involving Participants

Training and developing others is one of the most exciting and rewarding jobs anyone can have. You can affect the lives and work of many people, and influence individuals abilities to be successful, while at the same time have a significant role in increasing your company's bottom line.

This chapter introduces you to a couple of concepts that will ensure your success as a trainer. It acquaints you with the concept of experiential learning activities, sometimes called ELAs. It also provides several tactics for working with participants who believe they are “too serious” to have fun while they are learning.

Using Experiential Learning Activities

Experiential learning happens when a learner participates in an activity, processes the activity, identifies useful skills or knowledge, and transfers the learning to the workplace or life in general. ELAs attempt to imitate daily life experiences. Participants “experience” what they learn before processing or discussing the activity.

To be successful, ELAs must have all of the following characteristics:

- Have a structure, including specific steps and a process that will lead to anticipated results
- Focus on a specific goal
- Incorporate a high level of participation

- Provide concepts, information, and data for participants to review and analyze
- Require processing or debriefing so that participants can uncover the learning that occurred

The Experiential Learning Cycle (*Reference Guide*, 1999) identifies five required steps of experiential learning activities: experiencing, publishing, processing, generalizing, and applying.

Step 1, Experiencing. Participants complete a defined task, often using props, toys, and materials such as those from Trainer’s Warehouse. The activity may be associated with a game or fun. If the process ends here, learning is left to chance. Therefore the trainer or facilitator leads the participants through a series of questions.

Step 2, Publishing. Participants share their observations of what happened during the activity. Generally the trainer or facilitator guides the discussion with carefully crafted questions. Participants have an opportunity to share what they observed and experienced and how it felt. The trainer usually begins with a broad question such as, “What happened?” and then focuses on the more specific questions that lead participants to the learning outcome for the specific activity.

Give participants an opportunity to share observations. You may begin with broad questions and then focus on more specific concepts. Here are some examples:

- What happened?
- What did you observe?
- What helped or hindered the process?
- What results did you see?
- Did anything surprise you? What and why?
- How do you feel about what happened?

Step 3, Processing. Participants have an opportunity to discuss the dynamics and results of the activity. In some cases observers may also be used to help define what occurred. This step helps participants interpret why something happened.

The key here is to allow participants to discover this for themselves, avoiding your desire to “tell” them why. Ask questions such as these:

- Why do you suppose that occurred?
- What did you learn about yourself? About others?
- What can you glean from this activity?
- What principles might be true based on your experience?

Step 4, Generalizing. This step helps participants connect what they learned to real life. It uses questions to help participants identify why what they are learning is important. It uncovers the “so what” related to the activity. The following questions may be used to help participants connect their experiences to real-life situations:

- How does this relate to your situation?
- What does this suggest to you?
- What patterns and similarities come to mind? Are there exceptions?
- How does this experience help you understand others like it?
- What if . . . ?

Step 5, Applying. To be most effective, an ELA must allow participants to plan effective change based on what they learned during the activity. This step requires that participants move from “so what?” to “now what?” Trainers assist learners to apply what they learned to real-life situations at work or in their personal lives. Participants may establish goals, contract for change, make promises, identify potential workplace changes, or initiate other actions that result from their experience.

By this point, participants will have a greater understanding of the purpose of the activity. Facilitate a discussion about how they will apply their learning back at the workplace or in their personal lives. This application step brings closure to the activity. Questions such as these will get at the answer to the question “now what?”

- What will you do differently as a result of this experience?
- How will you transfer your knowledge and skills to the workplace?
- How and when will you apply your learning?
- How will this help you be more effective in the future?
- What support would make this change easier to implement?
- What’s next?

Your role is to help participants discover the learning from what they have completed. Remember that your task is not to tell them, not to assign your learning on them, but—through a series of questions—to help them uncover the lesson themselves. The lesson they need to learn may not be the lesson you want to teach. This is called experiential learning.

Note: As you gather the group’s feedback, record the answers on a flip chart so you can refer to them or perhaps even distribute important learning points later.

Every trainer should be skilled in using experiential learning activities. It is a powerful tool that turns fun into action, games into skills. All of the activities in this book are not formal ELAs. However, it is important to note that the activities that qualify as ELAs will likely require more attention and processing than others.

Working with Serious Participants

Many trainers, consultants, facilitators, teachers, and others in the field of workplace learning and performance fully embrace the concepts of fun and interactive training to accelerate the learning process. Others pass up the opportunity to use props and toys such as those found in the Trainer's Warehouse catalog and lament, "I wish I could use your 'toys,' but I teach engineers (or accountants or bankers or doctors) and they're too serious for that."

This comment heard by Trainer's Warehouse, was so prevalent that they wondered whether new teaching theory was required for these serious-type learners or whether trainers and facilitators simply needed new language and tools to sell the concept of playful learning to these serious learners, while still maintaining their credibility and professionalism. At the same time, Trainer's Warehouse had heard hundreds of testimonials about how using reinforcement games, fiddles, and other playful toys creates positive energy in the classroom, improves retention within the learning environment, and translates into greater productivity outside the classroom. So the question was, how to help all trainees to experience the same success, whether their participants were "serious" or not.

Susan Doctoroff Landay, company president, uses an approach developed by Roger Fisher, author of *Getting to Yes*, to help trainers and facilitators be more successful. She has identified several tactics that can help you convert serious and skeptical students to active and laughing learners. These tips might prove helpful to gain buy-in from skeptical learners.

Tactic 1: Be Open About Your Interests and Theirs Right from the start

Don't wait until the end of an exercise to address participants' concerns and goals. Instead, lead your group into an activity by articulating both their concerns and your interests. You might say, for instance, "I understand you may be a bit skeptical about my crazy games and toys. In fact, if you're like others I've taught, here are some of the thoughts that might be in your head." Read from the column of Participant's Interests and Concerns in Table 1.1. Then ask, "Before I go on, do you have other thoughts you'd like to share with the class and me?"

It is important to start with *the participants'* perspective. Once they feel heard and understood, they'll be more likely to listen to an alternative perspective. After they have expressed their concerns, list some of your interests and concerns.

Table 1.1. Interests and Concerns

| Participant's Interests and Concerns | Trainer's Interests and Concerns |
|--|--|
| This is a waste of time. | Need to prove success to managers |
| I don't want to embarrass myself. | Learning needs to be fun to be successful. |
| This is beneath me. | I don't want to look stupid. |
| I'm smart; just tell me what I need to know and I'll remember it. I don't need stupid games. | They're smart. . . I don't have all the answers, but I can help them share their learning. |
| I have other, more important things to do. | The organization has spent a lot just to get people into training—it has a purpose. |
| I won't learn anything. This trainer has never done my job, so what can she add? | When people experience emotion, the learning is memorable. |
| I won't learn anything new. | If all I do is lecture, nobody will remember anything. |

Tactic 2: Allow Participants to Experience Control

Allow participants to feel some control and involvement in selecting the teaching method. This doesn't mean that you will need to redesign the training session. When offered options, chances are high that the group will select the same things you did. Their participation in the selection process means they'll more readily buy into the creative teaching methods, without you having to "sell" the idea.

You might say something like this: "I've given a lot of thought to the format of the session, but think that input from a group like you could be extremely valuable. Let me share some of the components, then you can add to the list. Let's brainstorm a list first and then decide what to do. If we take five minutes to get a solid start, it will make the entire session more successful. Here are some options I've thought of:

- Lecture
- Role play
- Simulation games
- Q&A sessions
- Working in small groups"

At this point, invite the group to continue adding to the list, with suggestions such as:

- Senior employees help junior employees
- Junior employees help senior employees
- Use magic tricks
- Tell content-related jokes
- Play some music

Tactic 3: Use External Standards or Criteria to Choose Among the Options

Identify third-party assistance or some “blue book” standard to add support to the decision. You may wish to share some of these data points with participants and invite them to supplement with their own experiences.

- Retention can increase up to 800 percent if humor is used when presenting (Ziv, 1984).
- Students using lots of visuals did 12 percent better on short-term recall and 26 percent better on long-term retention (Meier, 2000).
- Standing speeds up information processing 5 to 20 percent, compared to sitting down (Jensen, 1996, p. 150).
- Four-member teams rewarded based on the group’s average scores performed significantly better than trainees rewarded on individual scores only (Hagman & Hayes, 1985).
- Data shows that tasks that are interrupted mid-process are more memorable (Allen, 2001, p. 13).
- Each of us might be a different type of learner. Some are visual (they need to see something to remember it). Some are auditory (they need to hear something to remember it). Some are physical (they need to do it to learn it). And some are kinesthetic (doing something with their hands helps them to remember) (Russell, 1999).
- Data shows that the presence of “happy chemicals” in the brain, like serotonin, stimulates memory. Serotonin is naturally produced in response to music, laughter, and physical activity (Jensen & Cabney, 2000).
- Sixty percent of what is presented in training is forgotten if it’s not used immediately. Seventy-five percent is lost with six months, and 85 percent within one year of training (Broad & Newstrom, 1992).

Together, choose among the options. Given the brainstorm of options and data shared, ask the group members which learning formats they most want to use in the session. When polling the participants, mark down their responses so they feel heard. Let them know that you'll adjust your session accordingly.

Tactic 4: Communicate the Training Process

Although most of your training time will be utilized in talking about the content, it's always okay to take a break and explain the process. The "process" is:

- The method by which you're teaching
- The pace at which you're teaching
- Topics that will be covered next
- Questions that remain unanswered
- Agenda for the remainder of the session

Tactic 5: Build a Relationship with Your Learners

Relationships are built on mutual respect. Remind participants that you, too, have lots to learn. Invite them to share their knowledge with you and to approach you at a break with important feedback, questions, or comments.

Whether you're teaching doctors, accountants, engineers, software developers, scientists, bankers, or financial analysts, remind yourself of the old cliché, "everybody's different." No two individuals and no two learners are alike—each has a different familiarity with your topic, sense of humor, ability to communicate, and so on. Don't make assumptions about your participants without checking in with them. You might surprise each other!

These five tactics will help you create support for using activities, props, and toys to teach skills and knowledge in your sessions.

Whether you are looking for a process to ensure learning occurs or tactics that prepare participants for the learning they are about to experience, Trainer's Warehouse can provide the materials, and this book offers over one hundred ways to use them.

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