

TRAINING

Learning and Experience

Think for a moment about some of the best and worst learning experiences you have had. They could have been in high school, perhaps in college, perhaps in a seminar. It can be useful to reflect on these experiences. Doing so can put you in touch with how you are wired as a human being, with how you learn. These past learning experiences can help a person understand just what it is about an instructor, a message, or a medium, that makes a learning experience valuable. They can put you in touch with the core concepts that make some training worthwhile for your business, and other training less than worthwhile.

As you think about these experiences, you may remember disheveled, chalk covered teachers whose disorganized manner carried over into confusing lectures. You may even recall presenters who mumbled with such monotonous profusion that had the audience stayed awake long enough to alert Insomniacs Anonymous, history could have been made. You may have been fortunate enough to remember sitting before a teacher who had what I'll call "pin drop" ability, someone in whose presence you could hear a pin drop when he spoke. He or she may have been a true educator, who had the ability to locate where the 'eager to know' part of you lived, and teach you there...so that your world became different.

"Worst Training Experience"

My worst training experience occurred when I was working in the environmental business, as an engineer. It was one that changed my life.

My job involved working around hazardous materials, and I was required to attend a forty-hour course in safe handling procedures. This class was taught by university professors, and was attended by plant operators, well-diggers, day laborers, and a few technical professionals. Mid-way through the program, a professor (whose role it seemed was to give the other professors a bad name) spent ten minutes expounding on a particular subject, peppering his windy explanation with obscure technical words that were foreign to most of the people in attendance. As he concluded his diatribe, he directed a question at one of the well-diggers.

When the perplexed student couldn't answer, the professor raised his voice and said to the man "You obviously don't care enough about yourself to pay attention. I wonder why you even bother to come to class."

The rest of the students were horrified, and so was I. Although at the time I did not know what was happening, the emotion I felt meant that I was face-to-face with one of my core values. I resolved then and there to teach in ways that honored the student role.

The Student Role

But how is the student role honored? Assuming that an educator is willing to be accountable for what students learn, how does he or she teach so that learning occurs? There are three essential steps:

Step 1

The first step is to realize that in order for a person to learn, that person must be **humble, curious and confident**. A person simply can't learn when he thinks he already knows it all. A person can't learn if he doesn't understand why learning is intrinsically important. And a person can't learn if he doesn't think he can.

Effective educators know how to relate material to a person's life, and make that person curious about possibility. Effective educators begin by presenting enough information to show students that there is significant new news on the horizon.

Step 2

The second step to honoring the student role is to recognize that the single largest barrier to learning occurs when there is too great a leap, too large a **gap**, between current understanding and the new understanding that is being taught. It's hard for most people to jump into the fourth grade if they haven't been through the first, second, and third. Teaching in small leaps facilitates the learning process. If an educator is able to create bridges that relate the new to what a student already knows, learning can be easy. For the uninitiated, learning about a subject as complex as electricity can be simplified if a person has at least experienced indoor plumbing.

If an instructor begins by saying "Electricity functions much like water through a pipe. Just like a pipe's diameter restricts water flow, a wire's resistance restricts electricity flow...", the student begins to relate the new to what he or she already knows.

Effective instruction keeps the "leap" at the level of friendly challenge, rather than daunting obstacle.

Step 3

The third step is to understand that, once a student has been exposed to learning and related it his world, the learning must be applied in a **meaningful context**. It's one thing to talk about electricity, it is another for a student to get a sense of the phenomena through a tangible exercise. It's one thing to talk about communication. It is one thing to tell someone that effective communicators are those who are able to temporarily set their world-view aside, and enter another person's world. It is still another to have a student actually do this, retain their integrity, and experience the value of new interaction.

When people are taught in this way, it can be amazing how quickly they both learn and retain large amounts of new information.

The Return on Training

Does knowledge of what makes a training program effective help in deciding whether training is needed for your employees? No. It helps in evaluating whether training was effective after the fact.

Companies train:

- To provide a **perceived benefit** to their employees.
- Because the perceived **cost** of having employees learn by trial and error is higher than the cost of having them attend a program
- Because the investment in training is likely to produce a greater **return on investment** than equivalent dollars spent elsewhere in the organization.

If you are considering a training program, an evaluation of the trial and error cost of learning is a simple method of determining if training is needed.

What if...

Training programs are in many ways like life rafts. If your employees are drowning in the ocean and someone tosses them a life raft, they probably won't care what kind it is.

But what if, for essentially the same cost and time commitment, they could have a life raft that came with clear, concisely organized ocean-swimming lessons?

What if the life raft had an easy to use map, compass, and sextant, designed to help passengers get out of rough seas?

What if the life raft was structured for a smooth, enjoyable ride, and people did not get seasick on the journey?

Would that increase the value of the training? Would it increase your return on investment?

At Advanced Business Resources, we exist to provide this type of training. We teach people where they mentally live, relate new material to life experience, and apply new learning to relevant business contexts.

