

Engagement and the Evolution of Classroom-Based Training

BY JIM HAUDAN



Classroom-based learning has changed a great deal in the past few years due to innovations in technologies and methodologies. But the biggest revolution of all has been in the expectations of learners and instructors.

In its strictest sense, classroom training follows the “mug and jug” theory. Picture a traditional classroom with rows of students and an “expert” at the front of the room who holds all the knowledge. If a student sits there holding an empty mug long enough, the expert with the jug will eventually fill it for him. That’s pretty much how “training” has been accomplished in businesses during the past few decades.

It’s true that we’ve moved away from this kind of teaching for the most part. Today, we’re seeing classroom-based training expanded and modified to include role-playing, scenarios, action learning, discovery learning, best-practice sharing and simulations. However, the real evolution of training is not about how you arrange the chairs or whether you use PowerPoints or flipcharts.

What’s evolving and changing is expectations: of the learner, the teacher and, most important, the experience itself.

Our learners’ expectations of how to get information have skyrocketed. They are immersed in stimuli competing for their attention and interest: the immense access to information on the Internet, the challenging interactivity of video gaming, rapid social sharing and exchange on networks such as MySpace and Facebook, and the increasing globalization of our lives through travel, either physical or virtual.

We have greater expectations of the learning itself. In a world of “edutainment,” the learning experience must blend analysis and critical thinking, entertainment, immediate feedback, practical application and especially personal relevance. Merely sitting in a chair and having someone else tell you what to think just won’t cut it anymore.

The techniques of our teachers, trainers, coaches — whatever name we give them — have never been more subject to examination under the microscope. They’re expected not just to transfer knowledge and information, but to orchestrate people’s ability to think and, even more daunting, act differently so they can capture new opportunities and deliver results. With all due respect, this is not your father’s classroom.

Relevance Changes Everything

In training, and just about every aspect of dealing with people, relevance makes the difference. Without a connection, even the best training, no matter where it’s conducted, won’t make sense or stick. Consider a profession where relevance has instant results: stand-up comedy. When audience members believe a comedian and his material are relevant to them, they’re immediately engaged. They laugh, they’re animated and their energy engulfs the room. Compare this to the unlucky guy who bombs, gets heckled and is booed off stage. What he’s doing and saying is just not funny because he demonstrates no association with those in the audience. They simply don’t connect.

It’s the role of the leader in the classroom to bring relevance to the people regarding their training. Learning leaders need to combine the focus of what needs to be learned and what is meaningful to their students. They need to probe for the most profound questions within the business that people don’t understand and illuminate the drama or adventure so students get excited about participating in it. It starts by simply asking the learners what they’re curious about. There’s not a more enticing way to deliver training than by starting with what’s relevant to the student.

Relevance is the “sweet spot” that makes the differ-

AT A GLANCE

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ence in convincing people that the classroom and the learning were built just for them.

Students as Customers

We know that the products or services we sell have to meet the needs of our customers. As leaders in the classroom, we have to think of our students as customers. We must frame the interaction and engagement around their needs and how they want to consume the information and convert

Whether choosing a hotel or a restaurant, customers expect services to be delivered in a way that fits them, that makes sense to them and provides them value in exchange for their time and money. Training must be that kind of service.

it into new capabilities. Viewing the student as a customer may seem a bit unusual, but when it's done right, learning professionals can capture people's imaginations, curiosity and lead the evolution of classroom-based learning.

Designing learning to fit a customer mindset goes far beyond analyzing evaluations scribbled out at the end of a classroom session. It requires a CSI-like diagnostic to find out what experiences resonate most with them. One of the classic mistakes instructors and coaches make is trying to lead in the classroom based on what has worked for them, not what works for their students. Possibly the greatest challenge for learning leaders is to abandon their wide base of knowledge and try to recall what it was like "not to know" — so the insight of that inexperience becomes the avenue to

relevance and connection with the student-customers.

One of the best ways to help ensure the modern classroom is relevant and customer-based is to follow the three-step process of context, content and practice:

- **Context is the “why” behind the learning.** A well-executed strategy requires many different elements to come together. Typically, employees are asked to put the strategy puzzle pieces together without ever having seen the entire picture. A cohesive, systemic view makes what once seemed overwhelming and random appear cohesive and sensible.
- **Content is the “what” of the learning.** Armed with an understanding of the overarching strategy, it becomes easier to grasp the supporting pieces. Learners can effectively build their content knowledge of each strategic initiative, skill or activity once they can place it within the bigger picture.
- **Practice is the “how.”** With the context set and the content understood, learners can then translate their understanding into action by practicing the skill in a safe environment, with supportive feedback. Judgment comes through experience. By planning opportunities for trial, error, reflection and refinement, we accelerate the learning process in a way that is personal, applicable and sustainable.

So with students as our customers and recognition that relevance is vital in delivering value, we also have to realize that the classroom experience itself is a service that competes with the level of service that people are accustomed to. People have standards and expectations about what they will “buy.” Whether choosing a hotel or a restaurant, they expect services to be delivered in a way that fits them, that makes sense to them and provides them value in exchange for their time and money. Training must be that kind of service. But in this case, the exchange is a learning experience that is well worth the expenditure of their time. With the level of competition for people’s attention — and more important, their hearts and minds — business training needs to step up its game.

The Evolution Solution

So how do we truly engage people in a service-like experience in which students are not just passive recipients but equal participants in learning? The answer lies in four basic, universal needs that all people require to commit to anything, from relationships to job training. These are the “roots of engagement.” When we pay attention to our students’ needs, we can gain their true commitment to the training that is so important. Let’s consider these “roots” in the light of business training:

IN PRACTICE THE BLOCKBUSTER SIMULATION EXPERIENCE

The leaders at Blockbuster Inc. have evolved former classroom-plus-textbook training into a four-step, interactive process that uses some very engaging tools. Because all learning involves making mistakes, Blockbuster uses failure as an accelerator of capability, especially when used with relevant, immediate feedback.

Four steps are used with associates at all levels to teach skills ranging from stocking and customer service:

1. **Prepare:** A coach (usually the store manager) builds trust with the employee, explaining what will happen in the training experience. Not only are mistakes allowed, they’re encouraged. Instead of looking to “test” people on the knowledge they’ve acquired, which implies a beginning and an end, they see practice and failure as ongoing stepping stones to greater performance. They are always in a “beta mode” mindset.
2. **Show and tell:** Using electronic learning modules or simulation modules, employees practice the best way to execute in a given situation. They make choices and check the results. If the results fall short, they learn from their decisions to try alternatives. Learners are invited to ask questions such as, “Why don’t we do it this way?” This creates an environment in which employees ask questions and sometimes find ways to do things better. Critical thinking and challenging the process is not only encouraged, it’s expected.

Then, simulation and real-life coaching are combined, as the coach demonstrates the skill with a real customer while the employee observes. What the learner just saw onscreen in the electronic simulation then happens live. Next, the coach and employee discuss how the interaction relates to the content from the practice session.
3. **Coach practice:** The employee practices with a real customer with the coach nearby. The employee can see how decisions or choices work and receive instant feedback. This continues until the employee feels safe and confident, and the coach believes the employee is doing the job correctly alone.
4. **Coach perform:** In the final step, assessments, observation and evaluation are used to continue coaching the employee, who is now “on stage” — on his own, but with the support of a coach who observes and provides helpful feedback.

After these four steps, employees are assessed on content knowledge. Coaches talk about choices that created the intended outcome and the choices that need to be improved. Training processes like this one are especially effective because they combine electronic simulation and live customer interaction with the safety net of the coach’s support. **CLO**

— Jim Haudan

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- **People want to be a part of something big.** Who isn't interested in being a part of something that's bigger than them? Think about how people behave at concerts or baseball games or political rallies. They act as one, connecting with hundreds or thousands of people they've never met. They feel like they're part of an effort, more substantial and significant than they could ever be alone. When this happens, people feel they are as big as the effort is. How does this relate to training? Well, it's practically impossible to get people to "think big" if they're constantly asked to "just do their job." They must understand the workings of the business and its overall purpose so they can see how training helps them achieve with others far more than they could achieve by themselves.

- **People want to feel a sense of belonging.** When people are truly engaged, they believe they really belong. They have a sense of validation when they feel that they "fit," they're accepted and they're one of the group. When training emphasizes this inclusion, the need for every person to be as capable as possible, it's much easier for them to connect to and commit to the training and execute the strategy to produce results. On the other hand, a feeling of being on the outside or not belonging can disintegrate into something much worse than disengagement.

- **People want to go on a meaningful journey.** We all want to be on some kind of adventure that matters. We want to create something that doesn't exist now. Nobody wants to sum up a lifetime by saying, "I did an amazing job maintaining what was already there." Seen like this, training is both a challenge and an opportunity. Time after time, people don't know the score of the game or the status of the adventure. They don't realize what they're up against, where they stand and what they're trying to accomplish as a business. When, through training, we help them understand the real challenges of the

quest they face, they don't have to be coerced to learn new skills and capabilities.

• **People want to know their contributions make a significant impact or difference.**

People want to be written into the story, to know that what they do really makes a difference, especially in the lives of other people. Engaged people feel that whatever they're doing is unquestionably connected to making a difference. An example: The hotel employee who sets up the breakfast bar who believes she's helping the businessperson prepare for a successful day is engaged. She's changing a life because she is the hotel. When training is set in the context of the difference it makes to the company, its customers and other employees, it's much more attractive and meaningful.

So it's not just the location of the training that's evolving. The real evolution is in tapping into the interests of the students to make them truly engaged participants rather than passive mug holders. As learning leaders, we need to be relevant, we need to be of service and we need to be engaging in a way that powerfully transfers capability. When we allow our people to feel the power of being part of something big, the warm sense of belonging, the rush of being on a meaningful adventure and the deep satisfaction of making a difference, training is engaging and a critical ingredient to better business results. **CLO**

Jim Haudan is CEO of Root Learning. Parts of this article were excerpted from his upcoming book, The Art of Engagement: Bridging the Gap Between People and Possibilities, to be published by McGraw-Hill. He can be reached at editor@clomedia.com.

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