

From Ugly Babies to Presentation Hell:

7 Solutions for Workforce Training



BY KAREN E. GARDNER

After a 25-plus year career in government service, the last 10 of which was spent training and educating the next generation of FBI agents, I thought I understood the world of training and development pretty well. But my first 90 days in Corporate America provided a slightly different context for some important lessons learned:

Those 'Pesky' Subject-Matter Experts (SMEs)

You have to learn to love them, because you can't develop training without them. Government agency or Corporate America, they walk around with wonderful training content in their head—but not writ-

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ten down. And the conversation to extract that wonderful content can be quite painful for both parties. They are the embodiment of the difference between novice and expert thinking. They skip steps, solution jump and forget how they learned this wonderful content. They immediately see solutions to complicated problems. They have to feel they are in control, and as an instructional designer working

with the expert, often they've done a pretty good job of slinging some content together. I call it the 80 percent solution—or the "ugly baby." They put time and effort into creating training, usually in their spare time, and then the training gurus come along and criticize their wonderful content. Our job as designers is to make their content as good as it can be. I always reassure them that if they trust me, together we'll take it from 80 percent to 100 percent.

Abandon Principles of Adult Learning at Your Own Peril

We all have strong preferences about what makes learning engaging: fun, relevant, experiential, hands-on and not spoon-fed.

But in the corporate world—like the government world—a lot of training ends up as endless text on screen or boring briefings. How can we forget what makes a memorable learning experience when we've all had them? Some of the biggest battles are fought over making training hands-on, just-in-time and fun. The point is, if you let people arrive at an idea themselves, they “own” that idea. People are more likely to believe something if they've reached the conclusion themselves rather than being told someone else's conclusion. Learning experiences that provide an opportunity for adults to “do” something instead of having something “done” to them increase the likelihood of retention and on-the-job application.

Years and years of educational research support the use of instructional methods that encourage active participation and interaction. We use these techniques because they work. I like to think about learning in three stages: 1) initial learning for accuracy and quality, 2) practice for fluency and endurance

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and 3) application or combination of components in a composite behavior. Many courses fail to produce true “mastery” because they skip or minimize the second stage. Think of show, try and test. Skipping the try part prematurely plunges learners into performance when they can't perform one or more critical components fluently.

It's All About the Learners

We used to call this “victory lap” training when the endless, pointless war stories came fast and furious. On occasions entertaining (and occasionally not), it's what happens when the focus is on the expert instructor, and not on what the learners need. Training with 148 Power Point slides jammed into an hour, with an expert instructor who's crossing every “t” and dotting every “i.” Motivated to pass

on everything they know in one one-hour presentation, some of the fiercest conversations I've had revolve around the notion that you can't teach someone else everything you know. Your need to teach others the content they need to know. To quote Lawrence Daloz, “education is something we neither ‘give’ or ‘do’ to our students. Rather, it is a way we stand in relation to them.”

E-Learning Can't Be Fast, Cheap and Good

It's true for government or corporate: Good online training takes time to develop and costs time and money. Slapping a shell or narration around a PowerPoint presentation is like putting lipstick on the proverbial pig. It may enhance the presentation a little, but the training is only as good as the underlying presentation (or pig). Convincing the food chain that you need two weeks instead of two days to produce good training can be hard. But another lesson learned: Your learners can tell the difference between what's good and what's slapped to-

Additional Resources

Working With Subject Matter Experts (SMEs):

- [ACS White Paper: Working with SMEs](#)
- [What Everyone Should Know About Working with Subject Matter Experts](#)

Principles of Adult Education:

- [www.teachermentors.com/adultLrng.php](#)
- [agelesslearner.com/intros/adultlearning.html](#)

Learner-Centering Your Content:

- [www.usp.edu/teaching/Learner-Centered](#)
- [www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/techconf00/mccombs_paper.html](#)

E-Learning Design Principles:

- [www.elearnspace.org/doing/designing.htm](#)
- [www.suddenlysart.com/effective_elearning.htm](#)

Instructional Systems Design:

- [www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/sat.html](#)
- [www.instructionaldesign.org/](#)

Job Competencies:

- [managementhelp.org/staffing/specify/cmptncys/basics.htm](#)
- [www.ehow.com/how_5631539_develop-job-competencies.html](#)

gether. Take the time to do it right the first time. Take the time to make it interactive. Take the time to make it visually interesting.

Not Everyone Thinks Systems

For those of us who work as instructional systems designers, we think in terms of systems. First we assess, or explore or discover what the problem is—and training might not be the whole solution. Then we design and develop content and methods. Next comes delivery, often by others, and last we evaluate and use that information to revisit and revise the design, and, we hope, assess transfer of learning into the workplace. But back to those pesky SMEs who have the wonderful content we designers need to create great training—sometimes our greatest challenge is applying some systems thinking without being overly rigid and transparent. If you can let the strongest part of their content drive the format, you won't dilute good ideas by forcing them into an instructional design template.

Job Competencies Are the Answers to the Test

Back in the FBI, when a case went to the jury, the judge read the jury something called instructions. They were really the answer to the test—the test being whether we'd proven guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Job competencies are the same. If you know the answers—or what success looks like—it's reverse engineering to have folks go through training experiences that result in those competencies. But does everyone

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have job competencies? Have your internal clients even been asked to describe what success looks like? That is one area where the government is at a distinct advantage. Corporate America can probably do a better job with better results if good job competencies underpin the design and development of training.

Culture Is Core

Again back in the FBI, one aspect of the culture was the willingness to collaborate. Successfully putting the bad guys in jail—from kicking a door to putting on the cuffs—required a lot of teamwork. That spirit of collaboration carried over to the development of training. Your e-mails were answered, folks showed up for meetings and returned phone calls—especially when you were able to tie training to successfully accomplishing the mission. In Corporate America don't forget to tie training to accomplishing the mission—i.e., pleasing your customer, executing a program and making a profit. If you can articulate metrics in terms of the bottom line—costs saved, issues prevented, top-line growth, lowering turnover, economies of scale, impact of failure to train—you'll see the development of a culture of collaboration. If you don't, your effort may be reduced to a culture of competition for limited resources.

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velopment at ManTech International Corporation, a multi-billion dollar organization that provides information technology, cyber and national security services to a wide variety of government clients. Karen retired in 2006 from the FBI, where she headed the investigative training program for FBI New Agent trainees and analysts. She has worked as an instructional systems designer in the intelligence community and came to ManTech earlier this year. She holds a Master's and Doctorate in Education from the University of Virginia and also is an adjunct faculty member. Email [Karen](#).

Tips

- Find a Way to Work With Subject Matter Experts to Make Their Content As Good As It Can Be
- Abandon Principles of Adult Learning at Your Own Peril
- Keep Your Training Centered Around What Learners Need to Know
- E-Learning Can't Be Fast, Cheap and Good
- Apply Systems Thinking to Training Design, But Don't Be Overly Rigid
- Job Competencies Are The Answers to the Test—Use Them to Underpin the Design of Training
- Culture Is Core—Tie Training to Your Mission