The Learning Environment: Helps & Hinders

Mark Rendell, independent trainer and project manager, considers the key factors that add or detract from a positive learning environment…

Have you ever wondered why your carefully designed training session doesn't feel 'right' or your materials seem to lack a sense of flow and rapport with the learners?

You've checked your session plan and learning objectives; the training brief and materials; the equipment and the facilities. All appears to be OK and yet there still remains a reticence and perhaps a holding back on the part of the learners themselves. Why is this?

Well, it's quite likely to be connected to the preparation you put in to the design of the learning environment. So why do we need to pay attention to the learning environment? Surely, if it's warm, clean, the facilities work and it's not been double-booked, what's the problem?

Well, for one thing, we need to expand on this rather narrow definition of the 'learning environment'. It is much more than the physical surroundings, although the room or setting will certainly have a big impact on the quality of the learning experience that takes place there. The learning environment really begins the moment you publicise and promote the training session.

As Dave Meier puts it in The Accelerated Learning Handbook[1], *"Facilitators need to be sensitive to the negative suggestions that they may be putting into the environment and replace them with positive ones. The language of positive suggestion speaks to the whole person – conscious and paraconscious – and thus can have a profound effect on learning outcomes."*

The words you use to describe the event, how you 'sell' it to potential participants, the types of images and pictures you choose will all be contributing to the potential success or failure of your training event. And as a lot of this type of activity can be unconscious, we may well be revealing a great deal about our own pre-conditioning around learning, our inner self-talk around our abilities, our confidence and self-belief to deliver the event itself.

And it's not just our own pre-conditioning around learning that we need to become aware of. It's the early experiences of our participants, too. Our work as trainers means that we often need to address the barriers to learning that were created, however unintentionally, by educators years ago. Many of our participants may hold negative or ambivalent feelings about training as a result of their early challenging, and sometimes painful, experiences in school and the classroom.

To some degree, these feelings are likely to be stirred again through associations with learning, despite your best efforts to be warm, open and welcoming, and will affect the ability of the participant to engage fully with the learning process.

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[1] P. 61

Things that hinder the learning experience
Early negative experiences are not the only factor that can result in an unfulfilling learning encounter. Many people have fears about their ability to learn, to participate fully or competently, to speak in front of others, and about 'failing'. Although these are understandable and fairly common feelings and we can acknowledge them readily in our session delivery, we will need to address them in our publicity and promotional work too.

Here are a number of other factors that can seriously hinder your ability to deliver a successful learning encounter:

Negative suggestions
How we choose to describe the learning experience (both written and spoken) will arouse or deflate the participant. It's very easy to fall into the trap that downplaying the value of the training session you are about to deliver demonstrates your humility or modesty. It doesn't. Instead, your participants hear that you are devaluing the training content and will question the value of your session.

Uninspiring surroundings
Although it may sound obvious, a room that's dirty, dull and dusty will distract attention and sap the goodwill from the participants attending your session. Similarly, blank walls, poorly lit conditions and odd smells and noises will undermine your best endeavours. Check the condition of the room you'll be using / hiring in advance and establish minimum standards of preparation, cleanliness and tidiness.

Room layout and decoration
The physical surroundings represent an untapped resource that you can commandeer to aid your learning experience. It is an extra member of the 'training team', if you like. Take a critical look at the room and attempt to 'read' the signifiers embedded in the decoration, lighting, layout, colour schemes, facilities. Bear in mind the power of traditional learning environments (rows of tables and chairs, lecterns, blackboards / whiteboards etc.) to trigger early (and painful) memories of learning.

Presentation style
We're all now familiar with the trope, '*Death by Powerpoint*', where the authority of the trainer appears to be subordinated to the technological support of the equipment. Avoid the comfortable default of the powerpoint presentation as a technological 'figleaf'. It will not disguise a poorly designed or executed training session. Similarly, watch your NVCs (non-verbal communications) – eye contact, gesticulations, tone of voice, modulation and pitch, what you wear etc. As participants, we are extremely susceptible to these forms of body language and are likely to assess the quality of the learning experience perhaps as much by these messages as by the content of the session itself.

Didactic v Dialectical learning
In simple terms, this refers to the exchange of the learning in the training session and reveals the way you understand the essential nature of training and learning. If you believe that, as the trainer, you have all the information and you need to 'fill' the participants heads with your content then this is an (admittedly exaggerated) example of didactic learning. This style is also the most familiar to participants, as it was the dominant teaching style in our early lives.

The didactic approach therefore includes the danger that you may well trigger those early experiences in similar circumstances that were painful or humiliating. This is likely to result in switching off, disengagement or withdrawal from the learning experience. We'll take a look at dialectical approaches below.

If we are able to address these first six factors that hinder our ability to create a positive learning environment then we are well on the way to setting up the circumstances for a successful and rewarding training session. Let's turn our attention now to a set of factors that we know will help the learning experience.

Things that help the learning experience
As we explored earlier in the article, it's important to widen the focus of the 'learning experience' away from just the training room. The learning encounter actually begins the moment that it is promoted or advertised. And here is where you set up expectations and value judgements about your training session. These will have a big impact on the success or failure of your session. Consider the following helpful factors at all stages of your learning experience:

Positive suggestions
In your choice of words (both spoken and written) ensure that you create positive feelings about the learning experience. These will help to overcome early negative conditioning on the part of the participant towards learning and will open out the potential for positive outcomes. How you choose to describe what's going to take place will raise or lower expectations and impact powerfully on the potential success of the learning experience.

Clear, meaningful goals
Ask yourself what the participants will be able to do (or to be) as a result of your learning encounter and state these outcomes in clear, 'non-jargony' terms that the participant can feel inspired or aroused by. You don't have to use words to describe your goals – think about what the results of participating in your session would look like: smiles, arms raised, cheers, passing the winning line, clapping, taking a bow, shaking hands, backslapping, laughter? All these expressions can be quickly understood in cartoon, photographic or graphic form.

Positive physical environment
Take a fresh look at the physical environment in which the learning will take place. How can it aid the experience for you and the participants? As I mentioned in the previous section, enlist your surroundings into the 'training team' and set it to work - wring out every drop of value in the walls, floors and features available.
Anything that helps to move the appearance of the space away from a traditional classroom layout will help – alter table and seating arrangements, change colours, decorate with themes relevant to the session content, wallhangings, plants, toys and costumes – the list is practically endless! And remember that an in-house training environment may also be restrictive in other ways – reminding the participants through familiar colour schemes, smells, and company materials, that they are still at work and in work 'mode'. If you want your participants to be liberated from constraining modes of behaviour, or thinking, transform the training environment with unusual (but relevant) illustrations, prompts and props.

Multiple (dialectical) approaches

Whose responsibility is the learning? Right – the participants. Our responsibility is providing the means, the setting and the raw materials. The 'learning' takes place *via* the active engagement of the materials and the opportunities provided and *from* the subsequent creation of knowledge, skills and experience.

As John Warren put it most succinctly: "*The facilitator's role is to initiate the learning process and then get out of the way.*"[2] As trainers, we therefore owe it to our diverse range of participants to provide a variety of ways to encourage this active engagement, taking into consideration the fact that different people prefer to learn in different ways, require different forms of catalysts and triggers and presentation forms, have different sets of values and beliefs and learn at different speeds.

Ensure that the physical environment is flexible enough to embrace this diversity of approaches, is adaptive enough to allow you to use different presentational forms (flipchart, OHP, Powerpoint, whiteboard etc.) and allows the learner to become optimally involved in the learning encounter in the way that suits them best.

Arousing curiosity

Why do we need to do this? Surely people will either be interested or not? Isn't this just insecurity on our part about our ability to run a session well? Arousing curiosity is about encouraging the participant to tap into a child-like attitude that welcomes new experiences with an openness and fearlessness. These qualities help to prepare the participant to enter a learning-ready state and the momentum is already underway. The earlier we do this in the learning encounter, the more the momentum (to learn) gathers pace.

How do we arouse curiosity, particularly in adults? Ask participants to find out something new (and relevant to the session), different, unusual. Ask questions, pose problems, confound with new data that challenges currently-held views or beliefs. Above all, set up the learning encounter as an opportunity to grow, widen, deepen and enrich their life experiences and understanding of themselves.

So, this is a list of perhaps the most significant factors that can help (and hinder) a positive learning experience. Above all, they aim to widen our understanding of both the learning encounter and the skills we must bring to create the best possible experience for the participants and indeed ourselves.

As Eric Jensen has observed, "*An artfully designed and carefully planned positive-suggestive environment can do 25% of your teaching for you. Conversely, a poorly designed learning environment can significantly detract from the learning process.*"[3]

In other words, ignoring the impact of the learning environment on our ability to nurture a positive learning experience means that we may only ever be 75% effective, at best. How many of us would be happy with this when there's a full extra 25% to aim for?

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[2] From 'The Accelerated Learning Handbook', p.68
[3] Jensen E., 'Super Teaching', 4th Ed., Corwin Press, 2009.