



# All aboard

## Reluctant passengers on the training journey

ONE OF THE BEST THINGS ABOUT ATTENDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS FIGURING OUT WHICH WORKSHOP APPROACHES ARE EFFECTIVE, AND WHICH ONES AREN'T. AS MARC RATCLIFFE EXPLAINS, EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OR TRAINING IS ABOUT SKILLFUL TEACHING, BUT IT'S ALSO ABOUT THE CLEVER USE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES.

We teachers don't always make the best students. Just as doctors often make challenging patients and mechanics often drive cars in desperate need of a tune up, teachers as a group tend to be reluctant passengers on the training journey.

I remember being holed up on a student-free day in some professional development workshop on behaviour management, feeling curiously sedated while doing the umpteenth role-play with a presenter whose middle name may as well have been Ambien. The delivery was poor, the match for our needs was worse and, unfortunately

for all concerned, the disengagement was extreme.

So how do we create dynamic professional development (PD) training that gets the most out of participants and encourages them to get the best out of themselves? To prepare for this article, I contacted some old teacher buddies and asked them two simple questions: what turns you on and what turns you off when you're involved in PD or training? Overwhelmingly, my teacher buddies agreed that the training has to be relevant to and it has to honour their existing experience.

### Keeping it real – and relevant

The key to engaging participants with PD or training is finding the balance between attraction and distraction. Essentially, we want to attract teachers to our training, not distract them from it. One way to do this is to issue a 'Keeping it real' card to each participant in any PD training. The front of the card actually says 'Keeping it real.' The back of the card is for action points.

Explain to your group that the card serves two purposes. Firstly, you encourage them to write some action points during the workshop for implementation after the ses-

sion. This ensures that they take things from the workshop that they can apply straight away. Secondly, advise the participants in your PD or training that if you stray from relevance, they hold up the 'Keeping it real' card so that you can see it. This is surprisingly fun and keeps everyone on their toes, the participants and you. It also gives some control back to the participants and supports a certain buy-in to the workshop.

Attending PD or training is a bit like walking into a retail store. If a salesperson comes up to us too early, we'll raise our 'just looking' barrier. If they don't come soon enough, we get frustrated and lose interest. This is a lot like the classroom. Students will often seem like they're 'just looking' until they feel comfortable in the space and develop trust in the transaction. Equally, if they're not involved or engaged, that is, if they're not participating, they'll lose interest and we can't 'sell' our content.

Rather than beating the group into submission with a content-heavy introduction, followed by a dozen sedating slides outlining all that needs to be covered, use an ice-breaker activity to get the buy-in and trust you need.

### **Let's play games**

I often get asked, 'aren't games just a waste of time?' Well, my short answer is no! The long answer? The right games, used correctly with the right audience, will enhance the content and promote learning. Of course, if you open your copy of *101 Games that Trainers Play* then close your eyes and randomly pick an activity for the day, you're unlikely to get much of a bang for your buck. Teachers will spot a time-waster a mile away, so games for the sake of playing games is never a good idea. The key is selecting activities to complement or partner the material to assist your participants in making the necessary connections. In most situations, a carefully-selected game will help you to attract and maintain the interest of participants in your session. If they're not playing, they're straying. In using a game, or anything else for that matter, you need to identify the relationship between your content and the supporting activity. Games aren't the antithesis of content. They can help to challenge, reinforce, persuade, refocus and reassure participants. Remember, you

want to captivate your participants, not hold them captive.

If a century of mass schooling has taught us anything, it's that teachers like their structure, which is why a question-and-answer approach in a quiz-show style can be a fun way of revisiting material or checking for understanding. Similarly, checklist tasks can motivate your participants when they can see the relationship between the activity and the outcome.

I recently did an activity with a group of teachers on continuous improvement. I divided the group into teams of three or four and gave each team a packet of drinking straws. I told them that they had to build a structure using only the straws and this structure had to support the weight of a full 375ml can of soft drink. The instructions were basic, but each team busied themselves with the task, with varying success. After their first attempt, I asked them to review their design and make a list of improvements. Next, I gave them a checklist of the kind of things that should be included in a successful design and asked them to review their design again. Finally I gave them a copy

of an engineer-created design to benchmark their own design. This activity provided high involvement and engagement, and helped to illustrate the benefit of different review methods; namely, self-assessment, audit and benchmarking, all to do with the continuous improvement concept.

### **Use tactile learning tools**

For decades, students have been lambasted for fiddling and doodling in class. Often seen as a sign of distraction and inattention, these practices have been all but outlawed in many cases. When used correctly, however, they can actually be very powerful learning tools. Some learners actually need to keep something in motion throughout their interaction with your content and asking them not to do that is like asking them to stop breathing.

Place some tactile learning tools – toys, stress balls, puzzles, highlighters, interestingly-shaped items – out on the tables or in a basket out the front of the room and invite participants to take one. While they might be uncertain at first, the inquisitive types will get things moving. During the session, encourage the participants to try different ones or swap with others at their table. At the end of the session you may want to debrief by asking if they helped. Additionally, you could engage in a discussion around which ones worked better than others and why? There are many benefits to using tactile learning tools through your sessions. They can relieve stress, improve focus, create a sense of calm, and promote a creative and playful mindset. These sorts of tactile aids work across age and gender boundaries and often result in more collaborative behaviour.

### **Find the comfort zone**

It can be a challenge to find out what motivates different participants, but the best first step is to create a safe and supportive environment. It's important to realise that our participants need to find their comfort zone – to know there are boundaries in place so they feel safe – because if they feel

threatened they're not likely to engage or take risks.

Many teachers have been through ineffective mandatory PD or training in the past and they can be pretty sceptical about the presenter's agenda or guarded in their interactions. Besides making clear the boundaries for the session you're presenting, it's a good idea to acknowledge the experience in the room. A simple way of doing this is by counting up the combined years of teaching experience of your participants and stating something like, 'With 172 years of experience, we should be able to find the answers we're looking for.'

### **Deal with the dominator**

The dominator can be characterised as someone who drives conversations, is quick to answer questions presented to the group, provides additional information unprompted and speaks over others to get their message across. These kinds of self-starters or devil's advocates can be extremely useful in leading the participants during your PD or training, but this ought not to be to the detriment of your other participants.

One technique to give all participants their voice and to balance the interaction, is to invite the dominator to be a scribe on the board. The dynamic thus changes from being active in discussion to being active in writing, giving the others the opportunity to make a contribution, without competing with the dominator. The time out the front will also support the dominator's need for attention. At the end of the discussion or brainstorm, you could invite some final responses from the scribe, which gives them their chance to provide input.

### **Be a technology trailblazer**

In general, educators as a group are slow to adopt new technologies, perhaps because they conflict with the canonical or conventional approach, because they know they'll have to justify the cost, or because they think this 'latest fad' will pass. More and more teachers are, however, embracing new

technologies both personally and professionally, and building their personal learning network online. Our universities are also producing tech-savvy graduates eager to use information and communication technology in innovative ways and there's a wave of support for digital pedagogy from the Commonwealth government. With all that, our training might usefully incorporate technology.

One activity I use is what I call the Five Live Quiz. After first providing some content or 'class notes,' I divide the participants into smaller groups and give them a list of questions, but they have to use at least five different sources to find the answers, these being: class notes; phoning a friend – who can't be another participant; emailing a friend – who can't be another participant; using a smart phone to search online; and posting a question online via a blog, bulletin board or social media site.

To add some urgency and an element of fun, you can give a prize to the group that finishes first. This activity will show how quickly information can be obtained and how truly connected we all are.

Let's face it, participants in your PD or training session are more connected than they've ever been. Just as Blackberries transformed the boardroom, smart phones and other wifi-enabled devices will transform the classroom. Today, you have access to a whole reference collection from a single handheld device and can be updated at a fraction of the cost of traditional collections. Half a billion people access Facebook and MySpace – that's potentially 500,000,000 people you can ask a question.

We're not the gatekeepers of knowledge any more. We're the tour guides connecting people with the right experiences, helping them to navigate their way to the best destination.

Try new things, test applications, ask participants how they'd like to connect, consider multiple platforms of delivery, have the courage to extend yourself.

## Six quick tips for professional development or training

1: Your introduction should orient the audience to the context, purpose and direction of the session.

2: Slides should be easy to read and easy to navigate. Too many bells and whistles will detract from your content. Remember, you don't want to kill your participants (Micro)softly.

3: Encourage participants to jot down additional notes to promote reinforcement and to create an enduring resource for later reference.

4: Ask participants to highlight pertinent points on their handout – this helps to reinforce content and makes later reference easier.

5: Use relevant anecdotes and examples to reinforce points and make the content real.

6: A fun quiz at the end of the session helps to reinforce content and supports checking for understanding. **T**

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*MRWED was recently rated in eighth position as one of Australia's best places to work by the Great Places to Work*

*Institute and BRW magazine. It was also a state finalist in the 2008 Training Provider of the Year awards, a top 10 Queensland Training Provider in 2007 and 2008, and ranked as one of Queensland's Top 400 privately-owned businesses by Business Queensland Magazine for the third consecutive year.*

### LINKS

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