

Trainers Warehouse White Paper

“Seriously, my groups are too serious for this stuff”

While many trainers and teachers fully embrace the concepts of fun and interactive training to accelerate the learning process, some pass by our trade show booth or our catalog and lament, “I wish I could use your ‘toys,’ but I teach ___x___. They’re too serious for that.”

That “x” can be anyone from bankers to engineers, doctors to software developers. The comment is so prevalent, it’s got us wondering if new teaching theory is needed for these serious-type learners or, rather, if trainers need the language and the tools to “sell” the concept to these learners, while maintaining their credibility and professionalism.

As I write this article, I must confess my background and motives. First, as President of Trainer’s Warehouse, I have heard literally hundreds of testimonials about how using reinforcement games, fiddles, and other playful toys has created positive energy in the classroom, improved retention within the learning environment, and translated into greater productivity outside the classroom.

Second, prior to joining Trainer’s Warehouse, I worked as a high-priced trainer/consultant teaching negotiation skills to older and more experienced professionals in high-profile positions, at high-profile companies. As a young, petite female (who was also a former Ringling Bros. clown), I experienced the formidable challenge of gaining credibility, quickly, whether I was introducing a new concept or a playful exercise.

The approach I took to gain credibility for myself and buy-in on my teaching method used the same “Getting to Yes” negotiation framework (originally developed by Roger Fisher at the Harvard Negotiation Project) that I was teaching my classes. I believe these six quick lessons can help you, as they did me, in converting serious and skeptical students to active and laughing learners.

Lesson #1: Be transparent about your interests and theirs. Don’t wait until the end of the exercise to address their concerns and goals. Instead, lead your group into an activity by articulating both THEIR concerns and YOUR interests. You might say, for instance:

“I understand you’re a bit skeptical about my crazy games and toys. In fact, if you’re like others I’ve taught, here are some of the thoughts that might be in your head (read from the column of “Student Interests & Concerns”). Before I go on, do you have other thoughts you’d like to share with the class and me?”

| STUDENT'S INTERESTS & CONCERNS | TRAINER'S INTERESTS & CONCERNS |
|--|---|
| "This is a waste of time" | Need to prove success (behavior mod) to managers |
| I don't want to embarrass myself | Learning needs to be fun and silly to be successful |
| This is below me | I don't want to look stupid |
| I'm smart, just TELL me what I need to know and I'll remember it—I don't need stupid games | They're smart . . . I don't have ALL the answers, but I can help them share their learning. |
| I have other things to do | The organization has spent a lot just to get people into training—it has a purpose |
| I won't learn anything. This trainer has never done my job, what can she add? | When people experience emotion, the learning is memorable |
| | If all I do is lecture, nobody will remember anything |

Note: it's important to start with *their* perspective. Once they feel heard and understood, they'll be more likely to listen to an alternative perspective. At this point, go ahead and share your interests.

Lesson #2: Let the students feel some control and involvement in selecting the teaching method. I don't mean you need to design your training session on the spot, but have some confidence—chances are high that if you share the options with your group and invite them to suggest additional learning methods, they'll come up with the same things you did. But their participation in the process means they'll buy into your fun and creative teaching methods, without your having to "sell" them on it. To this end, you might say something like this:

"I've given a lot of thought to the format of the session, but think that input from a group like you could be extremely valuable. Let me share some of the components, then you can add to the list. Let's try to complete this step in brainstorming fashion (no criticism), and wait to take anything OFF the list until we move to a deciding step. By the way, this exercise will not take all morning. But I believe if we take five minutes to get a strong start, it will make the entire session more successful. Here are some options I've thought of:

- Lecture
- Role play
- Simulation games
- Q&A sessions
- Working in small groups

At this point invite the group to continue adding to the list . . .

- Senior employees help junior employees
- Junior employees help senior employees
- Use magic tricks
- Tell content-related jokes
- Play some music

If you get any eye rolling, simply remind the group that eye rolling is criticism.

Lesson #3: Use external standards or criteria to choose among the options. Don't let this be about what you say or they say. Rather, look for some "third party" help, some "blue book" standards, if you will. Feel free to share some of these data points with your group and invite them to supplement with their own experiences.

- Retention increases up to 800% if humor is used when presenting. Avner Ziv, Ph.D., "The Influence of Humorous Atmosphere on Divergent Thinking," *Contemporary Educational Psychology*.
- Students using lots of visuals did 12% better on short-term recall and 26% better on long-term retention. Dr. Owen Caskey of Texas Tech and David Meier; the year-long study on imagery in learning involved 264 students.
- Standing speeds up information processing 5-20% compared to sitting down. Research by: Dr. Max Vercreyssen of the University of Southern California. Cited by Eric Jensen, *Brain-Based Learning*, p. 150.
- Four-member teams rewarded based on the group's average scores performed significantly better than trainees rewarded on individual scores only. J.D. Hagman & J.F. Hayes, *Cooperative Learning: Effects of Task, Reward & Group size on Individual Achievement*, Unpublished technical report, U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, Alexandria, VA., 1985.
- Data shows that tasks which are interrupted mid-process are more memorable. Rich Allen, PhD, *Train Smart, Perfect Training Every Time*, p. 13.
- Each of us might be a different type of learner. Some are Visual (they need to see something to remember it). Some are Auditory (they need to hear something to remember it). Some are Physical (they need to do it to learn it). And, some are Kinesthetic (doing something with their hands helps them to remember).
- Data shows that the presence of "happy chemicals" in the brain, like Serotonin, stimulates memory. Serotonin is naturally produced in response to music, laughter, and physical activity.
- 60% of what is presented in training is forgotten if it's not used immediately. 75% is lost with six months, and 85% within one year of training. *Transfer of Training*, by Broad and Newstrom (1992).

Lesson #4: Together, choose among the options. Given the brainstorm of options and data shared, ask the group which learning formats they most want to try out. When polling the group, mark down their responses so they feel heard. Let them know that you'll try to adjust your session accordingly.

Lesson #5: Communicate about the training PROCESS. While most of your training time will be taken up in talking about the CONTENT that you're teaching, it's always okay to take a break and explain the PROCESS. By "process" I mean:

- The method by which you're teaching
- The pace at which you're teaching
- Topics that will be covered next
- Questions that remain unanswered
- Agenda for the remainder of the session

Lesson #6: Build a relationship with your learners. Relationships are built on mutual respect. Remind them that you, too, have lots to learn. Invite them to share their knowledge with you (respectfully and appropriately) and to approach you at a break with important feedback, questions or comments.

Whether you're teaching doctors, accountants, engineers, software developers, scientists, bankers, or financial analysts, remind yourself of the old cliché, "everybody's different." No two individuals and no two learners are alike—each has a different familiarity with your topic, sense of humor, ability to communicate, etc.. Don't make too many assumptions about your class without checking in with them. You might surprise each other!

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