The Effective Lesson, Part II: Pulling together those Learning Activities

As second in a three part series, this *Tips* is dedicated to looking at the body of a lesson—how do you really put together learning activities to make an effective learning environment? Like a strong paper, an effective lesson has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning is the opening; this was discussed in Tips 16.1. The end is called closure---and you guessed it---we will discuss that next month. This month's edition is focused on the learning activities in the middle, or the body, of the lesson.

Chunking

As an instructor or a developer of training, it is important to remember how a person learns. We cannot internalize materials (a.k.a. LEARN) without having the opportunity to transfer the information from short-term into long-term memory. Even the most attentive and reflective of us cannot attend to information for more than 15-18 minutes at a time. This neuroscience dictates the need to **chunk** information into segments with an opportunity between each segment for the learners to do something with the material.

Chunking is a concept that is important to remember when developing or teaching a lesson. If information is continually pushed at the learner, then there is no opportunity to do something with the information ultimately meaning that though the instructor is *covering* the information, there isn't any meaningful *learning* taking place.

And though the best of us can attend to pushed information for a top limit of 18 minutes or so, it is probably best to go for a mid-range attention span of 13-15 minutes in a chunk.

The Learning Activity

Ultimately, if one thinks of a lesson as a string of learning activities, there is a good chance that the lesson is designed with the learner and learning in mind. A learning activity is simply that---an activity that promotes learning. The opening of your lesson is essentially your first learning activity—a hook to catch your learners' attention and suggest relevance or authenticity in what they are about to learn. Once you have accomplished this opening, your lesson should be a series of sequenced activities designed to move your learners

towards the ultimate objectives of the course. A *series* of activities indicates that there is more than one---and there should be. Let's say the instructor is using a PPT presentation as a learning activity. Within this chunk of instruction, there may be some discussion or a question or two, but ultimately, the instructor is pushing information to the learner. This activity should not exceed 15 minutes---this chunk should be followed by another learning activity. Maybe learners will be asked to write a quick reflection on what they just heard and how it connects to what they already know or to a mission they have seen. This reflection is a second learning activity, and though it may only take 3 minutes, it is a suitable activity for "doing something" with information to allow for a transfer to long-term memory. Of course, this transfer will be stronger and more probable if there are multiple opportunities to use information and skills. Additionally, remember the idea of PULLING information from learners exist as well, and with the adult learner, this is a very effective strategy for ensuring that learning takes place.

Strategies to try

Learning activities can run the gamut from passive to active, instructor-directed to learner-centric. There is no "best way" to teach, as there is no "one way" to learn. It is most effective to use a variety of strategies within a lesson. Here are some two strategies to try.

- Graphic Organizers: Use matrixes, flow charts, connectors or other model-like means to organize learners' thoughts. Use these as a means of guiding notes that learners take from an instructor-led activity (a brief or even a PPT presentation), or in having learners pull information out of doctrine or other written texts.

- Quick Writes or Partner Shares: Design stopping points in your lessons to allow learners to process information. Writing a quick reflection, or discussing main ideas or themes of what they have learned are good ways to have learners begin to develop their own thoughts on what they are learning.
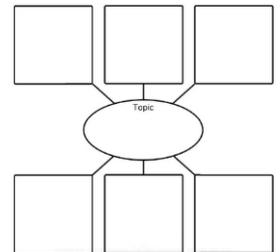
A word of caution

Having learners totally immersed in their own learning would be the ideal for most instructional situations. However, if learners are left to their own without feedback or instructional guidance, there may be a lot of activity, but very little learning taking place. For example, if students are placed in a scenario, and are left on their own to navigate their way, they may have a very successful outcome without having the first idea as to why they succeeded. Being too "hands-off" in a learning activity can be just as detrimental as being too prescriptive.

Keep all this in mind, and next month, we will discuss the importance of closing a lesson. As always, if you would like to further this discussion, the ESC stands by to assist.