The transfer of knowledge in a training environment often focuses on the 'push' of that knowledge. For example, how can we design training in a way which is easy for participants to absorb, or is delivered in a method which they find suitable? As instructional designers, we can spend considerable time on training interactions, activities or content to hopefully boost participant engagement. Microlearning and mobile learning are just two of the latest examples in this push-based approach to training design.

There's nothing wrong with this approach either! However, every force has an equal and opposite reaction. Indeed, when the transfer of knowledge is focused on behavioural change – apply new skills, stop old habits, implement different processes – the push of knowledge alone may not be enough.

This is particularly true for adult participants. Changing behaviours as an adult may be associated with uncomfortable feelings – admitting deficiencies with existing performance, acknowledging that someone else may have a better solution, or experiencing discomfort from initial failures with new skills. As a result, as we try to push learning and knowledge onto participant, they may well be pushing back against us!

So, in addition to considering how to push learning, we should give equal thought to helping the participant 'pull' the learning. We need participants working with, not against, the transfer of knowledge at a fundamental level. As we push, the participant pulls.

In this series of articles, we examine three concepts to improve this participant-driven (pull) transfer of knowledge in any form of training.

- Relevance
- Context (this article)
- Accountability

Let's examine training context in the second of three articles in this series.

Training context gives you the ending

Many training courses provide participants with, or ask participants to set, learning outcomes ('In this module, you will learn…'). However, the goal of training involving behavioural change is not merely to learn. It is to change. The context of what you will learn is good – the context of how you are expected to change is better. Giving context to expected change helps learners self-direct their pathway to that change.

Yet many organisations do not clarify expected outcomes or behavioural change before a training event. For example, participants attending a sales training workshop are often given one expectation – attend the training. In a best-case scenario, they might be asked to do some pre-reading, prepare some items or think about some learning goals. As a result, when they attend the training, these participants are 'responsive'. They respond to knowledge which is pushed towards them.

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Training context makes learners active

Let's say each participant instead had a meeting with their manager before the training to agree on two specific sales skills that participant would need to demonstrate improvement in after the training. They also agree on how that change will be measured – improvement in a sales metric or an observable behaviour, for example.

Now those participants are 'active' in the training process. They actively drive training activities, discussions and choices towards their specific requirements. They pull the training in directions which matter to them because they have the context of the outcomes they are expected to obtain.

Training context case study

This fact was highlighted in training exercise for 450 participants completed in March to August 2018 for a large Australian financial service company. The experience consisted of three participant modules and one matching Manager's module. The Manager's module educated managers on how to define desired outcomes, changes and behaviours with their staff. 65% of managers completed that module, with their staff training reporting an 89% success rate in with on-the-job activities associated with the training. For the staff whose managers did not complete the Manager's module, and therefore failed to receive information on the required context, the success rate for on-the-job activities was 48%.

When you have agreed on a destination to get to, you tend to map out a path to get there.

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