

## Nothing New, But . . . ?

Asked by my dear friend (and fellow Alaska Native *cousin*, Tom Lidot ☺) to provide training tips to fellow trainers my first thought was – "Oh no!" Deep breaths later because I'd said "Yes" to my friend my second thought was, "What wisdom do I have for people doing the same thing I've been doing that's worth their time to read?" After all, arguably one of the wisest men to have ever lived long ago noted, ". . . there is nothing new under the sun." (King Solomon, Ecclesiastes 1:9b.) Thinking about it I realized our culture often puts too much emphasis on being *original*. As in, we're pressured into coming up with something *new*. We don't. In fact, my best training techniques are ones I've read or seen and *borrowed* from others. What follows is nothing new; but there are some things worth borrowing.

### **1) Leave your ego at the door. This is not about you.**

Your learners do NOT care about how much you know, how smart you are, or what you've done. Aside from a baseline level of credibility, it's far more important that you care about how smart THEY are, what THEY know (and will know, thanks to this learning experience) and what THEY have done.

At the beginning of class, you do NOT need to establish credibility. You have a certain amount of credibility in the bank by the fact you're in front of the class. You can LOSE that credibility by doing things like lying (answering a question that you really aren't certain about, without admitting that you're not sure), or telling them you really DON'T know what you're doing. **But you'll usually hurt the class if you spend time talking about how great YOU are.**

The best way to let them know what you've done is in the context of a question someone later one asks, where you simply say, "Well here's how I solved that ..." or "here's how I handled that when ..." But even better if you say something like, "Well here's how one of my clients/students/co-workers solved it..."

## **2) Keep lecture to the absolute minimum.**

There is nearly (but not always) something *better* than lecture, if learning is the goal. If your class involves a combination of lecture and activities, then if you're short on time--always cut the *lecture*, not the exercises! (Unfortunately, this is the opposite of what most trainers do.)

## **3) For classroom trainers, the greatest challenge you have is managing multiple skill and knowledge levels in the same classroom! Be prepared to deal with it.**

The worst thing you can do is simply pick a specific (and usually narrow) skill/knowledge level and teach to that, ignoring the unique needs of those who are slower or more advanced. Even among those who meet the formal prereq requirements, you can have drastically different levels. *Especially* if the teacher who delivered those prereq courses was in the "covering the material" mode. Sure, your students may have been "exposed" to the prereq material, but just because they heard it or read it does not mean they remember it now, or that they ever really "got it."

Techniques for dealing with multiple levels:

\* Be sure you **KNOW** what you've got. Find out before the class, if you can, by speaking with the students or at least exchanging emails. If you don't have access to students prior to the class, then learn as much as you can during introductions!

\* Acknowledge the different levels right up front. The more advanced students are far more likely to get ticked when they think you don't *realize* or appreciate their level. By acknowledging it, you recognize their abilities and set the stage for having them act as mentors to the others.

## **4) Do group exercises whenever possible, no matter what you've heard.**

I've heard every excuse, "Adults don't like to do group exercises." or "Professional developers don't like to do group exercises." or "People don't like to do group exercises when they're paying big bucks to be here." They're all bulls\*\*\*. There is a huge social component to learning, regardless of how much we try to eliminate it in the classroom. There's a way to do interactive group exercises that works surprisingly well, and is usually quite easy.

### **A simple formula for group exercises**

\* Use groups of no more than 3 to 5. Try to go above 2, but after 5 you'll end up with some people hanging back. With 3-4 people, everyone feels more obligated to participate and be involved.

\* When you assign an exercise (for example, a two-page background on a family they are theoretically going to assist), have each person **START** by working individually for a couple of minutes, **THEN** get them into their groups (be sure that they know who their group is **BEFORE** they start any work on the exercise).

\* Eavesdrop on the groups and comment or just make sure they're on the right track. Drop hints or give pointers if they're veering into an unproductive approach. **But never give them the answers.**

\* After a certain number of minutes, give a heads-up warning "60 seconds left..." so they can finish up.

\* Be certain that someone in each group has the responsibility to record what the group comes up with. One person should be the designated spokesperson.

\* After the exercise is done, keep the people in their groups and query each group about their answers, or any issues/thoughts they had while doing it.

Note: the first few times you do this in any new classroom, students might be quiet or skeptical about doing it, but after the first two or three, they'll have a hard time imagining how you could do it any other way.