

THE HUMAN SIDE

Rekindling the Spirit of Learning

Make a joyful noise.

By Chip R. Bell

Amen. That word was poignantly spoken from a participant near the back of the training room. It was followed by an awkward silence, sideways glances from other participants, and a muffled apology from the overly enthusiastic one.

That one-word pronouncement preached an entire sermon. But it wasn't a religious or other outburst

from a problem participant; it was an expression of passion. Someone in the middle of learning got excited with a new discovery—and proclaimed it to everyone.

Such qualities as spirit, charisma, passion, and evangelism have taken a backseat to metric-driven, result-oriented, criterion-referenced learning. We want our participants to be in-

structed, not necessarily inspired; educated, but maybe not captivated. We like enthusiasm as long as it stays in the proper bounds of rational classroom decorum. And if a trainer moves participants to tears, makes them giggle or shout “Amen!” that trainer is labeled an *edutainer* rather than a serious, card-carrying change agent.

The late Malcolm Knowles, father of adult learning, was fond of saying that the greatest gift a trainer could give his or her students was love of learning. “Your primary goal is not to help people learn,” he’d say to colleagues, “your goal is to help people fall in love with learning.”

That was Knowles’s way of telling trainers to get their participants to shout out when a new insight or discovery excites them. Learning is temporary; learning to learn is permanent. And the first principle of learning to learn is a passion for finding out what’s not known.

Call for Stories

Are you or do you know a trainer who not only cares about delivering effective training, but also wants to inspire participants and truly cares about them?

As a participant, has a training session ever motivated you, not just taught you new skills or knowledge? Or ever dramatically improved relationships with your colleagues? Or led you to make marked changes in how you feel about or approach your work?

*If any learning experience has enhanced your personal or professional life, please share your story with us. Send stories to Josephine Rossi, associate editor, **Human Side**, T+D, 1640 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043 or email jrossi@astd.org.*

When I was a training director for a large bank, I had all of the instructors in the department attend worship services at an African American gospel church. I gave them a list of specific things to watch: style, timing, body language, rapport, use of metaphor, drama, personalization—all tools for fostering inspiration, if not religious conversion. The goal was to learn techniques that the minister used to communicate, in a manner that both taught and inspired. I didn’t want to turn trainers into preachers or diminish their facilitation skills. I wanted them to learn the role that spirit and cause have in enhancing the learning experience.

They left the church with new ideas for making their classes a magical experience, not just a stoic passage of information from brain to brain. As one trainer said, “I never realized my job was to manage the *spirit* of learning.”

Our next field trip was to a theater to witness a dramatic play that took the audience’s emotions on an extreme roller coaster ride. Several of my trainers volunteered to read stories to children in a hospital. One learned magic tricks to incorporate into her classroom.

Before long, their corporate classrooms contained props, costumes, and surprise guest appearances. They paid attention to the ambience they created with all types of sensory stimulations. They began decorating their classrooms with the fervor of a new first-grade teacher. One trainer attended a workshop on storytelling and returned to share his learning with his fellow trainers. The once taboo “smiley sheets” returned alongside more quantitative evaluation devices. Trainers now cared about how participants *felt*, not just the relevance of what they learned.

What were the results of the trainers’ departure from instruction-only teaching? No miracles happened, but enthusiasm increased dramatically. Participants

who were unexpectedly pulled out of class expressed regret rather than relief. Some stayed around the classroom during breaks and afterwards to talk, rather than rushing to check phone messages. Discussions were livelier, questions sharper, emotions more pronounced.

There were other changes. Participants were more open about their concerns, more authentic about their inadequacies, and more supportive of other classmates. The sense of “learning as a community” spread to the workplace, reinforcing the classroom experience.

Learning should be a joyful event. The best trainers care about what happens inside the learner, not just the PowerPoint slides. They recognize the force of drama and communication magic in creating experiences that produce zeal, not just wisdom. A trainer’s role should be to set a magical stage, manage the total experience, and then choreograph the show to allow joy to surface. And if that joy occasionally spills out as a loud “Amen!” view it as a welcome sign that valuable learning has begun.

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