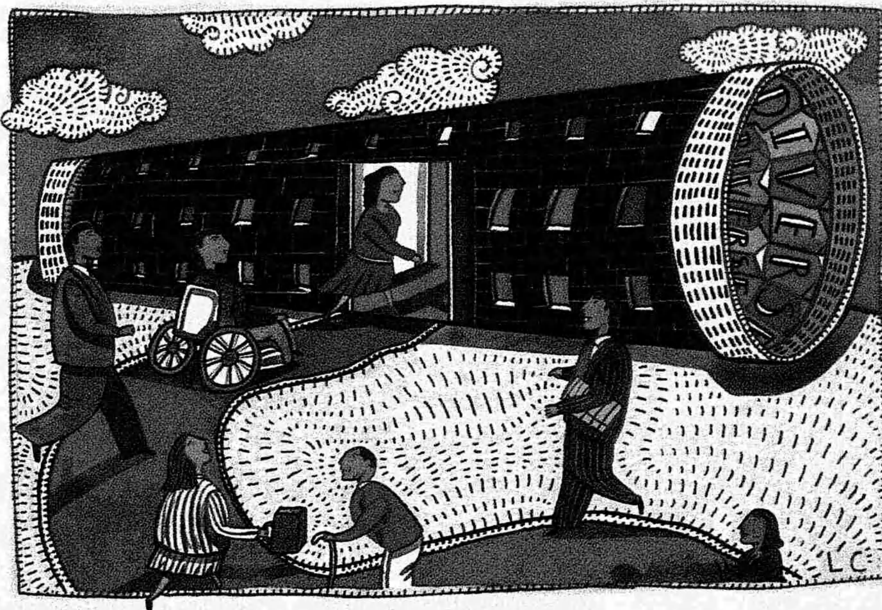
Training 101

Training in the Kaleidoscope

What are the implications of workforce diversity for training and development?

In the first article below, Robert Ingram follows a training and development manager as she tours the headquarters of a large multinational company and learns about diversity firsthand.

But workforce diversity isn't just about race, gender, and physical ability. It can also apply to differences in aptitudes, outlooks, backgrounds, and learning styles. Marda Steffey's article, beginning on page 22, focuses on the training room as a setting for all kinds of differences. Steffey presents 10 tips for uncovering the abilities of diverse participants and incorporating them into the learning experience.



Leslie Cober

A kaleidoscopic workforce presents special challenges, but such diversity also adds life and variety to organizations.

Anna and the Kaleidoscope

"Welcome," said Dave as he greeted Anna at the door. "Thank you," replied Anna. "It's good to be here." But the reply was mostly perfunctory. Anna was not convinced that she was glad to be at the headquarters of XYZ, a California-based multinational electronics firm.

The corporation had just bought the small East Coast software company at which Anna was training and development manager. This was Anna's first trip to XYZ headquarters, and she had some doubts about her new employer. Already she could sense that there was something very different about this place.

The large electronic doors at the front entrance had slid open as she approached them, making it easy to pass through—not only for Anna, but also for the young woman behind her, who was in a wheelchair. Inside, the place was abuzz with activity. People of all types—men, women, younger people, older people, people of color, and people with disabilities—were coming and going, many speaking different languages and different dialects of English.

"Our Differences Make Us Strong," proclaimed a poster behind the receptionist's desk.

It was differences that had brought Anna to the new parent company. Dave, XYZ's director of education, had told her that diversity was a high priority at XYZ; Anna was visiting the company to learn firsthand just what he meant and what it would mean for her as a training and development specialist.

Checking our cultural baggage. "This is one of our classrooms," said Dave, as he came to the first stop on Anna's tour of the headquarters. "This particular class is on cross-cultural communications. It's for a group of American engineers who are going overseas on foreign assignments."

Slipping into the back of the room,

Dave and Anna listened as the instructor, Keesha, continued her presentation.

"People often carry with them certain attitudes when they go on overseas assignments," Keesha was saying. "'Cultural baggage,' we call it. This excess baggage can weigh down the traveler and make it difficult for him or her to complete an assignment successfully. Many of these unproductive attitudes are typified by what I call 'Famous Last Words Overseas.'"

Keesha turned on an overhead projector to display a slide. "Those darn foreigners! Can't they do anything right?" read the text.

"The point to remember here," Keesha said, "is that when you go overseas on an assignment, the people in that country are not the foreigners—you are. You have to learn to do things the way they do them. You have to become sensitive to their culture.

"It is important to remember that there can be many right ways of doing something. Just because people do things differently does not mean that they are doing them wrong. To get the most out of your overseas assignment, be willing to suspend judgments and risk doing things a different way for a change.

"Although we are headquartered in the United States, we cannot afford to think of XYZ simply as an American company. We are a global company, and we have to think and act like a global company. That means recognizing and valuing differences in the way people conduct business.

"For example, in the United States, meetings are held for the purpose of sharing information or arriving at decisions. In Asia, meetings are ceremonies held to ratify or celebrate decisions that have already been made through networking outside of the meeting. When Americans come away from meetings with Asians, they are often frustrated that no decision was reached. Asians come away from the same meetings wondering why the Americans did not line up all their ducks before they got to the meeting. To be successful, both sides need to learn how the other perceives the meeting and its purpose."

"But I'm only going to be overseas a few months," contested one of the class participants. "I just want to get my job done and come home."

"Funny you should say that," replied Keesha, as she slipped another transparency on the projector, revealing words almost identical to the ones the class member had just spoken.

"That attitude is very common in the United States, especially among engineers and other technical people," said Keesha, "because they are so task-oriented. They want to get over there; fix the equipment, set up the manufacturing process, or do whatever else they have to do; and then come home.

"But the establishment of a working relationship between people in different facilities can be just as important as—or, in the long run, more important than—the accomplishment of a specific short-term business or technical task."

Keesha moved to the next set of famous last words. "Just get to the point!" screamed the text on the screen.

"Westerners in general value truth," Keesha elaborated. "I don't mean to say that all Americans are always truthful, but U.S. residents of European descent do tend to believe that there are right answers to every question and that the goal of society in general and science in particular is to uncover that truth.

"Many people, though—Asians and Native Americans in particular—tend to believe that truth is relative, that there are no absolute right or wrong answers, and that deriving solutions that maintain harmonious relationships is more important than finding a single right answer.

"We see these different philosophies reflected in different communication styles. Westerners tend to envy the businessman or woman who can stand up in front of a group of peers; say exactly what he or she wants us to do; construct a logical argument, supported by ample facts; reiterate the main point; and make a final call for action.

"Most Asians are not as accustomed to standing up in front of their peers. They prefer to act as a team. An Asian would not express a point overtly, because to do so would be to insinuate that the listener is not astute enough to grasp the point without extra help.

"Consequently, an Asian might begin a presentation by apologizing to audience members for wasting their time (thus showing deference to the senior members of the group and demonstrating that the speaker does not want to be singled out). He or she might then present a lengthy background report, never really stating the thesis of the presentation.

"Finally, there would probably be no specific or overt call to action—only a mere suggestion of what might be done. That way, if anyone in the group should happen to disagree with the proposal, it would be easy to modify it without embarrassing anyone."

Differing perspectives. Keesha paused, and Anna and Dave slipped out of the classroom. "Do all of your people going overseas take that class?" Anna asked him.

"We strongly encourage them to take this general class and a class on the culture of the specific country where they will be going," replied Dave, ushering her on down the hallway. "We also offer language training, in many cases."

"Do you provide the same opportunities for foreign employees who come to the United States?" asked Anna.

"Yes," said Dave. "We have cross-cultural communication and English-language classes in many of our overseas locations, as well as here in the States. In fact, right next door we have a class of Japanese expatriates who are studying English as part of their eight-month rotational assignment here. They've all had English in high school and college, but they

never really learned conversational skills. That's what they're getting now—along with some additional cultural training."

"Why put so much emphasis on the cultural training?" asked Anna. "Isn't it enough that they learn to speak English?"

"Not really," replied Dave. "Let me give you an example. A few years ago we had a group of Japanese engineers who came here for two weeks of technical training. They sat through the class, and everything seemed to go well. The instructor thought they were getting the material. But when they got back to Japan, their manager called us to ask what they had been doing for those two weeks. It seemed that they had not learned the material they had been sent over to learn.

"At first, we thought they had simply not understood the instructor's English. But when we looked deeper we found out that the problem was not a lack of English, but a different perspective on the roles of trainers and trainees.

"When those engineers were over here, they did not ask questions, so the American instructor assumed that they understood the material. But they did not. In school, Japanese students are taught that to interrupt their teachers and ask questions is impolite; it's seen as a sign of disrespect. Asking an instructor to repeat or clarify the material implies that the teacher has not done an adequate job of covering it.

"Now that we've learned about that cultural viewpoint, we not only work with the Japanese expatriates on their English skills, but we also teach them what is expected of trainees in an American classroom. We teach them how to interrupt the instructor and how to ask for clarification and assistance."

A multicultural community. "This is one of our videoconference rooms," Dave said a few minutes later. "What you see is a meeting of one of XYZ's American marketing teams and its counterpart in Hamburg, Germany."

Inside the room, people sat around a table and spoke toward television monitors.

"The implications of doing business globally are profound," Dave continued, "not only for the ways U.S. companies do business in Europe, but for the ways we in the United States do business right here—with people from all over the globe.

"For example, last month there was a videoconference between some of our people here and some of our people down in Venezuela. The Americans proceeded to get right down to business. But the Venezuelans wanted to know first how the weather was in California, whether any of the Americans had been to Venezuela, and how their families were. When one of the Americans commented on how late in the day it must be for the Venezuelans, because of the time difference, one of the Venezuelans responded that they were used to working late.

"To the results-oriented Americans, these preliminaries were unnecessary and a waste of valuable time and money. But it was crucial to the process-oriented Venezuelans to establish a personal relationship before proceeding with the rest of the business.

"The point is that cross-cultural communication is no longer an issue just for people who travel overseas. Technology has turned our planet into a global village. Whether we like it or not, we live in a multicultural community. To be successful in that community, we must learn how to get along with and communicate effectively with our multicultural neighbors, whether they talk with us across the garden fence or across the television screen."

Dave and Anna continued down the hallway and crossed a plaza before coming to the manufacturing floor, where workers were busily assembling circuit boards.

"Don't worry, Mei-ling," said a voice from behind a partition. "Everything will be OK."

The voice belonged to Maria, the manufacturing manager, who exited her cubicle just as Dave and Anna turned the corner. Dave asked Maria to share with Anna some of her own experiences with XYZ's diverse workforce.

"Sure," responded Maria. "In fact, I was just dealing with one of those issues with Mei-ling."

Dave and Anna helped themselves to some herbal tea and sat down at a nearby table as Maria told her story.

"One of the guys on the line, Ahmad, gave Mei-ling a present. Because of her cultural background, Mei-ling felt that she had to accept the present; it would have been an insult to Ahmad not to. But to Ahmad, the present represented his personal interest in her; her acceptance of the gift confirmed her interest in him."

"What did you do?" asked Anna.

"These kinds of things come up all the time," replied Maria. "I approach them on a case-by-case basis. First, I listen; then, I try to explain each person's point of view so that everyone sees the situation as a misinterpretation, not as an attempt to hurt or embarrass anyone. Of course, if the situation continues or gets worse, it may become a matter of harassment and will have to be dealt with as such. But we begin by pointing out how each person interpreted the situation differently, based on his or her own cultural background."

"You said that cross-cultural conflicts happen all the time," said Anna. "Can you give me another example?"

"Sometimes, at our staff meetings," Maria began, "we award certificates to employees who have demonstrated exemplary work. One month we gave a certificate to Loretta, who is Chickasaw, and she felt uncomfortable being acknowledged in public. When I asked around, I found that many of our Asian and African employees felt the same way."

"Did you stop giving the awards?" Anna asked.

"No. But we did change our approach. Now, when employees are scheduled to be recognized, we

tell them beforehand and give them the option of being acknowledged in public or not.

"It doesn't take that much more effort to acknowledge and accommodate people's differences," Maria concluded. "And the payback is well worth the effort."

The kaleidoscope. A few minutes later, Anna and Dave sat in the office of Raj, XYZ's affirmative-action manager. "So, what have you discovered about our operation?" Raj asked Anna.

"You've got a real melting pot here," she said.

"I don't know that I would call it a melting pot," Raj said. "That's a term we used in the old equal-opportunity days. Today we prefer to think of our workforce as a kaleidoscope."

"What do you mean?" asked Anna.

Raj handed his visitor a long, brightly-colored cardboard cylinder. "Look through this hole," Raj instructed, "and tell me what you see."

"I see pretty patterns," said Anna, "in many colors and textures."

"Right," Raj confirmed. "Now, what would happen if we took all those patterns and melted them down?"

"All the colors would run together," replied Anna, "and the patterns would lose their distinctive shapes and textures."

"Exactly," said Raj. "And that would not be as interesting. Diversity in the kaleidoscope is what makes it appealing; it's also what makes it work. Hold the kaleidoscope up to the light again. Now turn the attachment on the end of it. What do you see now?"

"The patterns and colors are changing."

"Bingo!" Raj exclaimed. "The world is changing. America's workforce is changing. Our customers are changing. If we want to remain competitive, we have to change with them.

"By the year 2000, only 15 percent of the net increase in the workforce will be white males. The rest will be women, minorities, and immigrants. We are seeing much larger numbers of people with disabilities in the workforce too, and we can expect that percentage to increase as the Americans With Disabilities Act takes hold. Also, the average age of our workforce is rising.

"Whether we like it or not, the U.S. population is getting more and more diverse. Personally, I like it. I believe that diversity strengthens us."

"Back up a minute," interrupted Anna. "You referred to 'the old days of equal opportunity.' Don't we still have equal-opportunity policies?"

"Of course we do," Raj assured her. "But equal opportunity merely recognizes the right of everyone to compete for jobs. We realized long ago that equal opportunity is not enough to correct the years of discrimination that used to hold many people back. That's why affirmative action was developed. Affirmative action says that we cannot just open our doors to women, minorities, and people with disabilities. We have to go out and find them and work with

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them to make sure that they are ready for the jobs we have to offer.

"But affirmative action has its limits, too," Raj continued. "It has brought more women, minorities, and people with disabilities into the workforce, but many of them found after a few years that they could not get beyond entry-level positions or first-level management positions. They ran into what has come to be known as the glass ceiling.

"They also got tired of feeling pressured to conform to the white male norms. They couldn't understand why they had to give up their own ethnic, gender, or individual identities to be successful in corporate America. Many people want to be treated according to their own, unique styles—and in many cases those styles have a lot to do with their race, gender, age, or physical condition."

"Are you saying that able-bodied white males are the problem?" asked Anna.

"I'm saying that assimilation is the problem," Raj said. "I believe very strongly in affirmative action. It has been an important tool in bringing diversity into our workplace. But I also recognize that in the minds of some people—white and otherwise—affirmative action has come to connote division among people. Rightly or wrongly, it has been seen by some as favoring women and minorities over white males. That perception has led to some resentment.

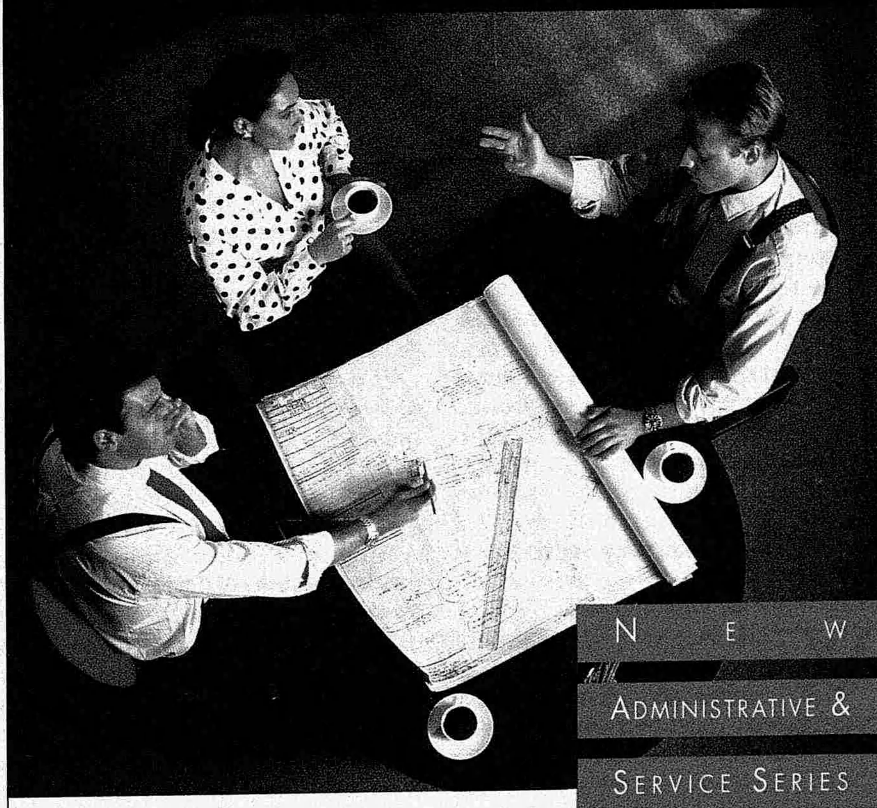
"It's time for us to recognize that we need all kinds of people in our workforce. That includes white males as well as women and people of color. Affirmative action focused on bringing women, minorities, and people with disabilities into the workforce. Diversity focuses on empowering people of all kinds to develop and contribute their own unique talents to solving our business problems."

Lessons learned. A half-hour later, Dave escorted Anna back toward the front entrance of XYZ headquarters. "What have you learned from this little visit?" he asked.

"I can see that diversity has significant implications for what we do as trainers and organization development specialists," Anna replied. "Diversity seems to be about several things. It is about communication. We will need to provide more language training as well as cross-cultural communication training—and even training on the use of new technologies such as videoconferencing.

"Diversity is about recognizing, valuing, and managing people's differences. We're asking people to behave differently; Managers may look to us for guidance on how to do that without discriminating against anyone. They'll probably need help with cross-cultural negotiating and conflict resolution, too.

"Diversity is about change. It is both a result of change and a cause of change. Most people have trouble coping with change; they may need



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extra help on managing the changes associated with diversity.

"Finally, diversity seems to be about power—the sharing of power among diverse groups of people, and the generation of power from the synergy of diverse ways of thinking and acting."

"You seem to have learned a lot," Dave said. "I can see that you are going to bring a great deal of insight to XYZ's training and development efforts."

"I think the first thing I need to do is to work on my own cross-cultural skills," Anna admitted. "I don't know if I'll ever get rid of all my own cultural baggage, but at least I can become more conscious of it so that it doesn't get in the way of my being an effective business partner."

As Dave walked back to his office, Anna turned to the receptionist's desk and read again the words on the poster behind it: "Our Differences Make Us Strong."

She felt stronger already.

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Managing Diversity in the Classroom

Workplace diversity is one of the most challenging, frustrating, and exciting aspects of American business. A microcosm of that diversity exists in the training room. As trainers, we encounter many types of diversity:

- different knowledge levels
- desires for varying amounts of detail
- different levels of commitment
- conflicting agendas
- different levels of responsibility and influence in the organization
- different thinking patterns
- preferences for different styles of learning
- different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

Many problems with diversity can be avoided with thoughtful planning. Others require an instructor who can be flexible and resourceful during a presentation, knowing how to adapt and respond to classroom conditions as they arise.

When a trainer prepares rigorously and shows unflagging respect for participants, classroom diversity enriches the environment. Training becomes more rewarding for the trainer, the participants, and the organization.

Prepare yourself and your materials. When a trainer enters the classroom, he or she should, of course, know thoroughly the training materials, the learning objectives, and the course outline or agenda. That goes doubly when the participants are a heterogeneous group.

With diverse groups, participants' questions tend to veer off in different directions. The trainer must have a clear vision of his or her itinerary to keep the discussion on track. To help crystallize the direction for the participants as well, it's a good idea to post the objectives and keep a course outline or agenda on a separate visual that all participants can see from their seats.

If a group is diverse in the levels of background knowledge that members bring to it, then the trainer will have to work extra hard to ensure that all trainees are catching on but that the class remains on schedule.

Diverse groups tend to require more comprehensive participant guides and reference materials than do homogeneous groups. Many learners find that they grasp more of the training content when they review written materials at their own paces between classes or during breaks. Many slower learners and learners with language barriers—those who know they are at a linguistic, cultural, or other disadvantage—are motivated to study the written materials more carefully than are some of their classmates.

The instructor can make use of that extra motivation with a brief review of earlier modules—perhaps as a game or puzzle—at the beginning of each new training session. This reinforces the learning that has already occurred, fosters a sense of accomplishment among participants, and provides an opportunity to clarify lingering questions or misunderstandings.

Training information, job aids, and activities should appeal to a variety of thinking and learning styles. And training that uses a variety of instructional approaches has a greater chance of engaging a wide spectrum of group members.

Most sessions should include all of the following learning aids: statistics, examples, checklists, flowcharts, analysis trees, demonstrations, hands-on experience, discussions, brainstorming, group activities, and games. "Soft-skills" trainers tend to neglect the first half of the list; technical trainers tend to slight the latter half. But conscientious course design and adaptation makes all of these techniques—and many others—viable and valid for all kinds of training content.

Prepare the participants. Trainers and participants tend to perform better when they know what to expect. Begin a session with a preview of the learning objectives and course agenda. And don't forget to let participants know what levels of skill and participation will be expected from them.

The instructor may need to manage diversity proactively by screening out some participants and sending them to different-level courses. Many training organizations establish sequences of courses, from basic to advanced. But too often, prerequisites are lackadaisically enforced.

One of the best ways to manage diversity is through instructor prework: Find out in advance the kinds of differences you will be facing. Get a class list before the training begins. Then conduct a written survey and speak in advance with some participants.

For example, pre-work for a train-the-trainer class in Houston informed me about the six participants:

- a young woman from India with a recent master's degree in training and development, but with little stand-up experience
- a training coordinator from Calgary who did occasional stints in the classroom
- a senior technical trainer from Houston, with years of experience
- two novice technical trainers from the Midwest
- an experienced software trainer

based in London, who warned me that games, contests, and prizes would not go over well in his home environment.

Knowledge of the participants' backgrounds and levels of experience made it easier for me to adapt activities and arrange project subgroups that leveraged the veterans' knowledge and experience (and boosted their egos), while bolstering the neophytes' confidence. The prework also helped me adjust for the senior trainer, whose education and research could add to everyone's learning. And I knew to tone down any pep-rally tendencies in my motivation-and-rewards system, to avoid alienating the Briton.

In addition to these differences, there were some common threads uniting the participants:

- They were employed by the same parent corporation.
- Each was motivated, as one participant put it, "to be a better, more competent trainer."
- They wanted to focus on software training, so there was no need to spend classroom time learning to facilitate such activities as role plays.
- All were at least a little nervous about having to perform before colleagues but also enthusiastic about working with people from several divisions and locations.

Similarities between participants can be used as a basis for working and learning together. The opening icebreaker can help participants build on those similarities as they also begin to appreciate the richness that ensues from their diversity.

For short, informational training classes, trainers are often tempted to skip icebreakers—they eat up so much time. But when you face a diverse group of trainees, the icebreaker is absolutely essential. Icebreakers should be instructional, motivational, and interpersonal. An icebreaker that has all three elements is likely to appeal to a diverse audience.

The key is to make the icebreaker substantive rather than "fluffy." For a technical-writing or graphics class, participants can poll each other for demographics, background, experience, and expectations, and then turn the results into charts and graphs to present to the rest of the class. In a software course, participants can work in teams at their keyboards, with a game or project.

Ten Tips for Reaching a Diverse Trainee Group

Diverse audiences bring life and variety to the training room. They also present special challenges to the trainer. Here are some pointers to help trainers uncover the abilities of diverse participants and incorporate them into the learning experience.

- Get to know the participants.
- Display posters with the objectives and agenda or course outline.
- Start with an informative, motivational, interpersonal icebreaker.
- Use simple language and concrete examples.
- Include clear visual aids.
- Show participants what you want them to do.
- Spotlight the participants: Listen, ask questions, and use redirects and student presentations.
- Stay close to the participants.
- Include frequent small-group activities.
- Maintain respect for every person in the classroom.

Stay in control of the course objectives. Standard advice tells trainers to stay with the agenda, follow an outline, and maintain control of the course objectives. But sometimes that advice is hard to follow, particularly when different backgrounds, agendas, and learning styles fill the classroom.

Certainly, small digressions from the outline are in order at times. But with diverse groups, those times should be rare. Digressions tend to disorient learners whose grasp on the material is tenuous. And they run the risk of alienating learners whose agendas conflict with the instructor's. If the trainer will digress for other participants' issues, then why not for theirs, too?

The facilitator's best ally in purposeful training is a clear, functional, and closely followed outline. But don't enslave yourself to it. Stay in tune to relevant questions. Work to eliminate confusion through simple language, visual aids, concrete examples, and occasional "war stories."

When a trainee brings up an issue that is peripheral to the course outline, be ready to say, "That's beyond the scope of our learning objectives." Then suggest resources the participant can mine outside the classroom.

Consider using breaks and after-hours tutorials to go off-line with needy participants. This may be necessary when one or two participants ask questions that are too basic for the rest of the class or are of little interest to the majority. If a large group of participants seems to need that kind of extra attention, you might want to adjust the course outline to accommodate the needs of your learners. You may also need to establish or enforce prerequisites for future sessions.

Always visualize yourself as confident and capable; don't let anyone's ego compromise the learning experience.

When people are not learning at the same pace—or when some participants feel that their agenda needs are not being met—they can become difficult or even hostile. Even when you can't meet everyone's content needs, you can fulfill their needs to be respected and to be treated as intelligent adults. A sense of respect encourages trainees to apply what they've learned and to feel better about themselves and their colleagues than they felt when they walked into the classroom.

Maintain contact with participants. Get close. Public speakers, first-grade teachers, stand-up comics, and actors know that it pays to "work" the audience. When you move physically close to participants, they feel close to you—both physically and emotionally. And it's easier for a trainer to detect confusion, disagreement, and apathy from a position two feet away from a participant than from a distant station next to an overhead projector or computer terminal.

Spotlight participants. During stand-up sessions, ask questions. Then probe for the real answers. Listen to the participants and help them listen to each other. Use "redirects" more frequently than you would in a homogeneous classroom.

The re-direct technique—in which several participants are asked to respond to each question and to elaborate on each other's answers—forces the instructor to learn what others in the classroom are thinking. It helps expose any confusion participants are feeling.

Another way to spotlight learners is to turn them into presenters. Like re-directs, trainee presentations can help minimize one drawback of diversity—the fact that every trainee approaches the training content from a different perspective. And they can maximize one of the advantages of diversity—the fact that every learner has a different idea and possible solution.

In a diverse classroom, student teaching does pose special challenges for the instructor—who must remain particularly sensitive to shy, insecure, and otherwise reluctant presenters. Trainers must offer moral support, consult with learners about content and delivery, and sincerely praise the results.

Hands-on activities and teamwork can be particularly useful with a diverse trainee group. Before each activity, demonstrate what the trainees are expected to do; even learners with language difficulties should be able to visualize your expectations. Seize every opportunity to use small teams and support groups to help trainees help each other.

> SEIZE EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO USE SMALL TEAMS AND SUPPORT GROUPS TO HELP TRAINEES HELP EACH OTHER

Teams should be closely monitored. If employees with similar backgrounds and motivations are grouped together, the benefits of group activity are lessened. But in teams that are too diverse, knowledge levels and work speeds are also diverse. Some participants may complete an assignment quickly, ignoring team members who need more time. The instructor's responsibility is to ensure that everyone participates and that the faster workers remain challenged without becoming frustrated.

The rewards for all this hard work include concrete visions of productive learning—of participants interacting with each other; of faces concentrating, smiling, and nodding; and of people acquiring new skills and new ways of applying things they already knew.

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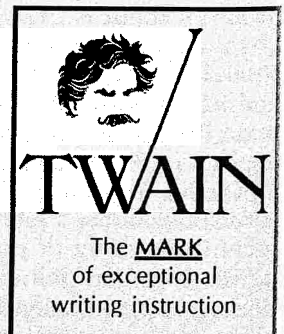

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