

A New Look at Learner-Controlled Instruction

By JOHN H. COX

In reviewing current literature concerning major implications for the HRD field in the 1980s two concerns surface: an increased recognition of the HRD function to assist the organization in improving its productivity through both effective and efficient training efforts; and the increasingly important need to incorporate adult learning principles into these training efforts. If these concerns are valid, HRD professionals should consider the use of Learner-Controlled Instruction (LCI) as one solution.

As a systematic adult learning methodology, LCI is not a recent phenomenon. The earliest documentation of an LCI-designed program in the area of training was conducted by Robert Mager and John McCann in 1961. They discovered when trainees were given control over the sequencing of their training program, significant savings in training time resulted. Mager and McCann continued to experiment with LCI, identifying an important element of LCI with great reliance to the area of adult learning and conceptualizing that adults have valuable previously gained knowledge when entering learning situations. This principle, as it relates to adult learning, has been fur-

ther developed and conceptualized by Malcolm Knowles.

Although many training and development practitioners give "lip service" to this principle, few produce training systems which consider past experiences. Most training programs revolve around some time-based standard, with all trainees going through the same rigor.

Following Mager and McCann,

lead, implementing various types of LCI programs, primarily for entry-level supervisors.

In 1975, Frank Wydra, then vice president, Personnel and Training for Allied Supermarket, reported the result of applying LCI for training assistant supermarket managers. In addition to reductions in learning time, Wydra reported improved levels of performance and the ability to

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and up to the early 1970s, LCI was rarely used in the training and development field. During this period of time, LCI found a home in formal education. Much of the research that helped define LCI principles was conducted in education, especially in the area of teacher education.

It wasn't until 1971 that a major corporation used LCI again. The Marriott Corp., a leader in the hospitality industry, implemented an LCI program for entry-level supervisors in its hotel division. Significant reductions in training time resulted. Marriott eventually implemented LCI programs in four other divisions. Since 1971, at least 10 major firms in the hospitality industry have followed Marriott's

train more people in shorter periods of time.

In an effort to identify the theoretical basis of LCI, a team of graduate students at East Carolina University undertook a research project in 1976 to identify LCI as a product of other learning strategies. The learning strategies they identified were: individualized instruction, mastery learning, contract learning, competency-based education, field-experienced education, criterion-referenced evaluation and self-paced learning. In essence, LCI represented an eclectic by-product, built upon the strengths of many successful learning strategies.

A synthesis of the findings was carried out by the author in

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1978. The major outcome was identifying the following characteristics common to LCI-designed programs:

- The programs specify in performance terms what the learners outcomes should be;
- The programs use the most realistic learning environment possible;
- The programs allow the learner to pace the speed of learning;
- The programs accommodate the individual differences of learners;
- The programs require the learner to demonstrate mastery of the learning outcome;
- The programs allow the learner to by-pass learning activities if the learner can demonstrate mastery;
- The programs evaluate mastery based on criterion-referenced standards;
- The programs provide immediate and continuous feedback on learning performance;
- The programs allow learners to direct their learning.

These characteristics established LCI as an adult learning methodology with a high level of congruence with adult-learning assumptions and principles conceptualized by people such as J.R. Kidd, Paul Bergevin, Allen Tough and Malcolm Knowles.

Because there was much evidence indicating that an adult learning methodology like LCI could produce positive results for an organization and its individual employees, a strategy-based model (See Figure 1) was developed. Initially, the model represented a translation and use of the research findings and common characteristics associated with LCI. In its present state, it also represents the results of successfully applying the model in several organizations.

A strategy-based LCI model

Strategy No. 1 calls for predetermining training results before any training is conducted. By involving different levels of the organization in the process, clear training specifications are

defined and a framework for training is constructed. This framework has four basic parts:

- *Job competencies.* Defined as the essential skills competent employees should possess to succeed in their jobs. (Here, skills represent a unit of work activity composed of behaviors, attitudes and knowledge elements.)

- *Training (learning) activities.* Designed to help employees start, develop and master job competencies. (Training activities can also represent systematic steps for learning to solve specific work-related problems.)

- *Standards of performance.* Defined as methods or means for

Interviewing & Selection Skills: Some Fundamental Questions...

Q Why the emphasis on skills training?

A Selection is more than theory. Many managers and supervisors are not really sure how an applicant will do on the job, or even if the interview met EEO Guidelines.

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evaluating how well employees learn training activities. They incorporate an organization's current policy and procedures and consider future changes.

- *Resources.* Represented by the organization's written and visual standards (such as procedure and training materials); physical assets (such as tools, equipment and facilities); and most importantly its human resources. Resources are identified to assist employees in mastering training activities.

The benefits of constructing this framework go beyond mere training applications. For individual employees, clear expectations of the training program as well as the job itself are set forth. For the organization, a competency model for training, selection, career development and performance appraisal now exists.

Strategy No. 2 calls for recognizing the prior experiences of employees. Past job experiences are evaluated and used as a starting point for determining exactly what training employees need. Since the primary responsibility of training is to take employees from where they are now to where they need to be, the assessment of individual needs is essential. Using the training framework just described in Strategy No. 1, an assessment tool now exists for evaluating employees' prior experiences and determining their current training needs.

The organization and its employees benefit when training needs are assessed on an individual basis. The organization can implement programs based on real training needs, reducing the cost of training by eliminating training skills employees already possess, while individual employees gain the self-satisfaction of knowing their prior achievements are recognized and used.

Strategy No. 3 calls for using the real work world in training. Whenever possible, the real work world is incorporated into the fabric of training. Training becomes a skillfully designed

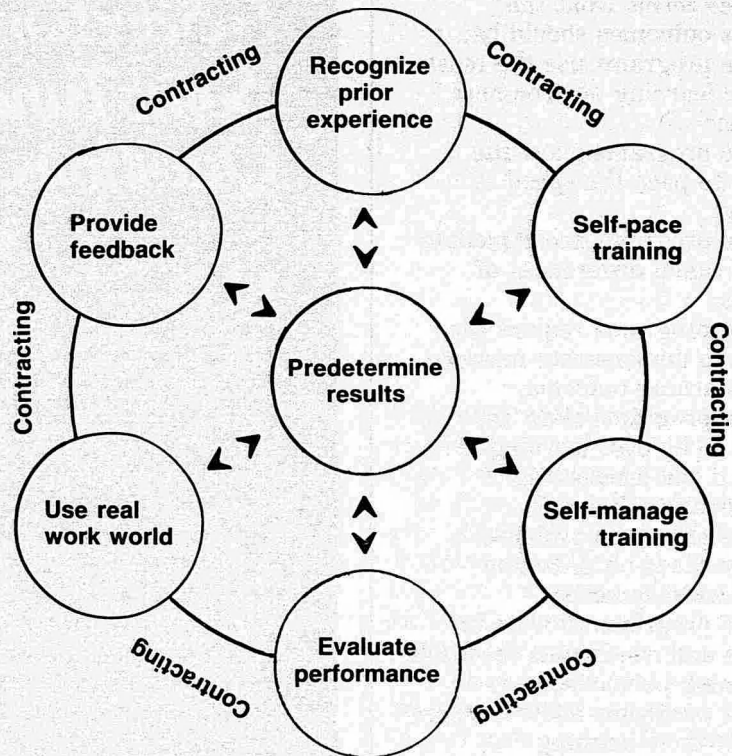
form of on-the-job training, weaving the total work environment with its written and visual standards, facilities and human resources into an efficient training network.

When an organization identifies, plans for and uses its resources for training purposes, training-related costs such as materials, supplies, equipment, facilities and instructional staff can be more efficiently used or, in some cases, eliminated. For the individual employee, training that plans for and uses the work environment develops confident performers who have gained confidence by learning to perform under real job conditions. For those HRD practitioners concerned with transfer of learning, this strategy makes sense.

Strategy No. 4 calls for evaluating actual performance. Training results are evaluated, as

Figure 1.

Strategy-based LCI model



much as possible, under actual job conditions. Having identified standards of performance in advance (Strategy No. 1), employees know exactly what they need to accomplish and how their performance will be evaluated.

By basing evaluation on specific levels of predetermined performance, the organization can develop highly skilled employees who can bring about positive results for the organization. Another outcome of this method of evaluation is the development of results-oriented employees, who will be conscious of performance results as they carry out their job duties.

Strategy No. 5 calls for providing immediate and continuous feedback to employees. LCI training is designed to include positive feedback. Feedback is accomplished by organizing train-

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ing activities developed in Strategy No. 1 into a simple to complex logical direction, with employees receiving immediate feedback as they accomplish each training activity. Further feedback occurs as they master each competency.

Training that provides for immediate and continuous feedback creates an internal reward system for successful performance—developing self-motivated employee performance. Additionally, as an organization develops self-motivated performance through its training activities, it increases opportunities for improving the productivity of its training efforts.

Strategy No. 6 calls for self-paced training. This strategy provides employees the opportunity to learn job competencies at their own learning speeds. With self-paced training, employees are recognized as unique, differing in how they learn and in the amount of time it takes them to learn. Again, using the training framework identified in Strategy No. 1, employees decide how to organize competencies and related training activities and how to select resources that will help them learn quickly and effectively.

When compared to time-based training approaches for similar jobs, self-paced training has resulted in significant savings in overall training time.

An indirect outcome of self-paced training is the development of a self-directed attitude toward training by those employees who experience it.

Performance Appraisal: Some Fundamental Questions...

Q. What's the real purpose?

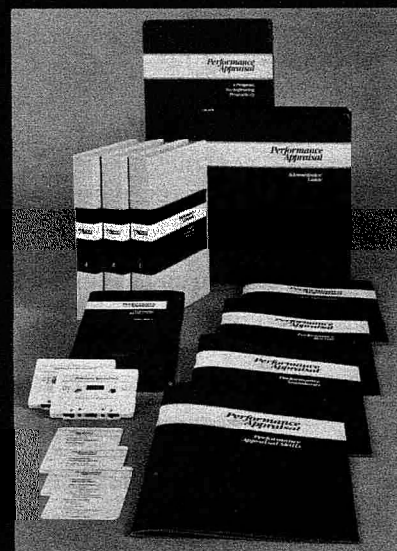
A. To improve performance. Traditionally, appraisals focused on the past. But they can become part of how people manage—achieving goals, solving problems, documenting what has and will occur.

Q. Does it work for all jobs?

A. Yes, when manager and employee know ahead of time what constitutes expected performance, and the right behavioral skills are used to guide the review. There's a way to appraise objectively, fairly, even those factors which can't be measured by numbers alone.

Q. How does this fit what we're doing now?

A. No need to change what's working well. But there may be a need for an easier, less time-consuming, more comfortable way of giving and receiving appraisals. The right training program can open communications, reduce defensiveness and resolve differences so everyone "wins".



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Strategy No. 7 calls for training to be *self-managed* or designed and organized to be managed by individual employees. By learning how to plan their time, schedule training activities, select resources, arrange for performance evaluation and deal with personnel problems as they normally occur in the job environ-

ment, employees practice management . . . the management of their own training program.

For the organization, self-managed training has great economic value. It has the potential of reducing training costs by eliminating a dependence on formal instruction, as well as the

need to invest in specialized training facilities. Employees, by actively participating in the management of their own training program, assume responsibility for the results of their training efforts. Employees also gain experience developing important managerial skills such as managing time, planning training efforts, developing contingencies, overcoming resistance, gaining acceptance, using resources effectively and evaluating job-related performance.

The binding agent

To plan, coordinate and control an LCI system with its various strategies, "contracting" is often used. Contracting represents an effective tool for operationalizing the LCI system. It ties together strategies and serves as an administrative control for program

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evaluation, feedback and documentation of individual achievement.

Generally speaking, the elements found in the framework constructed in Strategy No. 1 predetermine results and serve as the basis for developing a training contract. Although training contracts can be written or unwritten, most are written contracts between the learner and an individual who may serve as a coach, trainer or evaluator of performance. Training contracts serve as "learning maps" by giving the learner guidelines for ac-

quiring any assistance and by providing a framework for receiving necessary feedback during numerous stages of performance evaluation.

Not a "cure-all"

LCI may not work in certain organizations. Organizations unwilling to give their employees the freedom to learn as individuals would have a hard time swallowing LCI. On the other hand, organizations working hard to make needed changes because of economic pressures, the changing nature of the work force, (that is, better-educated, older employees with higher levels of aspiration) or new emphasis on career planning, pathing and development, should view LCI as a positive course of action.

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