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Tell Us What You Think

The abundance of new office and training technologies has to be one of the trainer's great frustrations. Glossy flyers about exciting hardware go into your in-box, and as you read them, you dream great dreams of interactive videodiscs, interfaces between computer and video, multimedia control panels, images on massive screens, and an emotion-filled CEO at a dais who says, "All our gratitude goes to the training department, which simply invested a small amount of money to make us a billion-dollar company."

Well, now you have to wake up and start typing the notes from the flipchart. You have effective programs already in place, and your budget is not that big—why spend money on fancy technology when your current programs increase productivity anyway? And when it sees the price tags for some of that stuff, upper management will suddenly appreciate your current work all the more.

But you've done your homework, you know how the hardware can improve your training, and you know how it can improve the organization. At what point in your training situation does that nice-to-have technology become crucial? To what extent is keeping up with the latest in training hardware important for your department and organization? How do you convince the people with the purse that an investment in, say, interactive-videodisc technology is necessary?

We'd like to hear what you think. Send your views on this or any other HRD issue to "Issues," *Training & Development Journal*, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.

Accelerated Learning Not for Everyone

As I read "Accelerated Learning Takes Off" (January 1989), I had a *deja vu* experience. In the seventies, I visited the Wilson Free School on the Mankato State campus in Mankato, Minnesota. That school (and others, such as Summerhill in England) had created a learning environment similar to the one described in the article.

Wilson had a nontraditional classroom. The students typically were those who had difficulty learning in a traditional instructional setting. At first glance, the learning environment appeared to be organized chaos, but a closer examination revealed otherwise. Many students who had dropped out of other schools were taking college-level courses and were expected to graduate on schedule. The teachers were learning facilitators who created a comfortable environment. They let each student learn at his or her own pace using any one of several instructional media. Synergy among the students was encouraged, because learning took place regardless of whether the learner was a teacher or a student.

I used that approach to teach high-school industrial classes during the seventies. Although I prefer the approach, the experience let me identify two problems that the article did not address. The first problem is that the nontraditional learning environment is not suitable for everyone. I would go even further and say that in some cases such an environment may be counterproductive to constructive learning. Some students feel uncomfortable in an open-classroom situation; they often retreat into their shells and do not contribute to the learning experience. Also, adult learners are goal-oriented and may not be receptive to a learning-can-be-fun environment.

The second problem is that

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because the effectiveness of the course or program depends highly on the instructor, the instructor must be both a subject-matter expert and a facilitator. That combination is hard to find. People who are not facilitators but believe that they are good instructors will resist the nontraditional environment.

I encourage anyone interested in accelerated learning to research the methodologies used at nontraditional schools during the sixties and seventies—you'll see that the approach has been used effectively in the past for a variety of learners. But remember that there is an important difference between the students at nontraditional schools and the learners described in the article. The students knew the type of environment they were entering—they had requested and, in some cases, had waited years to enter those schools. Adult learners may not have that desire.

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Hooray for Desktop Publishing

While I can agree with many points mentioned in "Publish or Perish?" ("In Practice," February 1989), I found the tone and emphasis in the article to be misleading. After three columns of text that rake desktop publishing over the coals, only the very last paragraph really gets down to the essential issue.

Certainly, "ugly designs" can result from desktop publishing (DTP). They can also result from a typewriter or from scissors and rubber cement. Certainly, "wads of money can be blown on inappropriate technology." But DTP is not the only technology subject to that practice. Whenever purchasing decisions result from emotional bias rather than logic and reason, waste

and abuse are possible. But isn't that problem management's responsibility rather than DTP's?

Relatively low prices are possible with DTP. The results may be less than magazine quality, but can you really tell the difference? Most of us could never afford magazine quality in the first place, and for all practical purposes, DTP looks just as good.

I don't know of any organizations with budgets so padded that they allow anyone to buy any new computer toy that comes along and to use it for their own amusement, totally disregarding the organization's mission. Where I work, we had to justify and demonstrate how DTP would save money and increase productivity before we could purchase it.

As for the comments about instant graphic artists, I am no graphic artist, and I do not pretend to be one. But we use DTP to produce newsletters and training aids with a minimum of frills. We certainly do not indulge ourselves in playpen or sandbox activities to the detriment of our training mission. In fact, our reader response rate to training notices produced by DTP is measurably higher than those generated on a typewriter!

In our organization, we use DTP as a tool to produce no-nonsense training aids quickly and cost-effectively. We believe that it has allowed us to increase our productivity, as well as the quality of our products, without increasing costs.

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When the Bloom Is Off the Rose

I hope this will be helpful to relatively inexperienced trainers just getting started within their organizations.

In a training-starved organization,

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a training program gets started because there is a definite, visible need—and the program exists because influential people in the organization champion it. Accompanying that are often positive, optimistic expectations about training, often throughout the organization.

That strong support translates to action in several ways. Experts in the organization take the time to provide the trainer with information. Because management is committed to training, trainers have access to management. Trainers get facility space and money for purchasing training materials. In general, the trainer has all the necessary resources readily available.

As a wise trainer just starting out in the organization, you have to meet those high expectations before they start to fall. For your first projects, you should select those that will be easy to complete and will yield significant results. That is possible because you have the entire list of needs from which to choose. Also, the initial widespread support will ensure good attendance. If you do a good job in your first few training projects, comments from trainees and management will be positive. The reaction is somewhat exaggerated because both the training and its results are new.

That warm glow may last for several weeks or months, but eventually you will have met all the obvious needs and trained most of the staff in crucial areas. At that point, more planning, needs assessment, and evaluation are necessary to deliver proper training, and your need for resources and program-development time increases. And, even if you have balanced behind-the-scenes work with noticeable training activities, you may come up against a "what-have-you-done-for-me-lately" attitude. You find it more and more difficult to obtain resources. A training session in the conference room is canceled for a crisis meeting. A class that should

have 10 students has only five—the others have "more important work to do."

In fact, training has become a part of the organization's daily operation. It is no longer a special area; rather, it is just another internal production department.

I have seen that cycle several times. It discourages new trainers, who in a matter of months find themselves pushed from their pedestals and back onto the same level as everyone else—sometimes lower.

Training generally has a long-term orientation, and training often is seen as less important than immediate concerns, such as cash flow and getting the product out the door. That is normal, but as a new trainer you must watch out for it. Try to diminish the low points by implementing suggestions from the experts (concerning ROI, evaluation, selling training programs, and so forth).

Most important, do not be discouraged when you see yourself as less than the favorite. After the bloom falls from the rose, your job becomes more difficult, but with the difficulties comes a richer work experience. We all have to sell our abilities and programs and to prove our worth to our organizations. Those activities are valuable growth opportunities that make us more valuable to our organizations.

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"Issues" is compiled and edited by Eric R. Blume. Send your views to Issues, Training & Development Journal, 1630 Duke Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313.