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I Told You Not to Tell Me That

THE CASE FOR NOT "TELLING" IN TRAINING— AND SOME GUIDELINES FOR DOING IT IF YOU MUST

It often seems that everybody talks and nobody listens. We have come to think that the fault lies with the listener. But, I fear, the truth is quite different.

One of my favorite examples of talking without listening is in the song "Alice's Restaurant" (if you can call it a song—it goes on for twenty odd minutes). In it Arlo Guthrie tells the story of his arrest for littering and its subsequent effect when he appears for a physical examination in order to be drafted.

Throughout the song, no one is listening to anyone. Arlo tells his story, but the listeners don't want to hear it. My favorite part is when the induction sergeant speaks for forty-five minutes about how to fill in a form, but no one listens to a word that he says.

This kind of rambling speech about what to do before you do it is so common that it hardly seems worthy of mention. The airlines do it all the time (usually in multiple languages), especially when you are about to land in the United States from overseas and they want desperately to tell you how to fill in the immigration form.

The problem is, of course, that listening attentively will not actually help you fill out that form, no matter how many languages you hear it in. You can't remember what people tell you all that easily, especially when it comes in an unbroken soliloquy. As we will see in Chapter 7, you can't even remember fun stuff that happened to you all that well.

In the mind of every speaker, and every trainer, and especially every designer of training, is the idea that there is something he or she would like people to know. But . . .

Why Would Someone Want to Know What You Want to Teach?

I once asked this question of someone who was compiling a set of stories about her area of expertise to provide to her clients. She called to talk to me about storytelling and she mentioned her project. I asked her why anyone would want to hear the stories she had compiled. Why would they be listening to them? What would motivate them to do that? And what would they learn from them? She said these were very good questions.

Rather obvious questions if you ask me.

Oddly, the most obvious question—*Why would anyone want to know this?*—does not seem to be so obvious to most folks who design training.

Some very good (if obvious) questions

- Why would anyone want to hear the stories I have to tell?
- Why would they be listening to them?
- What would motivate them to do that?
- What would they learn from them?
- Why would anyone want to know this?

We are so used to having to learn subjects in which we have no interest at all that we simply assume that's what education ought to be. Curiously, this is never what self-directed education is. People who learn on their own learn exactly what they find interesting or potentially useful. I assume there are those who memorize Latin declensions because they think it is good for them, but they are in the minority.

People who learn on their own learn exactly what they find interesting or potentially useful.

So, while we know better when we teach ourselves, when others teach, direct, or inform us we sit still for the boring and irrelevant. And, it follows, since designers of training know that students will sit still for whatever is thrown at them, we design training without thinking about what the student will be thinking when he or she is subjected to whatever it is we think he or she should know.

Want an Example?

I once examined the e-learning products of a large publishing company. They had acquired them by buying a smaller company and asked me to see whether what they had acquired was

worth anything. In the set of products I reviewed was one called *Handling Customer Complaints.*

The course begins with an exercise in which learners identify their attitudes toward complaints. The instruction begins with a voice-over explaining why complaints should be taken seriously, the percentage of people who complain, results of studies regarding customer complaints, and so on.

Presumably, the people who take this course are people whose job includes handling customer complaints. Would their job also include knowing the percentage of people who complain? How would knowing that, say, 23 percent of all customers complain help them handle complaints? Training is often full of information. It is as if information is somehow holy and needs to be known apart from its use. But information that is not used is forgotten, so why bother?

> *We design training without thinking about what the student will be thinking when he or she is subjected to whatever it is you think he or she should know.*

Later on in this course, learners view a hotel clerk who must help a guest with a problem. Learners do not have to help him solve the problem. Instead, they listen to the instructor talk through the steps people should follow when solving customer complaints.

At first glance this seems okay. There are a given number of steps in handling a complaint, so someone who is learning to handle complaints should learn those steps. Or should he? This is, of course . . .

The Heart of the Problem

I call this problem LIBITI—

Learn it because I thought it!

The LIBITI problem is hardly unique to trainers, of course. In fact, trainers would never even have thought to use LIBITI if it hadn't been used on them. Where? In school of course.

Consider Euclidean geometry for example. Euclid thought it up and students thousands of years later are proving isosceles triangles to be congruent. Of course, much lip service is paid to why it is good for the soul to know how to do such proofs, and no doubt there must be some value in it, but having every student in the world learn to do it seems just a little extreme. Why then do all students learn it? We learn it because someone important thought it up.

You have to agree that Euclidean proofs don't come up much in life. We tend to justify learning such things because we imagine that scholars have determined that the thoughts of great thinkers ought to be learned. Whether or not this is true, it has nevertheless left us with the idea that theories of things ought to be taught to practitioners of those things. We think that if you are going to become a carpenter, for example, that geometry might be especially useful, so we justify learning it because it might come up some day. The reality is that if we were really concerned with carpentry we would teach geometry in the context of carpentry, not worrying about proofs so much as worrying about getting the measurements right for something students were actually building.

> *LIBITI (learn it because I thought it) leaves us with the idea that theories of things ought to be taught to practitioners of those things.*

Trainers, however, seem to forget that LIBITI is really annoying to a student. So they present so and so's theory of customer service as a prelude to learning to do customer service, as if one were required for the other.

The motto of school? Theory first and then practice . . . although we don't always do the practice. Geometric proofs first and then carpentry, although most students never get to the carpentry. Physics first and then the use of materials, although most people never actually see any real materials. Biology first and then nutrition and health decisions, although . . . well, you get the idea.

As absurd as it is in school, *LIBITI is downright crazy in corporate training.* What is worse, not only don't your students care about the theory of customer complaint handling, they won't remember what was told to them anyway.

So, my simple message is:

don't tell anybody anything ever

Now I realize that simple messages are often quite difficult to understand, and typically statements like the one above are naturally disbelieved, since they seem so out of whack with everything that we have always understood to be true. What do you mean, never tell anyone anything? Not even the time of day if they ask? No, answering questions with short to-the-point answers is often okay to do, and so is helping someone

out when she is stuck (sometimes), but you see once I add codicils it gets harder to know what I meant.

So, in that spirit, the rest of this chapter consists of me telling you something you may not need to or want to know—which violates my very point about not telling anybody anything ever.

Nevertheless here are . . .

Some Simple Principles About Telling in the Context of Training

Principle #1: Just-in-time information delivery makes information useful. . . OR, don't tell people things that they cannot immediately make use of

Don't tell anybody anything that he or she cannot immediately use. People forget what you tell them unless they can put it into immediate use. Even then, they will forget it unless you let them practice what they have learned a large number of times. If there is something you are just dying to tell them, bear in mind that you must tell them how to use that information and allow them to use that information immediately. Telling them how many people call up to complain is useless. What can they do with that?

Principle #2: Authentic activities motivate learners . . . OR, don't tell people how to do something they will never have to actually do in real life

So much of what passes as learning asks people to do something they would never actually have to do in their real lives. This

sounds (and is) okay some of the time, particularly with kids. You need to be especially careful with adults however.

> *If I can identify someone who is acting defensive, does that help me to be less defensive? Will identifying a mistake make me less likely to do it myself?*

One e-learning course I looked at for the aforementioned publishing company had students match what characters they saw on the screen said with categories of the kinds of things that were bad to say (such as *making excuses* or *getting defensive*) in a given situation that people were being trained to handle. Now think about this for a second. What were the students learning? They were learning category names for bad behavior. Actually they were going to forget those soon enough. What they were doing was playing a matching game that had nothing to do with anything they would ever do in real life. Did the designers of this software think that learning to identify someone who was defensive in a cartoon would help students not to actually be defensive? If I have a problem with anger, will seeing someone else who is angry and saying "He is angry" help me be less angry?

ANOTHER EXAMPLE *The course was attempting to teach people to send effective e-mails. The software had you identify mistakes in e-mails (like forgetting to send an attachment). Will being able to identify this mistake make you less likely to make it yourself? If you became a good identifier of what are pretty subtle e-mail mistakes as it turns out, would you suddenly become good at e-mail yourself? Why not let students just practice sending e-mails?*

Principle #3: Guessing is not doing. . . OR, don't make me guess the right answer you were dying to tell me

Remember the TV show *Let's Make a Deal*? Contestants were constantly having to choose to take what was behind door number 3 when they had no idea at all what they were choosing. A lot of e-learning and training programs are like that. We think nothing of asking trainees if they would take this course of action or that course of action. What happens when they are asked such questions goes something like this:

1. Figure out as best you can what the people who designed the program want you to choose.
2. Play out in your mind what might happen if you choose that course of action.
3. Look at all the other choices.
4. See which course of action might work out best.

Now . . . *compare this to the process that happens in real life when a course of action needs to be chosen:*

- Think up something to do.
- Do it.

In real life, you can't go down a list of alternatives and choose the best one. (Of course, there are exceptions—great chess players do exactly that. They think of all the moves they could make and try to play out as many consequences of those moves as they can and select the one that has the best outcome as far as they can figure. But those are chess players.) In real life we haven't the time or the ability to do that. We just react and later may wish that we had reacted better.

It is in this latter recapitulation of events where learning can take place. If we think about what we have done, and if we have some help, we can sometimes come to different conclusions about what we might have done. This may or may not help us to actually do things differently next time. Thinking isn't acting, after all.

But what we cannot do is list all the possible moves and then choose among them, unless we have a lot more time than we typically have.

So any training program that lets us choose from a list of alternatives is usually just playing a trick on us. That program is going to let us guess a right answer and then it is going to tell us what we should have done. This is just telling in a rather convoluted form. Don't just tell him right away, make him flounder around a little bit, convince him he really is making a choice, and then tell him. This is not a real breakthrough in the telling game.

> *In real life, you can't go down a list of alternatives and choose the best one. Any training program that lets us choose from alternatives is usually just playing a trick on us.*

Principle #4: Identification is not recall . . . OR, it doesn't really matter what you can show that you know

Ask any American if Idaho is a state and they will look at you as if you are nuts. Ask any American to name all fifty states and he or she won't be able to do it. They quite often leave out Idaho

(and Utah and Delaware and so on). They can recognize them as states, but they can't recall them when needed.

A lot of knowledge is like that. We know it but we don't know it. It is on the tip of our tongues, we just knew it only a minute ago, but yet it's not there. Knowledge that doesn't come to mind each and every time we need it is really a different kind of stuff. It is often the names of things, words, memories, and such. It is not the kind of knowledge that we use regularly. We don't suddenly forget how to prepare the same breakfast we eat every morning nor do we forget how to start our cars. Nor do we suddenly become incapable of knowing that Idaho is a state.

Recognition knowledge and procedural knowledge—that is, knowledge we constantly use (we are always comprehending things and doing things)—never die. We use it and we don't lose it.

Recall knowledge—the stuff that tests are made of—is easy to forget, which is why people cram for tests. They are just trying to keep that stuff in their heads for a couple of hours.

> *If you can't recall it when you need it, you don't really know it . . .*

So it is ironic that the multiple-choice test was created. Multiple-choice tests test recognition knowledge. You don't have to remember anything; you just have to recognize an answer when you see it. For some people this is as good as cheating. They don't actually have to know anything; they just have to compare answers and figure out which is the best one. For others this is a nightmare, as all the answers look good to them and they are left figuring out the intentions of the test writer.

In either case, the test is meaningless. If you can't recall it when you need it, you don't really know it, or at least you don't know it in the form in which you would need to be able to use it.

Save your breath. If you are asking learners to choose from alternatives, you are simply asking them to do something that bears no relation to anything they will ever have to do in real life, so you may as well not bother. You can cram all you want for a test, but you won't be able to pass that same test as time goes by.

> *If you ask learners to choose from alternatives, you are asking them to do something that bears no relation to anything they will ever have to do in real life—so you may as well not bother.*

Principle #5: Playing a role has nothing to do with watching . . . OR, have somebody do something

I used to think that since people learn by doing, the best way to help them learn is to build a simulation and have them play a role that causes them to do some things that would be quite like what they might have to do in real life. Practicing in a simulation, as we learn from the air flight simulator, is a lot better than practicing on the real thing a lot of the time.

But I have found that life plays tricks on you when you say stuff that is obviously right but also is obviously hard. Simulations are hard to build, but lots of folks in the training world have heard me (and others) say how important they are to build. So now there is e-learning that uses simulations in which you

don't play a role at all. Instead you watch someone else play a role and say what he or she should have done. These are, of course, much cheaper to build, since you don't have to build software that accounts for anything anyone might actually choose to do. There are no surprises.

AHA! *Some simulations = multiple-choice tests + feedback on what you should have done = another form of telling!*

But yet again, we have a disguised version of a multiple-choice test with feedback on what you should have said or done, which is itself a disguised version of telling someone what the right answer is.

People just can't resist telling, can they?

Principle #6: Practice makes perfect . . . OR, if you teach it, have them do it one more time

If there were one word that you could remember after reading this book—I mean, memory is pretty flaky: you won't remember all that you read here—it would be

practice

It's a simple idea really. Music teachers and students show that they understand it when they play the same tune over and over again. Football players and coaches show that they understand it when they run the same plays over and over again. Feedback on what you should have said or done is a disguised version of practice.

Professionals show that they understand it when they actually refer to what they do as their *medical practice* or they use the term *the practice of law*.

But what about school? When is practice time? Is it when you have to do a hundred math examples? Yes, that is practice. Is it when you have to do a writing assignment. Yes, that's it too. What about when you are researching a paper or preparing a presentation? Those are a form of practice as well.

> *What is it that students spend the most time practicing throughout their school years?*

School does indeed use the concept of practice quite often. This is not to say that school uses that concept very well, however. What is it that students spend the most time practicing throughout their school years?

Test taking.

But as you might guess, practicing test taking gets you to be much better at test taking. Unfortunately, test taking doesn't come up all that much in an adult's life. So there is a lot of practice for a performance that never happens.

Now . . . what about your training?

What do learners in your organization practice when they are being trained? Recall when answering this, that practice does not mean trying something once. It means endless repetition, improving your performance with each try.

> *Practice means endless repetition, not just trying something once.*

One aspect of the very nature of training also differentiates it from school: Each employee actually does practice something (his job) on a regular basis. Therefore, training should naturally lead into that practice. If the training isn't stuff that then gets reinforced by the job itself, something is really wrong with the training.

I have seen a lot of training that has nothing whatever to do with practice. Training that sets up practice is only valuable if the trainee gets to practice at the end. But training that has employees playing a game is only valuable if you are training them to play that game. Training that has employees memorize information is only valuable if you are training them to memorize information. Training that entails a teacher talking and a class listening is training people to sit quietly and listen.

No practice, no learning. It is pleasant to think otherwise, to rationalize everything that you do that isn't practice, to believe in the gods of transfer. As they say in my home town: *fuggedaboudit.*

I realize that you might be dying to ask me a question after reading all this. Since this is a book, you can't, but I can anticipate the question:

Why are you telling me all this stuff when
the whole chapter is about how telling doesn't work?

Right.

Good question.

So here is what to do. Close the book immediately after I tell you. Then write down the six principles you just read.

Okay.

Now.

Close the book. When you give up, open it again.

I bet you can't do it, can you? Yes, I am sure you remember some of them. You just read them, after all. Even if you remembered them all, how many do you think you will remember next week? Next year?

"So, why read all this stuff?" you are asking. "And why does he bother to write it?" you are wondering.

I am not operating under the illusion that you will remember what I have written. It hardly matters. You probably don't agree with half of it anyway.

What I am hoping is that I am causing you think about what you are doing while you are reading—that you are relating what I am saying to your own experiences.

> ***My hope for this book . . .*** *that by reading these essays you are starting to reflect on what you are doing in training or might plan to do in training.*

In other words you are starting to reflect on what you are doing in training or might plan to do in training. You may wake up in the middle of the night with an idea that I helped jump start with what you read. That would be my goal. Remembering what I said is not my goal. Nor should it be yours.

Can you do this in training? Yes, you can. You can make people reflect on what they do by engaging them in the reflection process.

This leads to my last observation:

Principle #7: Make people reflect . . . AND, get a dialogue started

How do you get people to think about what they do and why is it a worthwhile exercise?

Recall that it is my view that people learn only by doing. One form of doing is conversation. Conversation with others or with oneself can cause one to mentally practice. Mental practice is pretty good stuff. Not everything is about hitting keys or running pass formations. Some practice is just thinking about

what one does and then re-thinking. Dreaming tends to be about this. We rehearse what we have done or think we will do under various conditions. Dreams haunt us when we feel we have not done things quite right. Daydreaming is like this as well. We imagine circumstances and think about what we might say or do.

> *One form of doing is conversation. Conversation with others or with yourself is a form of mental practice.*

This kind of thing should not solely be left to chance. Training should entail a serious effort to get employees to reflect on what they do and to examine ways that they can do better. By this I do not mean chastising them for mistakes. Enable employees to teach themselves about what they do.

Socrates believed that all knowledge was already inside a person and simply needed to be drawn out. While no one believes this today, the Socratic method of teaching has proven to be quite useful in getting people to come to their own conclusions—to think about ideas rather than listen to ideas.

Be a Socratic trainer. Draw out from trainees what is inside them. Make them teach themselves. And don't tell anybody anything.

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Jump Start Your Training

How to be a Socratic trainer? Try acting less like a teacher and more like a mentor. Some advice:

Be ignorant

When asked, a good mentor claims ignorance. Your favorite response to a learner's question should be: *I really don't know. What do you think?*

Let people be themselves

Not every trainee will be good at what you are trying to teach. If they can't do it, let them alone.

Know when to tell and when to be quiet

You can tell people the answer when the answer is a small missing fact that would mean having to spend inordinate amounts of time attempting to figure it out on their own. You can tell an employee the answer when following the wrong course of action might lead to danger or a recovery period that is way too long given the situation.

Don't tell anyone anything if you know they can figure it out on their own.

Make suggestions

The real role of a mentor is to make suggestions. Of course, there are suggestions and there are suggestions. When suggestions look like the gospel, they are bad. When they are presented as something to think about, they are good.

When an employee is spinning his wheels and accomplishing nothing, put him on a solid footing and let him start again. A mentor needs to recognize when just-in-time help will really

help and not be a crutch. This is the essence of the art of mentoring.

Lie to your trainees

Say things you don't believe if it will advance the cause of the students thinking harder about how to defeat you. It is not your job to show the trainees how smart you are nor to earn the trainees' respect for your good ideas. It is much better to make the trainees think hard.

Know when to hand hold

Holding learners' hands while they attempt to do something can be very tempting. It is possible to hold trainees' hands too much, to have them follow your lead and seem to understand, only to find out that, when left to their own devices, they cannot do it on their own. Know when to let go.

Practice, practice, practice

Practice is the essence of doing correctly. Good mentors know when more practice is needed. Good mentors also know when the rest of what is to be done can be skipped because the learner got it faster than expected. If what you are teaching can't be practiced, stop teaching it.