

The Rights of Training

The Right Curriculum

Why do entire training organizations fail? Why do students walk away from a learning activity wondering “what was that all about?” The simplest answer is that the organizers fail to get it right. In this series, we will take a hard look at what it takes to not only be successful, but to carry training to a higher level.

THE RIGHT CURRICULUM

The students must be training using a curriculum designed for the job or tasks they are being asked to perform. Simply put, training must be about giving students something new, or allowing them to do something better.

THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT

Students and instructors must have the right environment, including all the tools, training props, and resources necessary. The environment must be realistic and free from distractions.

THE RIGHT STUDENTS

Without students that are interested and engaged, having all the other pieces won't save a training session. Students must have the information to arrive at the right place, at the right time, with the tools needed to succeed.

THE RIGHT INSTRUCTORS

Instructors that are prepared, motivated and excited about teaching are necessary for training success. Selecting and rewarding the right instructors helps ensure your training budget yields a return on your investment.

THE RIGHT TECHNOLOGY

Far too many instructors and organizations today rely on technology to make up for poor planning, poor curriculum development and poor instructional techniques. Applying technology in a manner that helps the student achieve the desired outcome is appropriate – replacing a good instructor with a poorly executed online program is not.

Together, understanding and applying these “rights” will help make your training programs stronger, your students happier, and yield a better return on your training dollar.

The Rights of Training is provided as a tool for clients of Oak Tree Systems as part of an ongoing effort to help them gain insight into the business of training and help them obtain the maximum return on their investment in their TrainingForce installation.

The Right Curriculum

Regardless of what you intend to provide training on, the best students, instructors and technology cannot make up for an inconsistent, dated, or poorly produced curriculum. This guide reviews six fundamentals critical to developing or acquiring the right curriculum.

- Focus on the Outcome
- Use Peer Review / Development Groups
- Understand the Audience
- Provide Good Information
- Use Pilot Programs
- Evaluate and Update Consistently

Focus on the Outcome

The first thing that should come to mind any time you are considering building or adopting a curriculum is the last thing your curriculum will produce – the student. What skill do you want the student to gain or refine during this activity? This used to be called the “terminal objective”; the current phrase is student learning outcome. At the end of the day, though – you want the student to come away with something they can immediately put into use. There are thousands of excellent training programs out there delivering knowledge – but the very best programs always allow a student to “do” something new, or “do” something better. Knowledge is only useful if the brain that stores it puts it to good use.

The training industry must always keep the students in mind because if we want to keep them returning to our classes, we have to deliver a quality product. This is especially true if you operate in a for-profit training center.

When you first start the curriculum evaluation or design process, ask yourself: What do I expect the student to do when they complete the program?

For years many educators – myself included – didn’t really pay much attention to that slide right after the title slide. The one that said “Objectives”. Almost every trainer or educator will admit to telling at least one class to simply disregard them. One emergency services instructor textbook says “Identify positive and negative instructor characteristics.” Everyone reading this paper can pick out right and wrong behaviors. But what was the author of the book really trying to get the student to do? In reading the text, the author is really trying to get the newly minted instructor to be a “good” instructor instead of a “bad” one. So what could the curriculum designer have used to better describe the student’s outcome?

TrainingForce Tip: When setting up a course, be sure to put the “big picture” student learning outcome on the Web information tab. It will display when the student looks at the details of a class.

One problem with outcome-based education is that with certain programs (such as an instructor program) it may appear to be harder to evaluate whether a student has attained the outcome. In fact, most of your test questions still apply. Students must still recognize the inappropriate characteristics, but they are part of a larger picture of the student's ability. Are they competent as an instructor? The best curricula take a higher-level view of competency and performance. When training paramedics and EMTs, before signing their test application the instructor always asked one final question – can this candidate take care of one of my children in an emergency?

TrainingForce Tip: Edit the sign in sheet and place student learning outcomes on the header so that a student understands what they can look forward to doing during the training evolution.

If you're considering using a curriculum that is already developed using traditional chapter-by-chapter objectives, it is easy to adapt. Take the time to compile a list of their objectives and write your own student learning outcomes as you review the student and instructor materials. If you find it hard to correlate the materials to your outcomes, that should be a red flag.

If you are developing your own training material, use student learning outcomes as a road map to the content. After development, have other stakeholders or subject matter experts review the material and identify content that cannot be clearly tied to a student learning outcome. You should consider adding or modifying outcomes if the extra content really needs to be included, or deleting the content if it isn't critical. Remember that a student is committing time to your program – something that is valuable to everyone. Show that you respect that commitment by cutting out extraneous or irrelevant content.

Use Peer Review / Development Groups

One of the easiest ways to ensure your content's quality is to form a peer review or development group. Publishers rely on these types of groups extensively, and they do so for a reason. Feedback, especially in the early stages of a project, can be extremely valuable. As the project matures, these groups can provide great insight into the student and instructor experience.

Once you have identified a training need, put together a group to serve as a resource for the project. As an alternative, a training organization can form one trusted group to provide feedback on multiple training projects, or even serve as an unofficial "board of directors". Allow the group to meet on a set schedule. Involving individuals outside the training department, or even from outside the company can build credibility for the finished product.

Although these groups are extremely valuable, be sure that the training organization retains control of the finished training project. Intellectual property rights are valuable, so consult with your legal counsel and set firm guidelines related to the group. Formal agreements may be appropriate in some situations where sensitive information or trade secrets are being discussed.

The group's purpose should be the free and open exchange of ideas related to the moderator's agenda, or their assignments.

Review the business or training need that is driving the project and set parameters for the group. In some cases the moderator may choose to make assignments for specific tasks, or simply set an agenda. Ensure there is a timeline for the group's involvement. Even with the best participants, sometimes meetings can take unexpected turns or have "off" days. Show respect for the group's time by keeping the meetings on-task and on-schedule.

Members of the group can be internal or external, but should be diverse enough to give you honest feedback. Even if there are no active projects, sometimes simply brainstorming and talking about the current state of your training programs can lead to discussion and positive change. Ask questions, have them review content and make suggestions.

TrainingForce Tip: Use the groups feature to restrict sample content to members of the development group.

Development groups often work by teleconference or web-based meeting. Face-to-face meetings are not always critical and can be costly. Use technology to keep costs down. Document-sharing sites such as Acrobat.Com, Microsoft Office Live, or Google Docs can allow multiple users to edit a document. That type of flexibility is valuable and can allow you to get the most value from the actual meeting. These web applications also allow group members to work on projects at their leisure. For corporate users, be sure the use of such sites conforms to your IT policy, or work with the IT staff to provide an alternative solution.

Understand the Audience

Remember to evaluate the audience; you hear this often but it can be among the biggest challenges a content developer faces. You need to look at three key things with any audience:

- To whom am I speaking?
- What do I want them to know, do or believe as a result of this session?
- What is the most effective way of composing and communicating the information to accomplish that with this group?

You must seek to establish common ground with your audience. Good instructors can do this quickly and effectively because they frequently share past similar experiences. Sharing a quick story, especially if it demonstrates a lesson you learned the hard way, can help the audience identify with you as a person, not just the speaker. Good curricula allow time and help the instructor establish this.

Understand the demographics of the audience for the curriculum. There are a number of factors that will affect how your curriculum is received. Age, gender and religion all play a part, as do the member's racial, ethical and cultural backgrounds.

In the curriculum design setting, age can be an especially important consideration. Younger audiences demand constant interaction and a “wow” factor that has been nurtured by the Internet and video games. They also respond well to learning that takes a competitive approach.

Don't be afraid to develop multiple versions of presentations or student materials that can be applied to specific audiences. Keep student learning outcomes and information consistent, but students will appreciate the effort to present information in a manner consistent with their need.

Even more important than a demographic understanding of the audience, good curriculum design must take into consideration the situation the audience will be in for the activity. Will the material be delivered online? In a classroom to 24 students? In an outside open area, from a stage, to 100 people? Each of these training options-require tweaks to how the information is presented and should be addressed in the curriculum. Instructors appreciate when a curriculum design takes into account potential pitfalls, and gives them ideas and tools for adapting to situational changes.

TrainingForce Tip: Set up TrainingForce Manager's custom fields section for each registration to capture any information that will help instructors understand the audience.

Instructors may not always be able to control some situational aspects, such as timing of an activity. Every instructor has had to follow a truly outstanding presenter, or teach immediately after the dreaded lunch break. Good curricula provide tips and tricks to help overcome these situations. Be sure any selected or developed program gives you flexibility to adapt without compromising the student learning outcomes.

The last thing you should keep in mind when developing or evaluating curricula is the audience's disposition toward the topic. Are they interested? What is their attitude about being part of the training and the topic? What is their existing knowledge level. One of the most common mistakes in curriculum design is trying to create material that is too universal – the experienced students get very disheartened when training consists of the lowest level information and doesn't challenge them. Likewise, tailoring a curriculum only to experienced providers may mean the one new person in the room feels alienated.

Provide Good Information

No amount of planning, whiz-bang graphics, or interactivity can make up for inconsistent, incomplete, or inaccurate information. Information should also be timely. Students tend to be savvy consumers, picking up on even tiny details such as dated photographs.

Incomplete, Inconsistent, or Inaccurate = Ineffective

Be sure the information you include is from credible sources. As helpful as the *Wikipedia* web site is, posted information is not always accurate or current. Even global news leaders such as CNN and NBC

have been fooled by seemingly factual information that turned out to be incorrect. Always verify information with the original source or document. Be sure you keep a record of, and give proper credit to, your sources of information.

Your development group can be especially useful in helping you identify potentially questionable information or positions. When information or comments are brought to your attention, you can take one of three courses of action:

1. Agree with the comment or change after you do your own research and can document why you agree with it; documentation of the change and your reasons why are especially important if you are changing your mind about a critical step, belief or position.
2. Reject a comment or suggestion. Be sure you can clearly cite reasons or resources to back up your position.
3. Make a change to the curriculum based on the comment, but not necessarily the change that was suggested.

A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet can be an excellent tool to track changes during the development process. Include columns in which to paraphrase the comment or change, the source of the comment, the dates the comment was received and addressed, what changes (if any) were made, and document the source of information supporting why the change was or was not made. Creating this type of documentation in support of your finished project will help ensure credibility if your materials are ever challenged.

When using photographs or videos, many developers lose sight of the fact you are trying to teach the audience the proper behavior. They include “funny” photos or videos of things that happen when students fail to apply the knowledge, skills or abilities being taught. Showing a \$300,000 fire truck submerged in a pond definitely illustrates what can happen when the driver doesn’t perform – but does it teach future drivers how to avoid the situation? Remember to design your materials so that the student is exposed to the positive behaviors you want them to emulate.

Good content shows good behavior.

Many developers have gotten into the habit of including multiple video clips in their materials. First, be sure you have appropriate legal permission to use or display the clip. Simply because the originator of the content posted it to YouTube, you may not be able to use it in your material, even if you simply link directly to the site. If you are using video to teach a specific skill, use a staged video first, clearly breaking the task down into specific steps. Follow that with a video of the skill being used in real life. Be sure any clips are narrated. Many instructors tend to talk right through video in a classroom setting and frequently miss key points the content developer intended – no matter how good the curricula’s lecture notes are constructed. Remember that clips set in real life often contain skill performance errors; acknowledge those mistakes but keep the focus on the steps that are done correctly.

A lot of instructional designers and even instructors are brought up believing that people remember X percent of what they see, Y percent of what they hear, Z percent of what they do, et cetera. *There is no current research to support claims that any one method of instruction is superior to another!* Don't you find it odd that those charts almost always show 10% increments? Review Hermann Ebbinghaus' *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology* because rather than focusing on how we remember, it discusses how things are forgotten. You can also research Edgar Dale's Cone of *Experience*, which is widely regarded as the basis of this belief. The original model was subjective, and even Dale himself warned against taking the model too literally. So what is the point? Good curriculum design dictates that you deliver your message in a manner that makes a strong impact on your audience. Simply put, always match the student and subject and deliver good information in a good way.

Use Pilot Programs

The process of obtaining feedback on a program while still under development is known as *formative evaluation*. Once you have the draft curriculum in hand, it often helps to work with a small group of individuals to validate the program before its' final release. If your goal is to deliver a quality program, using a small group of students can give you a formative evaluation. You may also hear these referred to as "pilot programs." These programs are most effective if the student has opportunity to put the training into practice immediately following the session. Remember that you are not restricted to a single pilot program – if your first pilot program comes back with substantial changes, it is perfectly acceptable to rework the project and run an additional pilot.

TrainingForce Tip: Use TrainingForce Quest to provide feedback opportunities to each student in the pilot program. Use the Groups feature to limit participation in the program and surveys to selected students. TrainingForce class reviews and discussion provide opportunities for students to leave valuable feedback on a course as well as engage in course discussions prompted by the instructor.

You should maintain close contact with students participating in the pilot program, especially if it is a longer course. Share the feedback from the pilot students with your peer development group.

So what kind of questions might be asked in a pilot program?

- Did the graphics, video, music, narration, etc. support the student learning outcomes, or confuse you?
- Did you understand what the program wanted you to be able to do, or do better – after training?
- Did the program succeed in helping you gain a new skill or ability?
- Were there any inconsistencies or inaccuracies in the program?
- Did the program reflect the way this will happen in real life?

Evaluate & Update

Evaluation takes many forms. We evaluate the competency of the student related to the student learning outcomes. We evaluate how well our instructors teach compared to the curriculum as designed. We should also be constantly evaluating whether the curriculum produces students that close the knowledge or skills gap we originally identified during the needs assessment.

Especially when introducing a new training program, the individual or group responsible for the curriculum must collect feedback on the program's effectiveness. Developing or acquiring a program is a significant expense, and every training organization wants to maximize the return on its investment. The earlier you can identify and fix errors, the better.

Curricula should be evaluated after delivery of the first programs and on a defined schedule (normally every two to three years) after that.

Changes to a program should be made on a scheduled basis, unless it involves a critical change in the process. Changes of a critical nature are triggered by significant events, such as a new machine or identification of a life safety. The curriculum developer should know what events merit a change immediately, versus a change in the next update cycle. Keep a list of suggestions and changes (you may already have the Excel spreadsheet – keep it going!) so that when you and the development group are ready to update the program, you have a list to work from.

Many designers, especially those responsible for online courses, seem to think that frequently updating content is a good thing, but consider the student's perspective. Most programs are not that dynamic – frequently changing material can be perceived by students that the original program wasn't well thought out.

In Closing

Training organizations succeed when they have quality training for their programs and company. When creating a program it is important to identify the course outcomes (and provide complete and consistent information), understand the demographic you are training and create an environment that facilitates learning and understanding. Yes, technology can be used in the training process, but it is important to make sure that the technology is helping the program and not taking away from it. A successful training program takes time and may need to be adjusted a few times before it is complete. Oak Tree Systems is your partner in training, and helps your organization stay focused on learning.