

## Learners Teaching Learners: A Powerful Way to Train.

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**Note:** This article is formatted using the 4 Cs Accelerated Learning instructional design process. To get the most from this article, you are encouraged to participate in activities along the way. You will learn more, and be able to apply what you learn, because of your participation. For more information about the 4 Cs, download the free article titled: "Bag It! A Quick and Remarkably Easy Instructional Design Process."

### CONNECTIONS

**Picture This:** You are designing a 3-hour training which you will present in a couple of days. You are in perfect health except for one sudden, unexpected physical change - you have suddenly lost your voice. Totally. Completely. Not even a whisper to break the silence.

What action do you decide to take?  
Choose one:

**Option 1:** You cancel the training, or postpone it until you get your voice back.

**Option 2:** You hire someone else, or you ask a colleague (through email, since you have no voice) to do the training.

**Option 3:** You redesign the training so that the learners do the teaching.

If you chose options 1 or 2, this story has ended and you need to read no further (unless you are curious about option 3).

If you chose option 3, you may already be moving in the direction of handing over some of the direct instruction to the learners you teach, or you may be really curious about the concept. There is a good chance that, until now, you may not have even known that option 3 existed simply because you have never seen it done. But it DOES exist and it CAN be done. *Learners can, in fact, teach themselves and each other, even when the information to be learned is new to them.*



## CONCEPTS

Of course, you may not be able to hand everything over to the learners to teach, but a surprising amount of direct instruction can come from the learners. Bob Pike, author of *The Creative Training Techniques Handbook*, maintains that learners probably know about 70% of what trainers plan to teach them; they just may not realize that they already know it. **Therefore, regardless of the topic, many of the concepts you cover during training can be taught and reinforced by the learners themselves.** It may take a bit of time, forethought, and detailed planning on your part, but it can be done.

### Talk Less; Teach More.

Why not just lecture? More to the point, why even think about involving learners in the instructional part of your training? After all, you obviously know a lot more about the topic than the training participants do. In fact, some trainers (present company excepted!) often go so far as to assume that learners know nothing about the topic until they hear it from the trainer.

Research, and your own learning experiences, prove otherwise. You already know that, the more learners are actively engaged in the learning process (discussing, writing, imitating, questioning, practicing, doing, and the like), the more they are able to remember and use the information later.

You also know that learners have often been exposed to “informal” learning experiences even before the “formal” instruction begins.

### Informal and Formal Learning.

**One-Minute Lists:** In the next 60-seconds, make two written lists. The first list will contain all the informal learning experiences that you can think of. An example might be learning something by watching a movie. The second list will include all the formal learning experiences that you can think of. An example might be attending a class. After one minute or less of writing your lists, continue reading.

#### Informal Learning Experiences

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#### Formal Learning Experiences

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Your list of informal learning experiences probably included some of the following: watching others, listening to a discussion, playing a game, trying it yourself, having a family member or friend teach you, or gathering information on your own via movies, television, books, or the internet.

For formal learning experiences, you probably listed some of the following: classroom-based or web-based training, lessons, workshops, textbooks or workbooks, job-shadowing, becoming an apprentice, being tutored by an expert, and guided practice with an instructor.

Obviously, we all learn through a combination of both informal and formal instruction. More importantly, the learners in your training have had both informal and formal learning experiences as well.



Even if a topic is brand new to them, learners have often heard information about it, or have been exposed to concepts related to it - on television, in books, in conversations with other employees, or on the internet.

Learners don't usually sign up for classes or training knowing absolutely nothing about the topic. Moreover, there is usually a good chance that many of the other learners in a training will also know something about the topic, and may even know a lot of what the trainer knows.

### **Learners Master What THEY Teach.**

If you really acknowledge that learners in your training programs may already know a lot about the topic, then it follows that, if given the opportunity, they can teach each other what they know. Taking this concept one step further, you can also give them the opportunity to teach each other some new information as well.

There is a lot of research to support having learners teach each other instead of having all the direct instruction done solely by the trainer. Much of the research points to the fact that teaching someone else is the most powerful, and longest-lasting, way to learn. In the act of teaching another human being, learners:

- **Define** what they know.
- **Demonstrate** what they know.
- **Refine** what they know.
- **Master** what they know.

In other words, when learners teach each other, they begin to define, demonstrate, and refine their own knowledge, and attain a level of mastery that they would otherwise have missed. Put another way, learners teach so that they can learn - and, incidentally, so does the trainer.

## Look Who's Talking.

This is not to say that you relinquish your role as trainer. It does suggest that you take a close look at your training content to determine if, in fact, much of the information you think YOU need to state verbally can, instead, come out of the mouths of your learners.

*You take a hard look at how much of the training time YOU spend talking, while your learners simply sit and listen to you lecture. Then you decide how much of your content can be taught in another fashion that allows the learners to do much, if not most, of the talking.*

## Playing with Options.

How do you begin to hand some of the teaching back to the learners? First, you decide that learning can happen in all sorts of diverse ways, as the informal and formal lists demonstrate. Second, you begin to mix the informal in with the formal, choosing a variety of ways to engage learners in the actual direct instruction. Finally, you learn some specific instructional strategies that help you create structured “learners teaching learners” classroom experiences. Three of these instructional strategies are listed below as possible instructional options.

## **CONCRETE PRACTICE**

**Back to Our Story:** You have chosen to redesign the training so that the learners do the teaching. Now how do you go about doing that?

Choose an option:

**Option A:** You convert your lecture notes into a handout. On the training day, when learners enter the room, you hand them the printed material with a note that says, “I’ve lost my voice. Please read the lecture and then answer the test questions. At the end of the training, pass in your test papers.”

**Option B:** You divide up your lecture information into sections. When your learners are seated in their table groups, you pass out the sections, one per table. The instructions you’ve printed on the white board say, “Your table group is responsible for teaching this segment of information to the class. You will have 60 minutes to read through the material, discuss it with your table group, summarize the material in your own words, and design a presentation. You will then have about 30 minutes to present the information to the class. Please choose a table group facilitator and begin.”

**Option C:** You design a number of “learning stations” (i.e. independent learning areas) around the perimeter of the class. There will be a specific, topic-related task for learners to accomplish at each learning station.

Each station’s task or activity covers some of the training concepts. You post the printed instructions for the activities at each learning station. You also make sure each station has all the materials necessary for the activity there. As learners enter the room, they read a slide that says, “Please sit at one of the six learning stations in the room. Then choose a group facilitator and read the activity instructions. You will have thirty minutes to complete the activity. When the timer rings, please rotate stations.”

Not yet sure which option to choose? Here is some more information that may help you in making your decision:

**For Option A:** Learners who are strong readers will do well with this option. Learners who need to discuss the training content, or who need hands-on practice with some of the concepts, will not fare as well. Although this option is certainly one you can choose, it is probably the least effective one of the three.

**For Option B:** This is called a “Teach-Back,” where learners actually become experts on part of the training material as they read, discuss, and teach other learners what they know. It is an effective way of creating learner involvement with, and ownership of, the material. It also creates more interest in the information, more creativity in the lecture presentations, and more diverse ways of learning.

**For Option C:** The “Learning Stations” approach to learners-directed instruction has been around for a decades and is one of the most widely-used independent learning strategies in training today. The topic-related activities at each station can be very diverse: reading, writing, discussing, playing a game, constructing a model, taking a test, designing a presentation, answering questions, reading a set of flashcards, and so on. As with option B, this choice is also an effective way of creating learner involvement with, and ownership of, the material. Plus it enhances long-term retention of what is learned.



Obviously options B and C are two very effective ways of creating learner-directed instruction. These options will take more planning time than option A, with the payoff, of course, being the increased learner involvement and retention.

With options B and C, you will know, by observing and listening, how much of the material your learners actually understand. You will know which concepts you might need to re-teach later (when you get your voice back), and which concepts have been mastered by the learners. You will have created powerful ways for learners to take charge of their own learning. The bottom line? ***Learners will learn and remember more because they had the opportunity to teach each other and themselves.***

(Note: You will find specific, “how-to” instructions for the Teach Back and Learning Station activities in other free, downloadable articles on this website).

## CONCLUSIONS

**End of Our Story:** A reporter hears that you held a training without speaking the entire time. Intrigued, the reporter sets up an interview with you to discover how you taught without talking. As you describe the training strategy you used, you summarize your narrative with one of the following statements.

Choose a statement:

**Statement 1:** I created ways for learners to teach themselves and each other, without any trainer-led lectures, but instead with written instructions that involved the learners throughout the training.

**Statement 2:** Learners took charge of their own learning by following my written instructions and teaching each other what they needed to learn. In effect, they became the trainers.

**Statement 3:** I made the learners the center of the training by allowing them to become the subject matter experts as they read, discussed, learned, taught, and reviewed new information all on their own.

Whichever statement you chose, the bottom-line remains the same: you created a way for learners to teach each other while you remained available to assist and guide them, should the need arise. *You helped learners teach learners, thereby ensuring that they would be able to more easily define, demonstrate, refine, and master what they learned.*

The reporter is suitably impressed. She remarks, "Bravo for you! Perhaps one day you will write a training article that explains how to create more powerful learning experiences by allowing learners to teach learners. What a new way of training THAT will be!"

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This article is part of Sharon's newest book, to be published in 2008 by Pfeiffer Co., a division of John Wiley & Sons. Log onto [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) for Sharon's five popular training books already in print.



Sharon Bowman helps educators and business people "teach it quick and make it stick," - fine-tuning their information-delivery skills and turning their passive listeners into active learners.

For more information about Sharon and her books and training services, log onto [www.Bowperson.com](http://www.Bowperson.com), or email her at [SBowperson@aol.com](mailto:SBowperson@aol.com).

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