

ABSTRACT:**DON'T STRIKE A MATCH: SWITCH ON THE LIGHT!**

Workplace educators should reject Taylorism. We should not see ourselves as "trainers" teaching workers to perform one task perfectly to conform to a competency standard or a system of evaluation. This is the equivalent of striking a match to illuminate one small patch of darkness.

The role of the adult educator should be that of an "elucidator" switching on the light so workers can find their own way. This means empowerment and self-motivated learning.

A discussion session in which I will give examples of this theory in practice (in diverse workplaces with diverse participants) and answer questions.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

I hold an MA degree in Linguistics from Oxford University. I have been in education for nearly 30 years and for most of that time I was training ESL teachers. When I moved to Sydney four years ago I was employed by Sydney City Mission to teach ESL to long-termed unemployed people. The Mission trains more than 5000 people each year in 14 Training Centres throughout Sydney and New South Wales. As some of our clients were Australians, I developed a Communication Skills course to include them as well the migrants.

The nearby Sunbeam/Victa factory management heard about my course and, at the end of 1990, approached me to run a similar course for their workers. As the project was unique in NSW, we received a year's ETF funding to train 160 workers in what we called Cross-Cultural Communication Skills. We continue to run courses at Sunbeam/Victa on a fee for service basis.

Other organisations have heard about these courses and approached the Mission for similar training. I have trained other teachers to follow my approach using my materials and I am now part of a separate division of Mission Training Services called the Industry Training Division.

We have trained hundreds of workers in many different workplaces, including Telecom, Utilux, Sterlands and Concord Hospital. We have recently received one year's WELL funding to train workers at Frito-Lay, during which we will trial the ALAN scales.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS COURSES available from the Industry Training Division of Mission Training Services include :

1. CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION COURSE (LONG)

Duration: 50 hours.

Times: Optimally 1 hr/day x 5 days/wk x 10 weeks. BUT we are flexible and respond to particular workplace circumstances.

Class size: Optimum 12 Maximum 15

Content: Essential 15 hours of Communication Skills Theory and Individual Talks/Presentations, followed by 35 hours of options such as Spelling, Tenses, Idioms, Letter Writing

or Numeracy (depending on individual and workplace needs).

Target Group: Ideal for those of Non-English Speaking Background. It also helps English speakers to communicate more effectively with NESBs and we encourage the attendance of two or three English speakers in every class.

2. CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION COURSE (SHORT)

Duration: 25 hours.

Times: Optimally as for long course, on a daily basis for 5 weeks.

Class size: Optimum 12 Maximum 15

Content: Essential 15 hours of Communication Skills Theory and Individual Talks/Presentations, followed by 10 hours of options such as Report Writing, Leadership Skills and Management Styles (dependent on individual/workplace needs).

Target Group: Ideal for 'Key Communicators' such as managers, foremen, supervisors, switchboard operators and clerical staff.

Designed to break down the barriers between workplace cultures (eg blue and white collar).

A reasonable standard of English is required.

3. SHORT AND VERY SPECIFIC COURSES

Duration: As necessary, following pre-course discussions.

Eg: 12 hours: Writing for Results for Middle Management.

8 hours: Job Application Skills

8 hours: Presentation Skills

12 hours: Customer Contact Skills

Class size: By arrangement Optimum 12 Maximum 15

Content: Needs based.

DON'T STRIKE A MATCH: SWITCH ON THE LIGHT!

Jill Thomson

Mission Training Services

Sydney

The Australian workplace has (in theory, if not always in practice) rejected Taylorism; which treated workers as robots trained to perform mindless, repetitive, narrow tasks. This was the workplace where the workers 'left their brains at the gate and picked them up again on the way home'.

The term 'trainer' fits this era, with its connotations of animals mindlessly jumping through hoops.

We are now entering a new era with a new workplace culture.

This new culture, in common with other cultures, has its own language. As part of this culture, workplace educators have learnt to use words like 'restructuring', 'broadbanding', 'multiskilling' 'flattening', 'career-pathing' and a host of others.

Amid this plethora of new terms, I have yet to find one that replaces 'trainer'. (My own official title is 'Executive Trainer' and is one I am not comfortable with. 'Educator' is an improvement, with its origins in

'leading out', but it doesn't really describe what I do. 'Facilitator' is trendy; but I believe in challenging and stretching people, not making things easy for them.)

I am concerned that many workplace educators are seen, or see themselves, as trainers. We have to set specific, measurable objectives for our programs and train our participants to perform specific tasks to conform to competency standards. I can't help picturing those circus hoops.

The other picture I can't get out of my mind is that of a solitary match lighting up a tiny patch of darkness. If we focus on specific, narrow tasks and outcomes we are only lighting up a tiny finite part of the infinite darkness of the unknown.

I believe that the role of the adult educator should be that of an 'elucidator' switching on the light to give a broader view and enable workers to find their own way. Better still, let's show them where the switches are so that they can turn on the lights themselves.

Finding their own way means self-motivated learning. This is a much broader idea than self-paced learning. Self-motivated learners will learn under any circumstances, although they will naturally opt for methods they find compatible.

There are many ways to motivate people: reward and punishment are the two most generally used. (And we're back to those animals jumping through hoops again.)

Self-motivation is different because it comes from within; not from external influences. It implicates self-esteem and predicates empowerment. All of which sounds like high-faluting theory; so let's come down to earth and discuss examples of this theory in practice.

EXAMPLES:

A: a 60 year old Italian who has never been to school, either in Italy or Australia.

Now practises handwriting at every opportunity and reads aloud words from the handouts I distribute. (OHT)

B: a 31 year old who had limited schooling in Lebanon. Copied everything I wrote on the board and was delighted with her improved reading and writing skills at the end of a 50 hour course.

C: a 43 year old Laotian who has asked to do a Train the Trainer course.

D: a 51 year old Australian who was nervous about doing a First Aid course and is now in charge of the First Aid training and Chairman of the Safety Committee.

E: 2 process workers (a Mauritian and an Australian) who have gone together to do a secretarial course at TAFE.

F: an Indian process worker who has found the confidence to enrol at Macquarie University to get Australian qualifications in his field of engineering.

G: a 55 year old Swede who had lost his powers of concentration and ability to write after suffering a stroke. He is now writing beautifully and has become a multiskilled, flexible worker.

H: a 42 year old Australian process worker with minimal schooling who has bought the Ten-Week Teach-Yourself Course (a Penguin-CAE book) 'Improve

Your Spelling' and a PC. He sees these as tools to improve his literacy skills.

I could go on and on with similar examples; but I'm sure you get the picture.

What I want to emphasise is that:

1. it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to specify outcomes like these at the beginning of a program and
2. none of these people were 'trained' to achieve these outcomes.

Point 1 raises questions about pre- and post-course assessments and 'streaming' or grouping people accordingly. It is one thing to allow people to identify their own goals and needs and quite a different matter to label them as someone who should be put into a particular box or allowed a certain number of matches.

It also raises questions about curriculum design. Until the light is switched on, many people are groping around in the dark without knowing where to go or even what is out there hidden from their view.

Point 2 also raises questions about the curriculum as well as the methodology, the learning environment, the group dynamics, the individual and the 'trainer'.

My response to these questions has been to develop a curriculum that begins with Understanding How Communication Works and includes topics such as Assertiveness, Problem-Solving, Memory Skills and Morale and Motivation as well as topics such as Spelling Strategies and Pronunciation Exercises. The first part of the course, Understanding How Communication Works, is considered essential as this 'switches on the light'. We recommend that this is followed by Giving Talks/Presentations: participants are given the skills and support to give a 5 minute presentation that is graded by the rest of the group. This gives a huge confidence boost.

The rest of the course is a matter of choice. Prior consultation with unions, management and supervisors will have identified certain areas of concern and particular topics are then chosen from a list of options given to the participants. This democratic process empowers the group by putting them in control and also creates team bonding by working towards shared goals.

The idea of the team is essential to success. Those who have strengths and skills share them with those who do not. A Vietnamese with poor speaking skills but good writing skills will team up with an illiterate, articulate Australian and a highly educated Pole to produce a letter of complaint that will achieve the desired results.

This is in harmony with the new workplace culture which stresses the importance of teamwork. It clashes with competency standards and testing procedures which focus on individual achievement.

The team bonding starts with the way the participants are seated: in a horseshoe formation, separating people from the same work areas or with the same language background or of the same sex. This is done to integrate the group and encourage cross-cultural communication.

We then lay down these ground rules:

Freedom of speech:

Everyone must feel free to speak or ask questions about anything.

People are people:

People are human and therefore not perfect; so they will all make mistakes at some time. We must expect and accept this.

People are all different; so should be considered as individuals: they should not be labelled or stereotyped.

People should not be divided into 'them' and 'us'.

Democracy:

As far as possible, the wishes of the majority of the group will be met.

This seems to create an environment of trust, honesty and openness in which the participants become aware of their own strengths and the strengths of others and feel individually and as a team more empowered and in control. They motivate others and themselves to learn and grow. They 'see the light'.

If we can switch on lights all round Australia, perhaps we can find our way out of the present gloom and really become the 'clever country'.