Characteristics and Competencies of an Effective Trainer
By Stephen J. Bavolek, Ph.D.

The title of this chapter speaks volumes to the challenges that you face on your quest to become an effective trainer. Conducting a quality training experience is not an easy task and is not recommended for those who take evaluative comments as personal criticism. The challenges are many, but so are the positive payoffs – if you are not afraid of going after them. The positive payoffs of conducting a training experience don’t just automatically come to anyone. You have to work hard to achieve them, have a strong conviction that you can be a superb instructor, and a relentless determination to pursue that goal. Anything else and you will fall into the wasteland of ho-hum instructors who bore people to death and give learning a bad name. The moment we step into the role of trainer, we have an ethical responsibility to be the stimulus for the growth and development of those who are in our audience. So if you’re ready to be a truly great “learning stimulus, let’s get going.

What’s in a Title?
A lot. A title connotes what the experience will be all about. It also connotes your style and what the possible outcomes will be. Let’s examine the terms more closely.

First, some self-assessment. Look at each of the following terms in the box at the top of the next column and select the pair that best describes you and your audience.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Yes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you a <strong>Trainer</strong>?</td>
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<td>Is your audience Trainees?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you an <strong>Instructor</strong>?</td>
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<td>Is your audience Instructees?</td>
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<td>Are you an <strong>Educator</strong>?</td>
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<td>Is your audience Learners?</td>
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<td>Are you a <strong>Facilitator</strong>?</td>
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<td>Is your audience Discoverers?</td>
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<td>Are you a <strong>Teacher</strong>?</td>
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<td>Is your audience Students?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you a <strong>Leader</strong>?</td>
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<td>Is your audience Followers?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you a <strong>Presenter</strong>?</td>
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<td>Is your audience Participants?</td>
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What did you choose? It wasn’t that easy, was it? At times, your role can vary and be any one of these titles. It depends on what your goal is and what your agenda is. Now, let’s examine the terms.

**Trainer / Trainees**
Sounds pretty sterile, doesn’t it? The term is usually used to describe learning situations with animals. You know, elephant trainer, horse trainer, dog trainer. The term doesn’t instill confidence in your trainee’s ability to fully comprehend and integrate the learning that’s taking place on some meaningful level. But training is important when you want to teach the techniques or mechanics of some skill, like massaging an infant. Training answers the question, “How”? Techniques are the means to the end and training is the best way to accomplish that goal. But infant massage is much more than training; knowing which stroke to use, when to use them, the direction and pressure of the stroke are all critical in helping parents incorporate massage into their parenting practices.

**Instructor / Instructed**
This is a weird dyad. People don’t generally go around calling themselves instructees! An instructor gives instructions and seems to be like a trainer. Maybe an instructor is a trainer of people. You know, cooking instructor, music instructor, massage instructor, etc. When you instruct someone, it generally means you’re telling them what to do. This works in some learning situations – but not in many. “Read the instructions” and you’ll know what to do. More boredom.

**Educator / Learners**
Learning is the ability to assimilate information into a meaningful and useful manner, to enhance an individual’s knowledge, understanding and skills. It sounds like a learner is in a better place than a trainee or instructee.

**Facilitator / Discoverers**
Now, this is a term almost never spoken in a learning environment – Discoverers! Too bad. It is the most important, powerful way to learn. Self-discovery of information has a much higher rate of retention because – you guessed it – it was self-discovered!

The ah-ha moments of life are few and far between. A facilitator is one who sets up a learning environment that promotes the cause of self-discovery. If you ever wonder about the power of self-discovery, spend time in a preschool when children are “allowed” free play. Sit back and watch the excitement.
Teacher / Students
The word “teacher” has diminished in value over the years. So has the word “student.” For many, it conjures up a rigid system of test taking, failure, punishment, homework, report cards, notes/calls from the principal, suspension and expulsion. The system is called school. School – a group of beings all being taught to follow the rules, conform to some standard and be constantly evaluated. School is the only place students can “fail” learning. Think about it.

Leader / Followers
Some refer to themselves as “workshop leaders.” Gross! Here is education at its worst. Followers are mindless puppets that do whatever is asked of them. History should tell us this is the wrong term to use in education. “Lead, follow, or get out of the way.” I think this term should be dropped from any reference to education.

Presenter / Participants
A presenter operates on their agenda. The script has been written, the notes are in order, the transparencies lined up and the time clock is set. This will go on at this time and not a minute over. Presenters are only worried about covering their material. The participant is just that – there to participate in the presenter’s agenda. Little value is given to the participants’ outcomes.

So, which are you? It depends on how you view the learning experience. I do know this, after nearly 25 years of conducting learning opportunities for fellow human beings interested in the topic, one needs to be flexible to suit the audience.

How Does Learning Occur?
What a wonderful question to ask: How do human beings learn something? Let’s examine the critical attributes of learning.

Experiences
Sounds simple enough, but people of all ages learn through experiences, and experiences can be either positive or negative. If you prick your finger with a pin, or get a paper cut, you learn what pain is. You might also learn about band-aids, and, how to prevent the pain from happening again. No guarantee on this one though!

People also learn from positive experiences. If someone calls attention to your efforts or accomplishments, you learn that trying or succeeding is a good thing.

Experiential learning has been shown to be the most powerful means of acquiring new attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills. Creating an environment that embraces experiential learning will leave your audience in awe - just like preschoolers!

Cognitive and Affective Learning
People learn on two levels: on the cognitive level, which increases knowledge, understanding, facts, and the like; and the affective level, which promotes an awareness of emotions. Did you know that behavior is a combination of a person’s knowledge and emotions at any given moment? If we behave in accordance to our knowledge and emotions, and if memories and feelings are the result of past experiences, if a learning environment was established that took into account cognitive and affective learning, new ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors would emerge.

Active and Passive Learning
Active learning has been known to produce excited learners simply because learners who are active are doing something. But, being active all the time is tiring, so we have to sit down in the recliner of passive learning. Passive learners are observers. There is a value for both active and passive learning to occur in a learning experience. Take time to list the positive and negative aspects of active and passive learning.

Active and Passive Teaching
Not surprisingly, when the learner is active, the trainer is being a facilitator: promoting self-discovery. When the learner is passive, the facilitator now becomes the trainer. See the difference?

Combinations are Best
So, the optimal learning environment occurs when the learner is:

- alternating cognitive and affective modes of learning;
- alternating active and passive modes of engagement; and
- is engaged in experiential learning, promoting self-discovery.

To accomplish this, a learner needs a facilitator, a trainer, and an educator. Whoever said we couldn’t be all things to all people!
Styles of Teaching
Choose the characteristics that best describe your style of teaching:

Yes No Sometimes

1. Lecturer ___ ___ ___
2. Overkill on personal experience ___ ___ ___
3. Hand wringer ___ ___ ___
4. Nervous Nelly ___ ___ ___
5. Soft spoken ___ ___ ___
6. Loud ___ ___ ___
7. Mumbler ___ ___ ___
8. Pacer ___ ___ ___
9. Stationary ___ ___ ___
10. Enjoying ___ ___ ___
11. Hands in the pocket/money jingler ___ ___ ___
12. Uses humor ___ ___ ___
13. Uses the term “ok” a lot ___ ___ ___
14. Makes eye contact ___ ___ ___
15. Uses transition noise (ah, um) ___ ___ ___
16. Boring ___ ___ ___
17. Too cognitive ___ ___ ___
18. Flexible ___ ___ ___
19. Sticks to agenda-always ___ ___ ___
20. Starts on time ___ ___ ___
21. Ends on time ___ ___ ___
22. Dresses casual ___ ___ ___
23. Dresses formal ___ ___ ___
24. Fast talker ___ ___ ___
25. Know-it-all ___ ___ ___
26. Entertainer ___ ___ ___
27. Apologizer ___ ___ ___
28. Preacher ___ ___ ___

Characteristics of Learners
Each group has its own personality, and within each training experience, individual personalities will emerge. Brainstorm strategies in handling the following personalities:

1. Dominates the group with personal experiences as answers to questions.
2. Snoozer – sleeps during workshop.
3. Acts as a “co-trainer.”
5. Challenger - challenges the trainer’s comments.
6. Is clearly disengaged: reading the newspaper.
7. Knits during the training.
8. Talks to others all the time during the training.
9. Asks a lot of questions.
10. Is a head nodder – whatever you say, s/he agrees.
11. The absorber – takes in everything
12. The rescuer – bails out others.
13. Rebellious – finds no value in the training. Wants money back after third day.

Self-Rating Scale
The following characteristics are most often mentioned when describing a good workshop facilitator. Using the characteristics provided, rate yourself on a scale of 0 to 5 in each for the characteristics.

0 1 2 3 4 5

1. Flexible ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
2. Creative ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
3. Knowledgeable ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
4. Respectful ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
5. Practical ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
6. Empathic ___ ___ ___ ___ ___
7. Appropriate Humor ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

Key
0 Not my style 3 This is my style 50% of the time
1 Hardly every my style 4 Often
2 Sometimes 5 This is definitely my style

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