Being Engaged is Just the Beginning:
Make it Last Using Performance Centered Learning®

by Roy Strauss

*Julie was beaming as she showed off her new engagement ring to her admiring friends. "He just proposed to me last night and I accepted!" She held it out and they nearly swooned. However, when she visited her parents that weekend their reaction was somewhat different. They were happy for her, but were decidedly less excited than her friends had been. "That's a start," said her father. "How many children are you planning to have?" asked her mother. These were the voices of experience. Julie felt confused and let down. Why weren't they as excited as she was? Didn't they understand **she was engaged!** That was what was important!*

Little did Julie realize the hard work of marriage was yet to come. True, for a successful marriage it is important to become engaged first. But this merely sets the stage; engagement is not the goal in itself or the end of the story.

Likewise in our field, we constantly hear that to provide good training we need to get the learner *engaged*, and training has to be *interactive and fun*. To motivate the learner and keep their attention, we need good graphics and games, as if this were the end in itself. We know that it is not the end in itself and not the end of the story. The real goal is to provide the knowledge and skills so learners can perform the relevant job task, be it sales, customer service, operating software or machinery, or leading a team.

Just like the marriage example, to provide good training we need to involve the learner, but just because the learner is engaged (paying attention) it doesn't mean they are necessarily learning anything useful. They may be watching the colorful animations, or laughing at the instructor's jokes, or waiting for candy to be tossed out for correct answers. This doesn't necessarily mean they are getting any closer to mastering the learning objectives. While a presentation may both hold the learner's attention and provide good content, it may not be an effective learning experience.

Based on the current research in **Cognitive Science**, we know that in our minds, *content and context are linked and encoded together*; information is stored along with the situation in which it was learned. If not taught together, then the content is largely inert information (facts), and cannot be easily applied to the relevant situation. In the scientific literature this linking is called "Context-Dependent Memory." (For more information see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Context-dependent_memory.) This is why for example, if an important event in one's life occurs while they happen to hear music, then when they hear that piece of music again, they will most likely remember the event.

As an example in the training field, consider that simply reading a software user manual rarely allows one to actually start using that software on the job. Before one can perform the skill, the knowledge (which buttons to click, menus to use, etc.) must be learned and practiced in context (on a live computer running the software to do real tasks). In fact, the time spent first reading the user manual is considerably less beneficial than spending the same amount of time practicing with the software to accomplish real-world tasks.

We believe learners are entitled to training experiences that are not only engaging and instructive, but that prepare them to actually perform the job task at hand. As business professionals, we do not always have the budgetary resources we would like, but we must still deliver effective training. How can we reconcile these factors? The good news is that effective training is not a matter of budget, but of training design, and crafting a high-quality learning experience.

How can one do this? Designing training programs that place the learner into relevant, realistic situations which progress from simple to complex, and challenge them to make the correct decisions as they work through those situations makes for effective training. Each scenario has multiple decision points, and at each decision point, the learner is provided with the information they need to make the decision and move forward.

By providing the information when it is needed (or just-in-time), and using it immediately in that context, the information (content) is linked to the appropriate situation, and will be retrieved more reliably when a similar situation (context) arises on the job.

Consider this example: If you were going to have a surgical procedure, how would you like the surgeon to have been trained?

1. Motivational Presentation (Message – do the operation safely!)
2. Informational education (Here is the knowledge you need to perform the procedure)
3. Scenario-based practice (Practice performing the operation)

Obviously #3!

Many think that the learner should receive all three presentations in that order, but this is not necessary and is actually a poor use of the learner's time. When properly designed, the Scenario-based practice method (#3) will accomplish the first two points as well. By placing the learner in a relevant situation and asking them to make decisions, they find it inherently interesting (accomplishing #1); and by providing content when they need it to make the decision, they will gain the information needed (accomplishing #2). Even better, that information will be encoded with the relevant situation for reliable recall on the job.

What is the proper way to design or write a scenario-based practice method that accomplishes all three elements? Here are some guidelines:

- **Identify scenarios that are relevant and realistic** to the learner and their anticipated on-the-job experiences – this creates inherently motivating programs.
- **Organize scenarios from simple to complex** – this gives learners a feeling of security and mastery of the materials, which is very important for lessening tension so learning can occur.
- **Give learners just enough information to begin** the first scenario – keep the initial boring orientation stuff to a minimum so you don't lose their interest before learning even starts.

- **Use the scenario as a framework to ask learners to make decisions** – this takes them from one relevant decision-point to the next (teachable moments), so they are continuously involved in the unfolding scenario and are engaged and challenged with a relevant situation.
- **At the teachable moment, give them the content they need to make the decision** – this makes sure content is stored with the proper context, so that later in the work situation they will be able to recall the training experience, and reliably retrieve that content.
- **Do not provide content ahead of time, outside of a scenario context** – when time is spent learning content outside the scenario context, that time spent is largely wasted, because that content is inert, and not easily retrievable when the relevant context comes along.

We call this scenario-based training method Performance Centered Learning®, because it focuses on putting the user in a situation to perform the task, and in so doing learn the skill. Fortunately this method is applicable to any training media or method, be it live instruction, elearning, social media or self-study workbooks. And to apply it and engage the learner does not require a large production budget or high-tech gimmickry.

Whether you are writing a self-instructional workbook, performing a live classroom session, or designing high-tech elearning, or social networking, if you start by placing they learner into a realistic situation, ask them to make decisions and give them the correct content and feedback at that moment, they will not only become engaged, but the content will become wedded to the right context, and they will have a successful marriage of skills and knowledge on the job!

Biography
Roy Strauss has been designing and developing technology-based training for over 20 years, and believes learners are entitled to engaging and energizing learning experiences that provide them with real skills they can immediately apply to their jobs. To realize this vision, he founded Cedar Interactive 12 years ago. Cedar Interactive works with organizations in Chicago and nationwide providing custom learning solutions, including instructional design and development, as well as technological solutions to improve personnel performance.