WRITING CAFETERIA LEARNING OBJECTIVES

4

Just as with any learning experience, designing an effective Cafeteria Learning workshop begins with writing the learning objectives. Before you can create activities or fill out your workshop with content, you need to have the end in mind. If you’re not concerned about what your learners should be able to demonstrate on the job after the workshop, it won’t matter how many or what kind of choices you offer. You’ll be just like Alice asking the Cheshire Cat for directions but not caring where they lead her. Any direction will do.

Cafeteria Learning objectives are unique in that there are relatively few of them and the design is typically based around three core objectives. They are also designed specifically to allow for choice. Here are four quick steps for creating learning objectives for Cafeteria Learning. The steps may look familiar, but they incorporate suggestions on how to complete them with choice in mind.

Clarify Content

Subject matter experts (SMEs) and learning professionals need each other. Each brings different strengths and information to a project. The learning design expert can build an innovative, beautiful framework, but without the content expert’s contribution, the structure could easily crumble (Figure 4-1). In the end, we all have the same goal: a dynamic learning experience that captures the audience’s attention and makes a meaningful difference.

<<insert Figure 4-1; Figure 4-1. Learning Professional and SMEs Need to Work Together>>

Some SMEs think learners should know everything possible about a given subject and thus would like to cram as much information into the learning program. They may be expressing their perceived need, or their stated request, typically a result of a problem they are experiencing. This is often phrased in terms of a preconceived solution they have already in mind*.* Instead, a well-designed learning experience should be limited to only the content that will achieve the desired goal. The process of writing effective and strategic learning objectives involves not only knowing what content to include, but nearly as important, what content not to include. This is why it’s so essential when crafting your learning objectives to always begin with the end in mind.

By clarifying content, you’ll be able to provide an effective structure for the vast amounts of information that you (or your SME) possess, crafting strategic learning objectives in the process. Here are some tips to remember when working with SMEs to clarify content:

Understand your role.Learning professionals are notoften experts in the content areas they write about, nor should they expect to become experts. Learn as much as possible about the subject in order to create a learning experience that’s meaningful for the audience. The added expertise will enable you to organize and create a fabulous learning program.

It’s mostly about respect. Regard SMEs as the true experts. Sometimes they bring 30 years of detailed knowledge. Even if this knowledge comes in the form of a pile of printed materials thicker than the tallest coffee mug, still take the time to review the information the SME compiled. By building respect with the SME, you’ll improve access to reliable resources that you’ll need to accomplish your goals.

Guide the conversation.Communicate the big picture for the learning program and ultimately design the course only using the content that supports the learning objectives. If multiple SMEs are involved and they’re saying different things, actively listen to seek clarification and consistency.

Identify the Learning Outcome

For the most part, training requests won’t come to you as “We need a Cafeteria Learning workshop.” Instead, requests will likely sound like “We need sales training” or “We need diversity training” or “We need a conflict management workshop.” However, these requests don’t describe the desired outcome for the learning experience; they may provide a clue as to what the goal might be, but not the specific goal itself. If you receive these kind of requests, dig deeper and uncover the specific learning outcome.

When identifying the learning outcome, think of it asthe tangible, measurable benefit to the organization as a result of the learner’s participation in the learning experience. For example, an outcome for a workshop on the science of learning might be: To increase the use of brain-based learning principles when designing sales training.

Identify the Learning Objectives

The next step is to determine the learning objectives that will contribute toward the achievement of the goal. Learning objectives are the measurable results of the learner’s participation in the learning activities, or stated another way, what the learner will be able to demonstrate what they have learned.

Aristotle once said, “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them” (Bynum and Porter 2005). And David Kolb (1984) proposed that in order to gain knowledge from an experience, the learner must:

Be willing to be actively involved in the experience.

Be able to reflect on the experience.

Possess and use analytical skills to conceptualize the experience.

Possess decision-making and problem-solving skills in order to use the new ideas gained from the experience.

So when you begin writing learning objectives, you should ask what knowledge, skills, and attitudes will learners need to demonstrate the stated outcome. In our science of learning workshop example, a learning objective might look something like this: At the end of the workshop, learners will be able to explain three strategies to implement brain-based learning principles.

Of course, this is just one of the learning objectives necessary to achieve the outcome. What’s important is that you can actually measure the learner’s ability to explain three strategies to implement brain-based learning principles.

If your initial list consists of more than three learning objectives, the next step is to condense your list to just three around which your Cafeteria Learning workshop and activities will revolve. Over time, we’ve found that three learning objectives is the right number to deliver a two- to three-hour Cafeteria Learning workshop. If you have more than three learning objectives, the workshop can become chaotic; if you have less than three, there aren’t enough choices, which affects the richness of the learner’s experience. Barry Schwartz, author of The Paradox of Choice, Why More Is Less (2004),points out that while choice is critical to freedom and autonomy, too much choice can create a burden on the individual. With too many options, people tend to regret their original choice and become stressed or unhappy wondering if they should have chosen a different option. That’s why we like to stick with three activities per learning objective, which gives us nine activities. Any more than that and learners may become overwhelmed with choices, thus detracting from the learning experience.

Allow for Choice

Informal learning expert Jay Cross (2007) wrote, “Training is something that’s imposed on you; learning is something you choose. Knowledge workers thrive when given the freedom to decide how they will do what’s asked of them.” Cross couldn’t be more right.

Writing learning objectives for a Cafeteria Learning workshop should allow for choice in learning. They should be written in such a way that you will be able to design three different activities for each objective. Regardless of what activity the learners choose, they all should be able to reach the same learning objective.

This is the beauty of Cafeteria Learning—learners have a choice of activities to participate in rather than only having to experience the one activity that has been provided to them. By its very nature, Cafeteria Learning leaves the how to learn the content up to the learner. Learners can construct their own knowledge in an exploratory and self-directed manner, one in which they’re free to choose their own unique learning paths within a defined framework aligned with the learning objectives.

We put our theory—if learning objectives are written to allow for choice, learners should be able to reach the same learning objective regardless of the activity they choose—to the test during a Cafeteria Learning workshop we were teaching for talent development professionals. During this workshop we intentionally did not communicate the learning objectives and instead asked learners to reflect on what they’d learned as a result of attending the workshop. We then asked them to write what they believed the learning objectives were based on their experience. After reviewing everyone’s lists as a group, learners agreed that they had all reached the same core learning objectives (Table 4-1). One of the learners, whose title was director of customer service learning and development, noted that “It was interesting to see that while everyone had the opportunity to learn differently, they were able to walk away with . . . the same learning objectives.”

<<insert Table 4-1; Table 4-1. Identified Objectives Closely Matched Actual Learning Objective>>

A well-designed Cafeteria Learning workshop creates a learning environment in which all learners reach a similar destination regardless of the path they take; writing learning objectives that allow for choice will help you on your way to creating that environment.

Chapter Summary

Choice is the component that most distinguishes Cafeteria Learning from lecture-based learning models and enhances the learning process. When designing a Cafeteria Learning experience, clarify the content and identify the desired outcome for the learners, as you would with any learning program. The next step is unique to Cafeteria Learning: Identify your learning objectives and ensure they allow for choice. If you miss this critical step, you may find it challenging to design the three activities to support each learning objective. (We’ll review designing activities and how to enhance choice for learners in the next chapter.)

The Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy is a great resource for ideas when writing learning objectives for choice. For example, “Summarize limitations of lecture-based learning” is too restrictive: It implies that the only way to reach the desired objective is through summarization, when that is just one way to demonstrate an understanding of the limitations of lecture-based learning. A better way to phrase this objective might be, “Identify 10 limitations of lecture-based learning.” This allows for a number of options by which to achieve the same outcome.