DESIGNING CAFETERIA LEARNING ACTIVITIES

5

Once you’ve determined your learning objectives, the next step is to design the activities that will help your learners reach them. Chapter 10 offers a selection of our most popular Cafeteria Learning activities presented in a template so you can fill them in with your own content. Of course, once you are more familiar with the process you are probably going to want to design your own activities. Let’s take a look at how to do that.

Brainstorm Activities

In the fall of 2015, we conducted a workshop for our local ATD chapter in which we walked through the science of learning theory that supports the Cafeteria Learning method, had learners participate in a Cafeteria Learning workshop, and then had them design their own activities. The workshop was a big hit; however, it became clear that learners found it difficult to brainstorm activities. It takes experience, creativity, time, and practice to design learning this way.

What you’ll want to do first is schedule a brainstorming session. If it’s just you, don’t skip over brainstorming entirely. You can still do it even if you’re going solo. Here are a few tips:

Get outside, talk with other people, look for inspiring images, and read anything you can get your hands on that’s not about the content you’re working with.

While it may seem obvious, make sure you dedicate time to brainstorming—whether for a few minutes each day or one large chunk of time, you’re going to need time.

Don’t dismiss any of your ideas outright—if you find yourself judging your ideas, clear your mind and continue to come up with the most ideas you can. All ideas are welcome.

If you need a little more structure, creating mind maps serves as a wonderful tool when it’s just you brainstorming.

Try distancing yourself from technology in your creative space, including silencing your devices. This will go far in ensuring that the time you’ve set aside for brainstorming doesn’t get interrupted.

If you’re fortunate to have others available to brainstorm with you, schedule a brainstorming session. Set the stage for the experience to be highly creative, fast paced, and engaging. Be sure to welcome and document all ideas, and don’t qualify ideas yet. Remember, you want quantity, not quality. You will whittle them down later.

To begin the brainstorming session, review each learning objective one at a time and think about all the different ways each could be achieved. You could silently brainstorm for a few minutes with each team member writing one idea on a sticky note and then putting it up on a whiteboard or wall.

When brainstorming, think about your favorite board games, video games, apps, K-12 classroom experiences, and so forth. Also review any past activities you’ve had success with and could repurpose.

Once you have enough ideas to work with, have each team member explain her inspiration for her ideas while the rest ask questions and build on one another. Through this process, you might even come up with completely new ideas. Some of the best ideas are activities that evolve from the brainstorm but weren’t actually one of the original ideas. Sometimes ideas come easily; other times the process takes many brainstorming sessions. Even if you thought you had an amazing activity that ultimately fell flat with learners, keep tinkering with it: the effort will be worth your time in the end.

We put our brainstorming skills to the test and when we imagined a workshop about brain-based learning (Table 5-1).

<<insert Table 5-1; Table 5-1. Brainstorm Activities—Example>>

Check Activities Against Learning Experience Categories

To ensure that you provide an adequate range of choices for your learners, you’ll want to check that the activities you’ve brainstormed reflect a variety of learning experiences. You can organize them across three categories:

learning preference

interaction

technology.

Tables 5-2, 5-3, and 5-4 describe each of these learning experience categories.

Learning Preference

Note we intentionally use the term learning preference here, not learning style. As discussed in chapter 1, learning styles are widely believed to be an inappropriate determinant for how you structure a learning offering. Instead, people learn in many ways, though they do tend to have preferences for how they learn. Cafeteria Learning does not presume to match the learning preference to the individual, but rather to allow individuals to choose the way they prefer to learn at that particular moment in time. Sometimes an extrovert feels introspective, and sometimes an introvert wants to talk things through. It’s nice to have a choice.

You certainly could argue that any one activity can reflect many learning preferences; for example, connecting a chain of paper clips includes both visual and kinesthetic properties. However, when creating Cafeteria Learning activities, you should aim to identify the primary learning preference the activity supports. This will help you provide a range of activities that support the various learning preferences.

Let’s review each of these learning preferences in a little more detail (Table 5-2).

<<insert Table 5-2; Table 5-2. Category 1: Learning Preference>>

Problem solving gives learners the choice to solve a real world or simulated problem. With problem solving, or problem-based learning, learners think strategically to solve a carefully crafted, open-ended problem and learn from success and failure in a safe environment. This type of activity can be used with individuals, pairs, or in a group.

The use of competition in learning can work well if an activity is created to be balanced and fair. A competitive activity may motivate learners to excel and achieve the objective, while also creating a different level of excitement in the workshop. Learners can reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses and learn what to do to improve themselves.

Collaborative, or cooperative, learning brings learners together in an activity with opportunities to reflect upon and reply to diverse points of view and responses. As learners work to achieve the objective, a variety of input combines their range of perspectives into a more complete and comprehensive result.

Visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learning comes from the 1920s’ classification by psychologist of the most common ways that people learn. However, in practice, people tend to mix and match these three styles, rather than adhere strictly to one alone.

Sometimes learners like to take time to examine their thoughts and reactions, a reflective activity is a great way to provide this option. This kind of activity can increase self-awareness as learners make a conscious effort to think about the content.

Interaction Type

By giving learners the choice over whether they’d like to participate in an activity with others—with a partner or with a larger group—or by themselves, you allow them to match their comfort with the learning process (Table 5-3). Going further, you can sometimes offer an activity that can encompass multiple interaction types with only slight modifications. This makes the activity even more powerful as it can then appeal to designers wishing to provide more options for interaction to the learners.

<<insert Table 5-3; Table 5-3. Category 2: Interaction>>

Technology Type

Despite the proliferation of technology in people’s work and personal lives, individuals still have differing degrees of comfort with its operation (Table 5-4). If you only provide activities that require more advanced technological abilities, participants who are unaccustomed to using tablets might find themselves at a disadvantage and ultimately fail to learn. However, technology provides wonderful opportunities to connect learners to the content and to each other; totally ignoring technology would be a fool’s errand in itself.

<<insert Table 5-4; Table 5-4. Category 3: Technology>>

An example of a high-tech activity is to provide a discussion prompt for learners to answer on camera. Most tablets and laptops have a built-in function for this. Some learners love the opportunity to share their perspective; it allows them to reflect and share, and in doing so they are processing the content in a really powerful way. Others think this activity sounds like a nightmare. That’s what is so great about what Cafeteria Learning provides. The more reticent learner can still benefit by sitting down and watching the stories recorded by others. It is a simple but powerful experience that is so much more effective than asking people to put ideas on a flipchart. Learner could have a similar experience with just an audio recording. (The StoryCorps project that airs on NPR is an example of an emotionally engaging audio experience. Its mission is to provide people of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives.)

Table 5-5 offers an example of how you would check your activities against the learning experience categories. This exercise helps you ensure that the activities represent a variety of learning experiences, allowing adequate choice for the learner. All options in each category related to the activity are selected in this example for illustrative purposes. Another technique is to select only the primary learning preference, interaction type, and technology type.

<<insert Table 5-5; Table 5-5. Check Activities Against Learning Experience Categories—Example>>

Select Final Activities

After brainstorming a comprehensive list of activities and checking the activities against the learning experience categories, the next step is to narrow your list to three activities for each learning objective. After this step is completed, you’ll have nine total activities for your Cafeteria Learning workshop.

As you consider which activities to keep and which to discard, you’ll want to ensure that you have a balance of learning preferences, interaction types, and technology types. You do not want all your activities to be completed in small groups, as that prevents those who prefer to work alone from having the option to do so. Likewise, learners may prefer to steer away from technology-based activities, while others may be drawn to it.

Plan and Document Activity Details

Once you’ve selected your nine final activities, the last step in designing Cafeteria Learning activities is to plan and document the details of each activity. To simplify the planning and documentation process, we’ve developed a design document as shown in Figure 5-1 below. Check out chapter 10 for examples of completed design documents for sample activities.

<<insert Figure 5-1a and b; Figure 5-1. Cafeteria Learning Design Document>>

Some of the activity details, such as the topic title, activity title, foundational content, activity instructions, and reflection questions, will eventually be used to populate the instructions that you’ll place at each activity station for learners to reference. The learning objective, activity description, and learning experience categories are for your own reference and documentation. Activity details such as the estimated time and materials are documented for planning purposes. This enables you to plan the amount of time learners may need for each activity, as well as the materials you’ll need to purchase or create for each activity.

Planning and documenting activity details in one document provides an easy way to keep track of everything related to the activity. With so many moving parts—preparing for and setting up all the materials for nine activities, plus the primer, foundational content, and debrief—it’s important to plan and document. Let’s take a look at each component of the Cafeteria Learning design document in detail.

Topic Title

Determine a topic title that succinctly captures the outcome of the activity’s learning objective. The topic title helps you, as well as the learner, quickly identify which topic each activity belongs to—without having to write out the full learning objective.

Learning Objective

Document the learning objective this activity is aligned with. It’s important to keep this in front of you so you can verify that your activity meets the learning objective.

Foundational Content

For each of the three activities that support a single learning objective, provide some background information. This is one place in which you might provide some of the information that you’d normally tell learners in a typical lecture-style workshop. Ideally this is no more than a few paragraphs. Ultimately this foundational content will end up on your activity instruction cards.

Activity Title

Give your activity a memorable title, which will be visible to learners on the instruction card placed at each activity station. A catchy title is intended to pique learner curiosity and interest in participating in the activity. This will appear on the Activity Menu (discussed in more detail in chapter 6) under each activity title to help learners decide which activity they want to choose.

Activity Description

Write one to two sentences that summarize the way learners will engage in the activity. In addition to the activity title, this will appear on the Activity Menu to help learners decide which activity they want to choose.

Learning Experience Categories

Document the learning preference, interaction type, and technology type of each activity. Although you’ve already determined the learning experience categories for each of your activities in Step 2 of this process, the goal at this point is to document it for easy reference.

Estimated Time

Consider the estimated length of time the activity should take. We find that many of our activities take about 10-15 minutes to complete. Each of your activities should be designed to take approximately the same amount of time to complete. At this point, until the workshop is implemented, these are only estimates. To ensure all activities wrap up at about the same time, make sure to give learners notification when there is 15 minutes left to complete the activity portion of the workshop. This will allow them to self-assess and determine how many activities they need to complete to get to the “at least one from each topic” requirement. If learners finish the requirement with time to spare, remind them that they can complete additional activities.

Materials

Document the necessary materials for each activity, including whether you’ll need to purchase them or produce them yourselves. This is another aspect of planning: By writing down details such as the source and price for items you plan to purchase, you can save time preparing for the workshop. Research the materials you need to purchase so you know how long it will take to receive them before the workshop. If you can create the material yourself, you’ll be better able to determine how much time you need to design, develop, and produce.

Activity Instructions

Craft a set of step-by-step instructions for each activity, which will eventually be used to populate the instruction cards that you’ll place at each activity station for learners to reference. When writing instructions be succinct as extra words can sometimes confuse rather than clarify. Cafeteria Learning activities are self-directed, so activity instructions need to be written in such a way as to ensure each learner completes the activity following the same steps each time.

Reflection Questions

Once learners have completed the activity, give them an opportunity to reflect on their experience and perhaps discuss it with others. We like to include the activity reflection questions on the instruction cards learners see at each activity station (see the “Discuss” column in Figure 5-3 below).

Prepare Workshop Materials

The activities are just one portion of a Cafeteria Learning workshop, so it’s important to prepare for the other parts, too. The chapter that follows focuses on the structure to help you create a successful workshop. Preparing the workshop agenda, activity menu, and instruction cards brings you one step closer.

Workshop Agenda

Build an agenda for the learning experience that ensures everything is covered and the experience stays on track. Here’s how a typical Cafeteria Learning workshop is organized:

A brief welcome and introduction.

A priming activity and corresponding debrief.

Delivery of foundational content by facilitator.

A brief description of what Cafeteria Learning is and how it works. When introducing Cafeteria Learning to your learners, make sure to touch on the following items:

Let them know that Cafeteria Learning is designed to give them the freedom to choose how they learn, and that like a cafeteria, stations are set up around the room to offer them choices.

Ask them to browse the activity menu and to choose at least one activity from each topic on the menu.

Let them know that it’s not necessary to do all the activities; each activity has been designed to help them learn the same content, no matter how they choose to learn.

An overview of each of the available activities. Before turning learners loose to explore, show them where each activity is located around the room and give them a brief overview of the instructions for each one. Also let them know that written instructions are included at each station for their reference, and that you will be available during activities to answer their questions.

Activities. The time you set aside for learners to explore and choose among activities should be the largest block of time on your agenda.

A debriefing activity.

Activity Menu

An activity menu is an at-a-glance, quick-reference for learners to have throughout the activity portion of the workshop. The menu can be designed in various ways, but the key is to keep it simple and easy to interpret.

In place of a participant guide, learners refer to their activity menu when choosing activities. We’ve found that color-coding each topic on the menu in correspondence with color-coded signs or flags at each activity station helps learners navigate the learning environment. Checkboxes next to the description of each activity help learners quickly see the activities they have completed. Defining space on the back of the menu is helpful for note taking.

<<insert Figure 5-2; Figure 5-2. A Sample Activity Menu>>

Instruction Cards

To prepare for your workshop, you’ll need to create instruction cards for each activity station. We like to design our activity instruction cards with four distinct components, each of which you can pull from the design document you’ve already populated.

topic title

foundational content

activity instructions

reflection questions.

<<insert Figure 5-3; Figure 5-3. A Sample Instruction Card>>

Chapter Summary

Designing a Cafeteria Learning workshop takes time, discipline, creativity, and a lot of planning. Weaving in the power of choice for learners requires learning professionals to flex their instructional design muscles. If you follow the design steps outlined in this chapter, you—and your learners—will be rewarded with a transformative learning experience that taps into active, social, and experiential learning and holds choice at its core. The next chapter shows you how to frame the activities to further optimize the learning experience.