FACILITATING CAFETERIA LEARNING

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While Cafeteria Learning might seem simple in theory, it involves quite a few moving pieces: What do you need to do in order to prepare for your workshop? How do you set up the room? How do you introduce learners to the concept of Cafeteria Learning? How does a typical workshop unfold?

What’s more, facilitating a Cafeteria Learning workshop involves a shift in mindset regarding the role most learning professionals are used to taking. Rather than directly delivering content to learners, your role is to facilitate an experience in which learners can seek out and find the knowledge for themselves.

So what are the nuts and bolts of facilitating an amazing Cafeteria Learning experience? This chapter outlines the best practices for implementing a Cafeteria Learning workshop.

Preparation Prior to the Workshop

Completing the following activities a month before the workshop gives you ample time to assemble the necessary materials and make any necessary adjustments without causing too much stress. Facilitating any workshop is a big responsibility; with all the moving parts of a Cafeteria Learning workshop, give yourself enough time so you’re confident everything is ready for your learners on the day of the workshop.

Reserve a Workshop Location and Familiarize Yourself With It

When your Cafeteria Learning workshop is still a month away, go ahead and book the space you’ll need. To the extent possible, become familiar with the learning environment. There may be times when you need lots of wall space for activities and find yourself in a room with a ton of windows, or in a room that’s just too small. To avoid surprises like this, familiarize yourself with your reserved space in advance, giving yourself plenty of time to address any challenges. For cases in which wall space is sparse, you can bring in easels or tape to hang your mind maps, flip charts, or other wall activities. You’ll have time to figure out the logistics of bringing in more tables or chairs. Whatever the challenge, you can avoid the pressure of having to figure it out at the last minute.

Purchase and Produce All Necessary Materials

Using your design document as a reference, purchase or produce all the necessary materials well in advance of your workshop. The workshop materials don’t have to be fancy. You can write out instructions for each activity on a dry erase board or a sheet of paper, hand-draw your game boards, and create just about anything you might need with nothing more than a word processor, a printer, and some markers. What matters most is that your materials are effective in helping learners reach their learning objectives, not necessarily the professional production of the materials.

Practice Delivering the Content

You should practice delivering your introductory content and instructions well in advance of your workshop. This is good advice when giving any kind of a presentation, and Cafeteria Learning is no exception. Accordingly, to avoid surprises, you should test your activities internally and adjust them as necessary prior to rolling them out. Gather a number of your employees, colleagues, and friends and run through each of your proposed activities. You should ask or observe:

Are the instructions clear and will learners understand how to participate in each activity?

Are the materials working as intended?

Are the activities producing the intended learning outcome?

Which activities do learners really take to, and are there any that they do not like?

Do any other problems arise that may require troubleshooting?

It is also helpful to pilot the workshop when time and resources allow, which involves testing your activities with a segment of your target population and, if possible, using the specific room in which the workshop will take place. Individuals will take to activities differently, so this will allow you to get more targeted feedback about what works best for your particular audience. Give yourself at least a week before your workshop to refine your delivery and become comfortable with the activities. Plan to arrive prepared with a thorough knowledge of the content and activities. Ideally, you should know the content, how Cafeteria Learning works, and the instructions for each activity well enough to translate the experience into your own words.

Allow for Adequate Setup Time the Day of the Workshop

Imagine the feeling of arriving to the room early with plenty of time to spare. You are calm, cool, and collected as you set up the activities. By the time the learners arrive, everything’s in its place and you’re ready to greet each person as they walk through the door. Start your workshop off on the right foot by allowing yourself plenty of time to set up the activities prior to the course start time (90 minutes, just to be safe). This way, the entire experience will be smooth, even if unexpected challenges arise.

Prepare the Room Setup

Setting up your activities takes a bit of strategy. The best way to do it will depend on your particular space and activities. To illustrate, a setup blueprint can be found below. The activities are grouped by topic: for example, the activities for Topic 1 are set up on the left side of the room, the activities for Topic 2 are set up down the middle of the room, and the activities for Topic 3 are set up along the right side of the room. Note that some activities require wall space (several of the activities in Topic 1, for example); whereas others require table space only (for example, Topic 2, Activities 1 and 2; Topic 3, Activities 1 and 2).

<<insert Figure 7-1; Figure 7-1. Room Setup Diagram>>

You might consider having your learners sit down at the central tables as you present the introductory content; throughout the rest of the workshop, the learners are free to move around the room and explore.

In addition, set up the activities that require the more space, either on a wall or on tables, in each topic first, and then group the other activities for that topic around them. For example, when setting up the activities you would want to allot enough space for a collaborative activity where learners are writing or drawing on large sheet of paper hanging on the wall. Once you find enough room for this particular activity, you can dedicate the nearby space for the other two activities in the same topic.

As you set up your activities, mark each table with an instruction sheet, including the name of the activity, the topic, and the corresponding instructions. You may also want to place a few extra copies of the instructions on the table so learners can easily grab a copy and take a look at them without having to huddle around the table.

During the Workshop

Now it’s time to greet learners at the door, welcoming them to the workshop and directing them to get started on the priming activity as they enter the room. This is an important way to set the foundation for the rest of your workshop: Without direction from a greeter, many learners will habitually head straight to their seats without even realizing that they’re missing out on the priming activity.

You might also suggest that learners leave their coats, purses, and other belongings in a central location, as they won’t be sitting in one place with them during the workshop. Having too many belongings at a table can create cluttered activity stations.

Once learners have settled into their seats, guide them through the final steps of your priming activity by having them answer discussion questions with a partner or share their answers with the group. This will lead you seamlessly into the rest of your workshop agenda.

You might also include the priming questions as part of your introductory presentation, leave handouts on the tables or chairs where learners will be sitting, or both.

Break Up Side Conversations and Keep Learners on Track

Learners are accountable for their own learning and are free to move through the activities at their own pace; however, part of your role entails helping learners stay on topic and manage their time. To help them keep tabs on time, we’ve found it helpful to display a countdown timer on our presentation display that they can reference throughout the workshop.

It’s also a good idea to walk around the room during the workshop to find out how learners are doing and to keep them moving from one activity to another. If it’s obvious that a particular learner is off track or has gotten caught up in side conversations, feel free to give him a nudge by asking something like, “Have you completed an activity in each topic yet?”

Offer Your Learners Some Dessert

Don’t leave your learners hanging: A good debriefing activity is like the cherry on top of an already delectable learning experience. When the main course, or activities, are completed, it’s time to bring all the learners back together as a group to validate, for you and for them, that learning has indeed taken place. Debriefing helps bring a sense of completion to your workshop and allows your learners to leave your workshop feeling satisfied and full.

After the Workshop

Before you break down your activities, take a moment to snap a few pictures of your learners’ creations. Not only will this give you a chance to admire the fruits of your labor, but it will also help to remind you what worked and what could be improved next time.

The best learning experiences aren’t singular, one-time events; rather, they’re spread out over time and are reinforced in a variety of ways. About 30 days after the workshop, send out follow-up communications (emails, notecards) to those who participated in the workshop. In your communications include:

a brief paragraph or two to refresh their memories on key takeaways from the workshop

attachments or links to photos showing output from the workshop to remind them of the work they did

a question or two about how they’ve incorporated the learning into their day-to-day work, and a friendly nudge to take action if they haven’t yet done so.

Chapter Summary

Cafeteria Learning relies on facilitation not presentation. As a facilitator your role is to be a guide during the experience, helping learners to learn from the provided content, each other, and their experiences. Differing from a more traditional training presentation, during which you are the expert in the room, your job is to ensure that learners:

Understand the Cafeteria Learning concept.

Successfully complete their chosen activities.

Stay engaged and on track.