CASE STUDIES

9

We first introduced the concept of Cafeteria Learning to learners at the ATD Cascadia Chapter’s 2012 conference “Back to Basics and Beyond.” Since that time, we have refined the method to its current form. This chapter presents some of our case studies with reactions from learners and organizations who were keen to participate in this new method of learning.

ATD Cascadia Chapter 2012 Conference: “The Brain Is Not a Bucket” Session

Note: This was the first use of the Cafeteria Learning method; the process has been refined quite a bit since this workshop. For example, we learned from this experience that while five activities per topic provides ample choice for learners, it is a large undertaking as learning designer and also requires a lot of complex preparation for facilitators.

The brain is not a finite container that you fill up. Instead, the brain is a complex system of dynamic connections that interpret, process, and organize an amazing amount of information. Most of our learning takes place through direct experience as opposed to formal instruction.

This workshop presented at the ASTD Cascadia Chapter’s 2012 Conference “Back to Basics and Beyond” looked at the shortcomings of traditional lecture-based learning and education through the filter of brain-based learning research. What roles do experience and sensory intake play in learning? How can we implement brain-based learning principles to get back to the basics and create richer, longer-lasting learning experiences?

The hands-on workshop, facilitated by Idea Learning Group, was designed to help learners reframe the way they train using practical brain-based tools and strategies with their learners. The room was organized into three learning topics, each with five separate activity stations. Here are three activities from the workshop:

1. Engaging Your Audience (Topic: Best Practices)

(Learning preference types: individual or pair; reflective; low tech.)

Flipcharts were prepared ahead of time with the following titles, “Instead of Butts in Seats, Try . . .,” “Instead of Pre-Determining Outcomes, Try . . .,” “Instead of Lectures, Try . . .,” and “Instead of Slides, Try . . . .” When learners arrived at the station, they were asked to think about or discuss alternatives to traditional learning approaches. For each situation listed on the flip charts, learners wrote lists such as:

Going outside.

Role plays or simulations.

Allowing learners to construct their own outcomes.

Asking learners to discover content.

Scavenger hunts.

Teach back activities.

2. Brainly Land (Topic: Brain-Based Learning)

(Learning preference types: group; collaboration or competition; low tech.)

A group of up to four players participate in a game that quizzes their knowledge of brain-based learning. In turn, players roll die and advance the appropriate number of spaces. If a player lands on a BRAIN square, choose a BRAIN card from the deck. Read the card out loud to the group, and keep it until the game ends. The first one who reaches the end is NOT necessarily the winner! Accumulated knowledge—brain cards—counts for something, too:

First person to reach the end is awarded 5 points.

Second person to reach the end is awarded 4 points.

Third person to reach the end is awarded 3 points.

Players are also awarded 1 point per brain card they have.

3. Limber Learning (Topic: Limitations of Lectures)

(Learning preference types: individual; kinesthetic; low tech.)

Staying glued to your seat during lectures is not only boring, but also unhealthy. New research shows that it’s best to stand up and move around for two minutes out of every 20 minutes during the day. It helps keep you energized, focused, and healthy. Learners try five yoga-inspired exercises they can apply in their learning sessions. For example, Exercise 1: Breathe With Intention! Deep breathing is essential for relaxation, clear thinking, and well-being. Try this simple exercise to maximize your breathing:

Sit in a comfortable upright position, on a chair or on the floor.

Inhale through your nose and count to four.

Briefly hold the breath in and count to two.

Exhale through your nose and count to four.

Count to four before beginning the cycle again.

Repeat 10 times.

Approaching Brain Science Differently

The “Back to Basics and Beyond” Conference asked the 46 participants at the end of all sessions to evaluate their experience by answering three questions. Table 9-1 presents the results.

<<insert Table 9-1; Table 9-1. Reactions to First Cafeteria Learning Workshop>>

The Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center

In December 2015, the diversity and inclusion ready-to-go kit Diversity Works was piloted with a group of 18 staff members at the Oregon-based Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center. Diversity Works is an off-the-shelf solution designed to help organizations implement a Cafeteria Learning workshop with a complete set of materials and instructions on the subject of diversity and inclusion.

“The style of learning was different than the traditional way,” a learner stated. “But I liked that it gave me the flexibility to participate in the activities I’m more comfortable with. You pick what you want to do, you pick what you want to achieve.”

The Virginia Garcia Clinic was formed in 1975, when 6-year-old Virginia Garcia, the daughter of migrant farm workers, tragically passed away as a result of complications from a cut on her foot—a wound that should have been easily treatable were it not for the language, cultural, and economic barriers standing in the way of receiving proper medical care. The founders of Virginia Garcia vowed to prevent anything like this from happening again, and a mission was born. Ever since, the nonprofit has been providing culturally appropriate healthcare to migrant workers and other individuals who face barriers in receiving medical care.

To provide choice for learners, we set up the materials as nine stations around the room, each of which corresponded to one of the workshop’s three main learning objectives: identify what makes me the unique individual I am, seek to understand others, and consider differing perspectives in the workplace. Here are three activities from the workshop:

1. Uniquely Me (Topic: Understanding Self)

(Learning preference types: individual; reflective; low tech.)

Several sheets of paper were placed on a table along with sticker shapes of various colors. Learners used the sticker shapes to craft a representation of themselves on paper then finish the sentence: “I am unique because . . .” Learners were instructed to hang their creations on the wall for others to see.

2. Telling My Story (Topic: Understanding Others)

(Learning preference types: individual; reflective; high tech.)

A recording device was placed on a table along with several story prompts, such as: “Describe a time when you experienced another person’s bias,” “Tell about a time as a child that you observed an adult who was disrespectful toward someone,” and “Tell about a time when you stood up for someone else.” Learners selected a story prompt then recorded their answer. Learners also had the option to review stories recorded by others and answer the question, “What stood out to you as you viewed others’ stories?” on a flipchart.

3. Communicate With Care (Topic: Communication)

(Learning preference types: individual, partner, or group; reflective; low tech.)

Learners spun a wheel to land on a scenario related to communication in the workplace and then shared their answers to the two discussion questions on a “perspective card.” Cards were left at the station for others to review.

At the end of the workshop, the learners all came together for a final shared experience and participated in a diversity and inclusion board game.

4. Journey of Diversity

(Learning preference types: group; collaborative; low tech.)

Learners were organized into small groups of five. Each group received a board game, card set, dice, and game pieces. Learners participated in the game by individually answering questions related to diversity and inclusion and advancing spaces on the board with each correct answer.

Coming Together Through Diversity

Shared experience turned out to be an unintended outcome for the learning and provided insight among learners. Learning through shared experiences is constructivism in action: Learners construct and discover meaning and knowledge through active exploration rather than having it presented to them in a lecture. For many of the activities, there were no right or wrong answers; rather, the bulk of the learning occurred through the learners’ impressions, thoughts, and perspectives as they moved through various activities and interacted with their peers. One activity, for example, had learners identify their initial reaction to a specific diversity and inclusion scenario. They then took the time to think through a more appropriate response.

“When [my group] shared our responses with each other, I was surprised that all three of us had the same reaction initially, but then we all decided to respond thoughtfully in a slightly different way,” shared one learner. “It’s both showing diversity and the fact that in a ton of ways we’re the same. It was interesting that the learning was driven by what we were saying to each other in the moment rather than from what we’re hearing in a rote presentation.”

“Those ‘aha moments’ will stick with me,” he continued. “I will remember that [my group] came together, we disagreed, then at the end we were able to kind of look back and reflect and say, ‘Oh yeah, you know what, there is a different way to look at this, maybe there is a different feeling to those words or to how we approach a situation.’ That’s what I took from it, and I don’t see myself forgetting that, especially since I did it and I didn’t just sit and listen.”

“This experience made me think in so many ways,” another learner shared. “At the same time I learned how other people think.”

Yet another learner contrasted the workshop to a lecture the team had attended in the very same room the day before. “Yesterday we were in this same space [for a learning experience], sitting in chairs all day long,” she explained. “It was frustrating because I think that people learn better when they’re up and moving their bodies. Moving around is definitely my chosen way to learn; I think it engages people more when you do that, and I liked that there were three different options for each category so if we weren’t comfortable doing one activity, then maybe we’d be comfortable doing another one. For example, I didn’t choose to record a history of myself. That was not one that I’d want to do. I did the drawing station instead; I’m not an artist, but it was fun.”

In a post-workshop survey, more than a third of learners indicated that they had shared personal experiences related to the topic with others. The results of the post-workshop survey reinforced the idea that learning in an active, choice-based way is an effective way to learn. In our evaluation, learners indicated that they are most likely to definitely learn by participating in activities (68 percent), followed by being given a choice of how to learn (65 percent), sharing their own knowledge (53 percent), and lastly, through lecture (50 percent).

“I would love to see my continuing medical education credits offered in this manner,” shared a Virginia Garcia staff member, “because those of us who go to these lectures all day long are bored to death and we know that we don’t get much out of it. I like this format and I think it should be incorporated more into what we do here as adults—and also at school where our children are learning.”

Eric Oslund, employee performance and talent development manager, said, “What’s really great about this is that I can run it. I need a handful of people, but I don’t need outside expertise to run this workshop. Anybody can run this stuff, which is great.”

Wellness at Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants

With a business goal to build a culture at Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants that encourages healthy behaviors that influence and inspire others to achieve a balance of wellness, and just two hours available for learning time, the Cafeteria Learning method was an effective choice for this custom content. The rollout of this wellness program involved a train-the-trainer model, so the experience could be implemented across 35 locations nationwide as quickly and efficiently as possible. Here are three activities from the workshop:

1. Strength or Challenge (Topic 1: The Kimpton Wellness Wheel)

(Learning preference types: partner; reflective or problem solving; low tech.)

Learners took turns spinning a “Wellness Wheel,” which was displayed at the center of the table, and sharing their answers to the following questions: “Is the area of the Wellness Wheel you landed on a strength or a challenge for you?” “If this area is a strength, what best practices can you share?” and “If it’s a challenge, what is getting in your way?”

2. Take Your Temperature (Topic 2: My Wellness WIG)

(Learning preference types: individual; reflective or visual; low tech.)

At Kimpton, a wellness WIG is a wildly important goal related to one or more elements of wellness on their Wellness Wheel. Images of six thermometers were hung on the wall, with five pairs of green and black dry erase markers placed on a table. Learners took turns rating their current state of wellness for each area of well-being by making marks on each thermometer using the black marker (“taking their temperature”).

Next, learners used the green markers to rate where they would like their wellness to be for each area of well-being, writing their name next to each mark. Lastly, learners reflected on two questions: “Are your temperatures where you want them to be?” and “Which area(s) would you like to see change?”

This activity was a great way to help learners assess and reflect on their current and desired levels of wellness to help inform their wildly important goal.

3. My Wellness Wig (Topic 2: My Wellness WIG)

(Learning preference types: individual; reflective; low tech.)

In this activity, learners wore novelty headband “wigs” to get their creative juices flowing as they brainstormed personal wellness WIGs (wildly important goals) related to a specific area of well-being (physical, career, financial, community, social, or internal balance).

To jog their memory on the definition of WIGs, we first asked learners to think back to the workshop’s foundational content in which they learned about WIGs and refer to some examples of WIGs that we displayed at the station for their reference. Learners then drafted a wellness WIG in their personal wellness workbooks; if they felt comfortable sharing their WIG, they could also write it on one of the flipcharts displayed on the wall (the “Wellness WIG Gallery”).

Taking Time for Wellness

For employees who often feel stressed and pressed for time, it was a true gift to be able to slow down and think about how to foster a sense of well-being in their lives. Learners also enjoyed the social and interactive nature of the Cafeteria Learning workshop. “I liked interacting with the other people in the room and bouncing ideas off each other and realizing that we were all in the same boat,” said one learner after the workshop.

“Being allowed the time, at work, to think about my own personal wellness was like an emotional massage!” said another.

Learners left the workshop with personally crafted wellness goals, along with corresponding action plans to achieve them. Kimpton management is thrilled with the results and excited to continue offering the wellness workshop to new and seasoned employees each year.

Daimler Trucks North America (DTNA)

On a Wednesday afternoon in Portland, Oregon, sunlight streamed into a glass-paneled conference room at the corporate headquarters of Daimler Trucks, the largest heavy-duty truck manufacturer in North America. A group of employees was gathered together to participate in a pilot study of the Cafeteria Learning ready-to-go kit, Diversity Works. (This is the same kit that was used for the Cafeteria Learning pilot with Virginia Garcia; thus, similar activities were utilized) The Diversity Works product consists of an array of nine predesigned diversity and inclusion activities that a facilitator can set up and implement with minimal time and effort. Daimler Trucks employees came together to participate in the pilot study from several departments, including finance, IT, HR, diversity, and legal.

We began by facilitating an initial priming activity and presenting learners with a brief introduction, then we set them free to explore and tinker around the room. Throughout the workshop, learners enjoyed the opportunity to take control of and choose their own learning, to interact and engage with other learners, and to learn experientially.

“When you go to a lot of workshops, there’s a lot of lecture and then they might have you do an activity that feels forced, but nobody wants to get up at that point because they’ve already settled into their seats,” one learner said. “This was nice in that while there was a brief introduction, you were moving around the entire time and not getting too comfortable. I think that helps you to be engaged in each topic and to really learn.”

“I do like the idea of the cafeteria,” added another learner. “It provides different options, it keeps you moving, and it allows you to go through and look at the same concept in different ways. I like learning through engagement and being involved, but most trainings don’t offer much engagement at all, and those that do only engage you in one way. They don’t give you the choices where you can move from activity to activity and have different ways of learning like Cafeteria Learning does.”

Learners also noted that they felt empowered by the inherent choice that the approach offers. “I thought it was a very unique way to approach training,” shared one learner. “I think by giving folks the ability to choose what they learn or the style in which they want to learn, you open them up to learn more, because they’re selecting the activities and they feel empowered. So I think it’s a very powerful opportunity to take ownership of your learning.”

He noted that he chose certain types of activities over others and appreciated having a variety of activities to choose from: “I chose not to go to the drawing station because that makes me very uncomfortable, so I liked the idea of being able to mix it up a little bit.”

Another employee took the opposite approach, consciously choosing activities that pushed him outside his comfort zone: “I made a conscious choice to pick an activity that made me feel uncomfortable because I knew that if I got in my comfort zone, I may not be able to learn more, whereas if I made myself a little bit uncomfortable maybe I could make myself vulnerable, which opens me up to learn.”

“[My partner and I] both wanted to do the same stuff,” another man added, “and I found out why—we started talking, and it turns out he does the same kind of work that I do and we have the same mindset on how work gets done. I realized that he picked the same kind of analytical stuff as I did—solving the puzzle, the case studies, and [problem-solving] because I can’t draw.”

Experiences like this not only speak to the idea of allowing for individuals’ unique learning preferences, but also illustrate how the social and interactive nature of Cafeteria Learning opens up opportunities for learners to form new relationships with their peers—or to deepen those that may already exist.

“I’m from Eastern Europe,” one woman said, extending her hand as she introduced herself to a man she’d partnered with for an activity. “I’m from Virginia,” the man responded. The two of them delved into the activity together; within minutes, they were deep in discussion.

At another table, two women shared with each other about the diverse qualities that make them the unique individuals they are, touching on topics such as spirituality (“I believe in a higher calling”), hobbies (“You won’t believe how much I love bowling!”), and personal challenges (“I’m dyslexic”). In a post-workshop survey, 80 percent of learners indicated that they had shared personal experiences related to the topic with others. More than half of learners indicated that others shared personal experiences with them that they were able to learn from, as well.

In addition to sharing about themselves, learners also exchanged their thoughts and viewpoints on various topics. While playing a diversity and inclusion board game, employees clapped when their peers answered a question right, occasionally pausing to discuss one of the questions among themselves. “Is that really the definition of homophobia?” one man asked.

For the next few minutes, the group ping-ponged their thoughts back and forth among one another.

“This workshop was valuable because it actually allowed people to exchange viewpoints,” commented one learner.

This kind of shared discussion and interaction is a key driver for experiential learning. One activity, for example, was aimed at helping learners understand the concept of unconscious bias. At a typical learning, a lecturer might present the definition of unconscious bias and explain to learners why it’s important to be aware of and to challenge the biases they form in their interactions with others.

In Cafeteria Learning, however, the learning happens more directly. By choosing a photo of a stranger and answering discussion questions about the person they chose, learners began to gain an understanding of their own unconscious biases. Based on a single snapshot of a person and a few facts about his occupation and hometown, learners began to realize that they had already formed snap judgments about whether they liked and trusted that person, about the person’s lifestyle and beliefs, and so on.

“He looks important and too serious,” one woman shared in reference to the photo of a man she had picked. “I don’t trust him.”

Another woman guessed that the woman in her photo, who was employed as a nanny, had a high school education.

“We all automatically form judgments and biases as we interact with the people around us,” the facilitator explained as she guided the group in their learning experience. “It’s the way our brains work, and it’s neither good nor bad. It only becomes a problem when we are unaware of these judgments and carry them into our relationships without questioning their accuracy or validity. The point is to become aware of our unconscious biases and know that we have them so that we can learn to challenge them and not to carry them unexamined into our relationships with others.”

Several learners nodded their heads in agreement as the facilitator spoke. They weren’t just being lectured about an abstract concept; rather, they were experiencing their own unconscious bias in a concrete way.

“I wanted it to be provocative, and it was,” said Learning and Development Manager Brian Stowe.

And learners appeared to have an appetite for more: In a post-workshop survey, 87 percent of learners indicated that they’d enjoy learning about another topic through Cafeteria Learning. Said Daimler Trucks Manager of Learning, Brian Stowe, “I wanted it to be provocative, and it was.”

PeaceHealth

At PeaceHealth, a not-for-profit health system serving communities in Washington, Oregon, and Alaska, Erica Davis acknowledges diversity in how adults learn by applying the Cafeteria Learning model to an annual two-day conference on population health. Davis, a learning and leadership development program manager for PeaceHealth, immediately identified with the Cafeteria Learning technique when she learned about it at her local ATD chapter conference; she recognized the importance of staying up to date with what is “up and coming” in the learning and development field.

As the learning designer for one 60-minute session at the conference with a cohort of 80 clinical leaders attending, Davis determined a Cafeteria Learning experience would allow for more content sharing than a more traditional presentation. The method would allow participants to choose activities that appealed to them. It was a risk, with most of the audience accustomed to typical lecture-style learning, but with the support of the stakeholder, she was ready to give it a try.

With objectives in mind, Davis utilized existing activities and pulled from her experience as a learner to build activities at four stations. Each station included a variety of activities that achieved the same outcome, regardless of what the learner completed. An activity worksheet listing the activities was used by participants as a guide when selecting activities to participate in.

Activity stations were set up in various locations around the conference location to accommodate the large audience. Since this experience was her first time implementing Cafeteria Learning, Davis acted as a floating facilitator to answer any questions while she relied on facilitators at each station to ensure participation. A week before the session, Davis held a meeting with each facilitator explaining how the model works, the learning concepts, and each individual’s role at their assigned station. Having an experienced facilitator at each station aided in gathering data and ensuring that the activities were executed properly.

Learners watched video clips illustrating the social determinants of health and brainstormed in small groups how they could create interventions for similar patients in their local communities. Others participated in mind mapping scenarios to developing community safety nets through leveraging social services and community partners for vulnerable patient populations. A game involved learners in practicing the steps of leading improvement projects and illustrated the impact of communication. Other activities included case studies and discussions.

1. Social Determinants of Health Video Clips

(Learning preference types: group; collaborative; high tech.)

A screen was set up to play video clips that illustrated social effects of individuals’ health. In small groups, learners were asked to brainstorm ways they could create interventions and solutions for similar patients in their local communities. The conversation was monitored by a facilitator stationed at the activity and the information was gathered using flipcharts.

2. Community Safety Nets Mind Mapping

(Learning preference type: individual, partner, or group; reflective; low tech.)

Individuals or groups of two or more were given a scenario that dealt with safety nets in the communities represented by various PeaceHealth medical centers, particularly within their vulnerable patient populations. The learners were asked to mind map solutions and outcomes leveraging the social services and community partners available to patients.

3. Impact of Communication Board Game

(Learning preference types: group; collaborative; low tech)

Learners were organized into small groups and used a board game that included trivia cards, dice, and game pieces. As part of the game, they answered questions, practiced the steps of leading improvement projects, and discussed the impact of communication.

Breaking Out of Accustomed Models

The feedback from this session was highly positive overall. The session was “just as good if not better than if we would have done instructor-led training,” said one participant. All of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that this activity met the learning objectives for being able to describe leadership behaviors for improving the health of vulnerable populations.

Participants shared the following feedback: “I enjoyed the activities and working with people I have never met before.” “I learn best by being involved and being hands on.” “[Facilitators] kept us engaged through activities and getting up and moving around.” “Activities around different topics were very helpful in understanding different concepts.”

Some learners did mention they were uncomfortable with the session format and prefer lecture-style learning. Some facilitators also stated they preferred to be at the front of the room leading the learning, rather than relying on the learners to discover the information. Unlike many of her instructor-led sessions, Davis noted that this method gave her the opportunity to hear feedback from participants immediately, in the moment, and it stretched both participants and facilitators to engage in learning in a new way. Looking back, Davis recommends that other learning designers using Cafeteria Learning ensure that the debrief process happens. This was one component that she’ll be sure to spend more time designing and implementing next time.