PREFACE: WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

As practitioners who design workplace learning experiences, we share a passion for transforming workplace learning to appeal to learner curiosity, influence behavior change, and generate meaningful, relevant experiences. Throughout our careers as learning professionals, we have observed a tendency of resistance to learning among those who seemed skeptical about workplace training in general. Some of the assumptions we witnessed include training classes are a waste of time; the content is generic and doesn’t help with individual roles and responsibilities; and learners don’t feel engaged in training in a personally meaningful and productive way.

Learning through experience is one of the most natural, basic concepts of learning. It’s how we begin to understand the world as children, and we continue learning through and reflecting upon experiences throughout our lives. “Learning is a process whereby the individual reacts to, learns from, and builds on experiences. [John Dewey] posited experiences are continuous in that they build on each other, each one affecting future experiences. Continuity signifies that each experience influences a person whether it is for better or for worse” (Monk 2013, 65). As adults, many of us carry around stereotypes and negative associations toward training. Some of these beliefs stem from the learning we experience as young students in school.

As a child, Jillian (co-founder #1) was often bored and disengaged at school. She was bright but struggled through much of her education, failing to see its applicability to the real world as her teachers lectured to her and her classmates. Years later, after graduating with a BS in management, Jillian was thrust into a role as a training director for Goodwill Industries, tasked with helping underemployed or unemployed people re-enter the workforce. Knowing nothing at the time about instructional design and given little direction, she thought back to the best teachers she’d had. “The less they talked, the more I learned,” she recalled. Unwilling to perpetuate the ineffective lecturing methods that had affected what she learned and determined to make a difference in the lives of her students, she experimented with self-taught methods of active learning, taking note of which approaches worked best. And thus began her lifelong love affair with transforming the learning experience.

Shannon (co-founder #2) also found herself immersed in the world of learning from a young age. As an avid observer of human connections, she practiced being a teacher as a child and spent her days writing detailed stories of life laden with emotional experiences. With her BA in English, she began her career as a technical writer focusing on the end user, advocating that learners should get the information they need when they need it. As she moved into instructional design, she strove to ensure that each individual’s learning needs were met clearly, simply, and effectively.

By the time we formed Idea Learning Group, it had become all too clear that learners in the workplace were generally no better off than students in the classroom who—not unlike Jillian as a child—were subject to ineffective and outdated learning methods. For us, these outdated learning methods seemed to have been carried over as the default training option for most learning professionals, including ourselves. We had to figure out a new way of approaching learning at work.

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It was the week before a big presentation for our local ATD chapter conference in 2012\, and for the past month, we’d spent hours putting together a carefully crafted presentation covering the science of learning, one of our favorite topics. But as Shannon reviewed the materials for our presentation, it suddenly became strikingly clear: we were caught in a pickle. The slides were beautifully designed. The presentation was thorough. We knew the material inside and out.

There was just one big problem. It became increasingly clear to us that we were about to violate the very principles of brain-based learning that we’d set out to teach. Research has shown that people learn best through active, experiential, and social learning that is broken up into small and meaningful chunks. And yet here we were, clicking through slide after slide of information, lecturing to an imaginary audience on how to design brain-friendly learning programs.

We couldn’t believe it. We weren’t sure how we hadn’t seen it before.

After all, we founded Idea Learning Group with the mission to improve the way people learn at work. We were progressive, forward thinking, and passionate about learning. So how was it that we now found ourselves here, violating the very rules we’d set out to champion?

We panicked. We had only a short amount of time until the conference, not enough to change the format of our presentation, our team advised. Besides, presenting any other way seemed risky, especially in front of a group of our peers. What if a new approach didn’t work? What if we tried it, only to be laughed at by our fellow learning professionals? Regardless of how well founded a new approach might be, it’s uncomfortable to step outside your comfort zone.

The clock was ticking.

As we tossed and turned in our sleep over the weekend, stressing about how—or even if—we should reformat our upcoming presentation on the science of learning, an idea came to Jillian. Like many ideas, it wasn’t entirely new. Years before, it had surfaced in a sudden moment of inspiration before quickly getting buried by the day-to-day responsibilities of life and work. Just like that, the idea had disappeared—until this particular Monday morning.

With the lightbulb in full blaze, we decided our plan of action. Before we’d even taken off our coats or poured our morning cup of tea, we gathered our team together.

“We’re scratching everything,” we announced. “We’re starting over, and this is what we’re going to do.”

We detailed our vision: an interactive, play-based, experiential model that would allow learners to freely move around the room at their own speed and pace. Everything we’d discovered in our research—active learning, social learning, experiential learning, play—would be included.

And then for the important part: it would be station based, allowing learners to freely choose among the activities we’d prepared for them. Choice, we’d determined, was the component that most distinguished Cafeteria Learning from other models in the industry, even from more progressive approaches that were active and social.

We were invigorated, inspired, and ready to go.

As our team looked back at us, wide-eyed, it was apparent they thought we were crazy. But as we continued to explain our idea, they slowly began to see the potential, eventually giving way to unbridled enthusiasm.

We spent the next several days overhauling our presentation, transforming slides of lecture-based content into an array of hands-on, social activities and designing 15 different stations for learners to choose from (see chapter 10 for examples). We were nervous about trying a new approach, but we knew there was no turning back. We had the acute sense that maybe—just maybe—we were on to something. We had to find out.

When the big day arrived, we took a deep breath and introduced learners to our concept of Cafeteria Learning. Then, we let the participants loose to explore the learning stations. As they moved around to the various stations, we watched carefully to gauge their reactions. Were they enjoying themselves and engaging in the activities and with each other? Most important, were they learning?

We thought so, but even so, we were anxious. Our fears were finally quelled when a woman walked up to us after the workshop.

“I have to tell you,” she started, as our hearts skipped a beat. “That was one of the best trainings I’ve ever attended.” Then, she gave us a hug. Several other attendees came up to us after the event with positive feedback, too.

From that moment, we knew we were on to something. And that’s how Cafeteria Learning was born, as an alternative or complement to traditional training. In practice, it’s an approach to learning that allows instructional designers (chefs) to apply content (ingredients) to a variety of interchangeable activities (recipes), resulting in an informal classroom workshop in which each learner builds a customized learning experience (meal). It’s our answer to passive, choice-less training that has become the norm.

You want to see learners light up, not shut down. You want learners to choose from a cornucopia of learning experiences rather than being force-fed learning. You want to see your company reap the benefits of well-executed training programs rather than grumble about their ineffectiveness. You want to transform workplace learning for the better. Read on to learn how.