Introduction

Imagine a world in which restaurants gave you only one choice. “This is what you’re getting, and you’d better like it!” the waiter snarls as she places a plate of spaghetti in front of you. You used to love dining out—until now.

“Ugh. I hate spaghetti,” you think to yourself as you pick up your fork to begin the less than exciting task of chewing your food. You feel more like a 5-year-old being force-fed your daily serving of vegetables than an adult enjoying a pleasant night out on the town.

We cannot help but cringe when we imagine a world of choice-less restaurants—not only because we like food way too much, but also because this scenario resembles today’s learning and development field. Most organizations serve up learning programs that, even when masterfully prepared, lack an essential ingredient: choice.

Think about it. A chef may meticulously plan and carefully concoct a meal. She may prepare it with the very best ingredients, but not everyone will like it. One meal simply cannot meet everyone’s needs.

Because most restaurants offer many options, ordering spaghetti—or chicken salad, or spicy fajitas—becomes an active choice rather than a reluctant “have to.” Choice allows for a variety of tastes and dining preferences, ensuring as optimal an experience as possible. Spaghetti may very well still be on the menu—in fact, you may even end up choosing it—but you have a choice to select it, which makes all the difference.

This is precisely the active, engaging experience that the Cafeteria Learning model promotes. Cafeteria Learning brings together the best of the experiential, constructivist, and action learning approaches and bakes in an important brain-based twist: choice. What if instead of walking into a training event and seeing rows of chairs with an instructor waiting at the front of the room, your learners were surprised to find interactive stations stocked with hands-on materials? What if instead of sitting and listening to a lecturer read off words on presentation slides, your learners were free to explore and absorb the content at their own speed and direction? And what if instead of being given only one option for learning, your learners could choose from a variety of learner-centered activities, just like they might choose from a variety of food in a cafeteria?

Let Them Choose is written for you, the learning professional who is searching for another way of designing learning experiences. Cafeteria Learning typically works best with what may be referred to as “soft skills” or “people skills” content such as communication, sales, time management, or goal setting. What makes this type of content work well with Cafeteria Learning is that it can be presented in a nonlinear way. That is, it doesn’t matter in what order the learner achieves the learning objectives, just that they are all met by the end of the learning experience. In contrast, “hard skills” training is intended to improve a learner’s technical skill set in a very specific way. The Cafeteria Learning model could be applied to a training program for technical procedures, though how you structure and outline the activities around the learning objective might need more order.

Over the course of this book, we will present a start-to-finish guide on what Cafeteria Learning is and how to implement it within your organization.

In Chapter 1, “How We Learn,” we’ll introduce research on how the brain learns best (perhaps unsurprisingly, it’s the opposite of how many organizations structure their training). You’ll learn why moving around a room and learning experientially is so much more powerful than sitting in your seat, how learners construct knowledge, and how choice enhances the learning process.

In Chapter 2, “What Is Cafeteria Learning?” you’ll gain an in-depth understanding of Cafeteria Learning and each of its components. You’ll learn how Cafeteria Learning works, and the core components of a Cafeteria Learning workshop. And you’ll see what it’s like for a learner to move through a Cafeteria Learning experience.

Chapter 3, “Getting Buy-in for Cafeteria Learning,” explores the process of getting organizational buy-in for your Cafeteria Learning program. You’ll learn how Cafeteria Learning benefits the learner, the organization, and the learning professional.

Chapter 4, “Writing Cafeteria Learning Objectives,” details a step-by-step tutorial on the art of writing Cafeteria Learning-specific learning objectives. You’ll learn how to identify your three core learning objectives and write them in a manner that allows for sufficient choice.

Next, in Chapter 5, “Designing Cafeteria Learning Activities,” you’ll discover the four-step process for designing Cafeteria Learning activities that revolve around each of your core learning objectives. You’ll learn about the best way to brainstorm and select activities and why it’s important to design activities that span various learning experiences in order to enhance the choice you offer your learners.

Chapter 6, “The Framework for Cafeteria Learning,” covers the process for framing your content. You’ll learn how to design a priming activity that engages learners from the start. You’ll learn how to weave in foundational content that leads learners into the main activity workshop. And you’ll learn how to bring your workshop to a close with a debriefing activity that helps your learners synthesize and reflect on what they’ve learned.

Chapter 7, “Facilitating Cafeteria Learning,” shares tips and best practices for facilitating a successful Cafeteria Learning workshop. You’ll learn how to prepare for facilitating a Cafeteria Learning workshop one month, one week, one day, and one hour before your workshop. You’ll learn what you need to take into account when setting up your room and materials. And you’ll learn the best way to introduce a Cafeteria learning workshop and lead learners through the activities.

Chapter 8, “Measuring and Evaluating the Results,” lays out helpful practices for evaluating your Cafeteria Learning workshop and gathering valuable feedback and metrics after your workshop has come to a close. You’ll learn that evaluating the results of Cafeteria Learning is just as important as measuring more traditional learning experiences.

Chapter 9, “Case Studies,” details how organizations have successfully used Cafeteria Learning to deliver engaging workshops. Through case studies, you’ll learn about the intended learning outcomes, activity examples, and the perspectives from participants and stakeholders on their experiences learning with this method.

Finally, Chapter 10, “Cafeteria Learning Activities,” provides a handpicked selection of our favorite Cafeteria Learning activities, which you can use as a starting point for your own design process.

We hope Let Them Choose will inspire you to take meaningful steps toward creating learning experiences in your organization that effectively harness the power of choice and ensure that each individual’s learning needs are met. Cafeteria Learning is the model we’ve designed for achieving this goal. We hope you’ll join us on our quest to transform workplace learning through the power of choice.