WHAT IS CAFETERIA LEARNING?

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Think of Cafeteria Learning as a complete dining experience rather than a grab-n-go meal. With Cafeteria Learning you begin with an appetizer (priming), move on to the main course (activities), and finish with dessert (debrief).

Cafeteria Learning workshops begin with a priming activity that engages learners and gets them thinking about the content. This not only prepares learners for the learning that’s to come, but it’s also a great way to involve learners from the get-go and make use of the often overlooked first few minutes of a workshop when learners are settling in.

Research shows that priming, or providing advance knowledge of the information to come, increases learners’ abilities to retrieve this information in the future (Martin and Turennout 2002) and also activates an important problem-solving area of the brain (Carter, MacDonald, and Ursu 2000). “Priming works to retrieve information from memory when a priming stimulus is presented and sets off a chain of events in which one node of a concept is linked to another,” wrote Dosher and Rosedale (1989). Ratcliff and McKoon (1988, 405) suggested that “If the prime is directly related to the target concept, the individual will have an easier time recalling the concept as a chunk of information.”

The workshop officially begins with the main course, during which learners spend the most time freely choosing, exploring, and engaging in learning activities at their own pace. Stations are set up around the room where learners get to decide which learning activities they want to participate in. Each activity is designed to provide the same content for learners to discover no matter which activity they choose. For the most part, the content, or knowledge, is in these learning activities. By taking a constructivist approach to learning, Cafeteria Learning allows learners to discover and construct their own knowledge as they complete the activities and interact with their colleagues and peers.

Lastly, each workshop ends with a dessert, or debriefing activity, that helps learners synthesize the content and reflect on what it means to them within the context of their day-to-day jobs. An effective debriefing, which facilitates collaborative reflection, can bridge the gap between the workshop content and applying learning back at work (Wick, Pollack, Jefferson, Flanagan 2006, 73).

The experience as a whole is exploratory, allowing learners to build, construct, and discover information and meaning for themselves rather than simply memorizing and reciting it. It emphasizes choice in activities that ultimately leads learners to the same learning outcome regardless of the activities they chose.

With Cafeteria Learning, we’ve carefully selected elements from each of the experiential, constructivist, and action learning theories, added in choice as a twist, and organized it all into an approach that encapsulates what we believe is the best of brain science and learning theory.

A Cafeteria Learning Story

“Not another training,” you grumble to yourself as you prepare to facilitate your company’s new workshop, “Creating an Inclusive Workplace.”

As a seasoned corporate trainer, who’s been with the company for years, you know exactly what to expect: You’ll spend an afternoon inside a too-warm, too-packed meeting room as you explain the importance of an inclusive workplace. Maybe you’ll sprinkle in a few discussion questions for good measure, which participants will reluctantly volunteer to answer: Their boss is in the room, after all. They better look engaged.

All you can think about is the fact that you have more important things to do: between managing day-to-day operations and preparing for a critical quarter-end deadline, you’re already squeezed for time. On top of everything else on your plate, your team is expanding and you’re in the process of hiring a new consultant. You already know that having an inclusive workplace is one of the company values, and you will do your best to model it.

You review the facilitator guide. It’s different. There will be interactive stations stocked with hands-on materials, and you’re responsible for summarizing the priming activity and presenting foundational content for about 10 minutes of the allotted session time. You do a double-take: Are those building bricks referenced as learning materials?

This couldn’t be right.

You walk through the experience in your mind.

“Are you here for the Creating an Inclusive Workplace workshop?” you ask as participants arrive. You smile and direct them toward a table full of photos depicting a variety of people’s faces.

You ask each learner to pick a photo that appeals to them—any photo—and to use the first few minutes before the workshop begins to answer discussion questions that have been placed on their table with a partner.

Participants appear a tad nervous at first. It’s much more comfortable to sit near the back of the room, listening to the lecture and occasionally taking some notes. But bit by bit, their curiosity helps them to overcome their nerves.

You imagine one of the learners sitting next to a manager from their department, saying good morning and agreeing to work together. One of the learners reads one of the provided discussion questions aloud: “Why do you think you picked the photo that you did?”

The learners had thought about why they picked it, but after reflecting for a moment, they realize that they’d selected a person who’s just like them: Male. Caucasian. Similar in age. Do they do the same thing when choosing whom to engage with on their team? Although they’d never exclude anyone purposefully, it dawns on them for the first time that maybe they have an unconscious bias toward socializing and working with people who are similar. It’s subtle and they mean no harm; it’s just what comes naturally.

The learner thinks about Jenny, who’s one of just a handful of women in the department and wonders: Could this tendency to work more closely with the men on the team make Jenny feel excluded and undervalued?

“Ding!”

You ring a bell, signifying that the workshop is about to begin. The first five minutes of this experience has already sparked personal insights, and the workshop hasn’t even officially started.

You begin, “Today we’re using a learning technique called Cafeteria Learning. It’s designed to give you the freedom to choose how you learn. Similar to a cafeteria, stations are set up around the room to offer you choices. You get to decide which learning activities you want to participate in. When it’s time, you’ll browse the Activity Menu, which lists your activity choices. First, let’s talk a little bit about why we are here today, the expected learning outcome for the workshop, and what you will learn this morning.”

“As you know fostering an inclusive workplace is one of our company values. I’d like to begin with a brief review of our organization’s mission, vision, values, and our philosophy around the importance of creating an inclusive workplace and then I have just a couple of slides to show you.”

After emphasizing the desired workshop outcomes and learning objectives, you continue, “Let’s review your Activity Menu for today. It lists the learning activities you can select from during today’s workshop.”

<<insert Figure 2-1; Figure 2-1. Sample Activity Menu>>

You continue, “At the top of the menu are the three topics we are learning today, and under each topic there are three activities. You will choose one activity from each topic. The activities you choose are completely up to you. If you’ve completed one activity from each topic and you have extra time, feel free to choose additional activities.

“Don’t worry about not learning something because you didn’t complete all of the activities! Each activity has been designed to help you learn the same content within that topic, no matter which activities you choose.

“With that, take a moment to consider which activities interest you and make your selections. Then, you’ll have a chance to participate at your own pace, and I’ll let you know when you have 15 minutes left. Of course, I’ll be checking in at each of the stations and available to answer any questions you may have.”

You overhear a learner say to another, “This is going to be different.” Although they aren’t quite sure what to expect, they seem intrigued and also comforted by the fact that they’re in control of their own learning.

Each Activity Menu is organized into three main topics, each of which have three related activities to choose from. Each topic and the three activities that relate to it is called a “learning topic.”

You watch as participants head straight for their activities of choice. You notice one begins the “Building Bridges” activity within the “Communication Strategies” topic.

As you read deeper into the facilitator guide, you imagine the following scene:

The learner partners with Miguel from the finance department, whom she’s never met before. “Whoever thought we’d get to play with building bricks at work?” she says to Miguel. “This is going to be fun!”

As they work together to build a unique structure, some differences in opinion arise; nevertheless, you can’t help but notice how well Miguel’s analytical mind complements Emily’s: her idea for the bridge is lofty and grand; his is sturdy, calculated, and realistic. Without her vision, the bridge would have lacked beauty and many value-added features. Without his analytical approach, however, the bridge would have been shoddy—it would have fallen to shambles. Realistically, she needed some healthy nuts-and-bolts perspective in order to make it work.

While answering the discussion questions, it dawns on them just how critical it is to communicate and share these unique perspectives, resources, and skills in the workplace, both inside the department and out. They discuss how they might work with other departments more closely so everyone can bring a unique perspective to the table and help solve problems affecting both departments—in the past they’ve always tried to solve problems individually or with their own teams.

You begin to think about the candidates you’ve been interviewing to fill your department’s open position: Sure, you relate more easily to people who think like you, but could it be beneficial to bring someone on board with a completely different set of perspectives and skills.

Next, you move on to understanding the “Telling My Story” activity within the “Understanding Others” topic. Using a tablet, the activity invites learners to record themselves relating a story about a time in which they witnessed or experienced inclusion not being valued. They also have the opportunity to view stories recorded by your colleagues.

Learners sit down at the table, read the story prompt card, and record their story. When they’re finished, they can review the other recordings. One such recording recounts an employee’s personal story of moving to the United States from India:

“I was in one of my first meetings with my prior company, and not everyone could understand my accent. I thought I had important contributions to make, but no one asked for clarification or further explanation—most of the time my comments were just skipped over or dismissed. It was easy to feel like my voice wasn’t valued or heard. Eventually I just decided to stop contributing.”

You think about this story and it triggers important questions and insights for you: Inside and outside of formal meetings, how are you making sure everyone on your team is given the chance to speak up and that they all feel heard? You realize that, purposefully or not, you tend to interact more with people who are similar to you. Why not purposefully create an environment of inclusion?

As learners are engrossed in the activities, participating in meaningful discussions, and reflecting on personal insights on how they will behave differently and apply what they have learned to encourage inclusion on their team, you begin to understand the difference this method of learning provides. As a trainer you’re no longer the “sage on the stage” but rather a facilitator to ensure that the framework is set for personal, meaningful learning.

As you near the end of the workshop, you bring the learners back together as a group to debrief each activity. You ask learners to volunteer to share some of their experiences and tie their insights back to the intended learning for each topic. Listening to other’s insights provides learners with even more to think about and apply.

New relationships with people within the company are formed, and initial nervousness has faded away. What was once abstract has suddenly become relevant, real, and meaningful. Learning that once felt mandatory and one-sided now feels like a choice. You provided the framework and foundational content while the learners constructed their own meaning and ideas that they’ll apply, ones that are relevant to their particular experience and workplace.

At the close of the workshop, you invite each learner to reflect on a final question, “Knowing what you know now, what will you do differently in your job?”They write their answer down on a pair of sticky notes: one to stick onto a collaborative board along with those of the rest of the group and one to take with them.

You think about what your answer would be, “Actively seek to embrace rather than ignore differences,” which further crystallizes your understanding of how you can apply these concepts to your work. You thought you got it before, but now you really get it.

As you close the facilitator guide, you wonder, “Why didn’t we do a workshop with activity choices like this 10 years ago?”

Chapter Summary

Cafeteria Learning takes the best of what we learned in our research and experience and rolls it all together into one simple framework with choice at its core. Cafeteria Learning consists of three main components: a starter (priming activity), a main course (choose, explore, engage activities), and a dessert (debrief). Stations are set up around the room where learners get to decide which learning activities they want to participate in. Each activity is designed to provide the same content for learners to discover no matter which activity they choose. By taking a constructivist approach to learning, Cafeteria Learning allows learners to discover and build their own knowledge as they complete the activities and interact with their colleagues and peers.