

The key to unlocking your potential

Summary Points

- The limitations of many training approaches
- The relationship between democratic control of learning and cognitive engagement
- The aim of Dewey's formulation of the democratic control of learning
- The importance of the use of multiple training strategies
- The benefits of the Communities of Inquiry model in training delivery

The relationship between training and thinking may seem obvious to many of us but the actual incidence of cognitive engagement in training is often lower than we anticipate. The consequences of this low rate of rate of active learning and problem solving in the training process can have serious ramifications for businesses.

At the root of the problem is a training methodology that has not combined the importance of cognitive engagement, real problem solving and motivational issues.

In a majority of traditional training contexts, the transfer of information is predicated on a model of passive acquisition by learners. This passive learning model is often seen in contexts where course requirements are imposed on learners for the purposes of accreditation, employer sponsored training, or where some other degree of compulsion exists in the reason for the training.

Recent developments in E-learning strategies have begun to incorporate elements of active learning and problem solving as a means of resisting the problems associated with passive learning. Yet even these approaches may fail to achieve full engagement because of the absence of a democratic problem solving approach that results in complete cognitive engagement.

Even in the context of E-learning, the majority of training approaches are predicated on the assumption that there are sets of data – key operational training, for instance –

that must be conveyed to participants and learned by them. In such cases, knowledge is transferred rather than acquired: if motivation is not provided to stimulate knowledge acquisition, what can result is a passive transfer of information in which the learner feels little ownership of the learning process and there is little consequent cognitive engagement or motivated interest in the learning process.

The resulting lack of any sense of ownership of learning, coupled with its intrinsic lack of motivation, is one of the contributing factors that lead to a lack of initiative in on the job problem solving tasks.

The loss of democratic control over learning, still a common feature of predominantly instructor led training in the private and public sectors, works against established pedagogical principles.

Democratic control of learning

Learning that seeks to establish democratic control and establish real cognitive engagement is distinguished by four core elements:

- establishing a rich dialogue between learners and between learners and the teacher to facilitate the exploration of problems;
- engaging learners in the application and use of the information they are expected to master through the exploration of alternative points of view;

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- engaging in real world problem solving based on the information being learned;
- providing opportunities for learners to operate at a level of cognitive engagement that is intrinsically motivating and enables them to achieve Flow.

There is nothing new or radical in this idea, which was articulated by John Dewey, among others, in his work *Democracy and Education* in 1916. More recently, psychologists and philosophers have reiterated Dewey's ideas in formulations of their own such as in Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's concept of Flow and in Matthew Lipman's 1988 work, *Philosophy Goes to School*.

Dewey's formulation of learning

Dewey presented a deceptively simple formulation that ought to go to the very heart of what all training should achieve in the promotion of thinking and problem solving. It should, in all instances, promote:

"Thought or reflection...[which] is the discernment of the relation between what we try to do and what happens in consequence." (pp.144-146)

For Dewey, this could only occur in what he chose to call "a community of co-operative inquiry".

In the absence of these communities and the thinking they promote, we have what Dewey characterised as "intellectual servility", the abdication of all real participation in the process of learning, whose only end is to please those who impose the learning and to secure whatever promised benefit is held out as a reward for its successful completion. Regarding this mechanical approach to learning,

which can still dominate training methodologies, Dewey had strong words:

"The notion that the 'essentials' of elementary education are the three R's mechanically treated, is based upon ignorance of the essentials needed for realisation of democratic ideals...[I]t assumes that in the future, as in the past, getting a livelihood, 'making a living', must signify for most men and women doing things which are not significant, freely chosen, and ennobling to those who do them, carried on under the direction of others for the sake of pecuniary reward." (p.192)

Dewey's comment forms an accurate description of the function and approach adopted in the majority of workplace training. It is still based on the necessity of the corporate "three R's" and derives its relevance from the need to "make a living", to generate profits, and elicits little by way of genuine cognitive engagement or democratic dialogue. In many instances, the result is the passive, unmotivated acquisition of information – not knowledge – that is processed and applied in only the most limited of ways.

In this context, such training may create an inflexibility of response because there is a minimal personal investment in the learning process, thereby frustrating the espoused aim of creating understanding that will, in turn, generate knowledge. Instead, there may only be a decontextualised body of processes and behavioural responses that will be applied regardless of the realities of each situation that confronts the learner when he or she returns to the role of employee.

This is a circumstance that all organisations need to consider

because the initial emphasis or result of workplace training is not always on cognitive engagement but on the structurally simpler and more cost effective process of the passive transfer of information. As Dewey again remarked, in such situations the learner's "...seeming attention, his docility, his memorisings and reproductions, will partake of intellectual servility" rather than intellectual freedom and consequent engagement.

It is therefore incumbent upon organisations to ensure that their training is delivered in a manner that promotes genuine, not just apparent, intellectual engagement, stimulates critical thinking skills and offers the means to these through strategies such as democratic dialogue and real problem solving.

Fundamentally, learners must first recognise the problem for themselves in order to be engaged in its resolution: a problem imposed upon learners, whether owing to external regulatory constraints or to operational reasons, with no real accompanying intellectual incentive, does not translate into understanding and knowledge. It simply becomes learned data lacking any personal investment on the part of the learner beyond "the sake of pecuniary reward".

It is important to understand that this approach does not preclude existing methods of training such as E-learning strategies. It is, however, important to understand that E-learning strategies do not provide all solutions and must be complemented by democratic dialogue and inquiry processes that focus on the development of strategies that resolve problems and contribute to meaningful learning.

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Communities of Inquiry

While the public and private sectors have taken up the challenge of Communities of Practice (COP), they have yet to respond substantially to the challenge to develop their training strategies in terms of the approach advocated by the Communities of Inquiry (COI) model.

The majority of trainers themselves do not always recognise the importance or value of COIs in improving the quality of their training delivery methods because the notion of cognitive engagement is not one that is often subject to extended scrutiny by the training community.

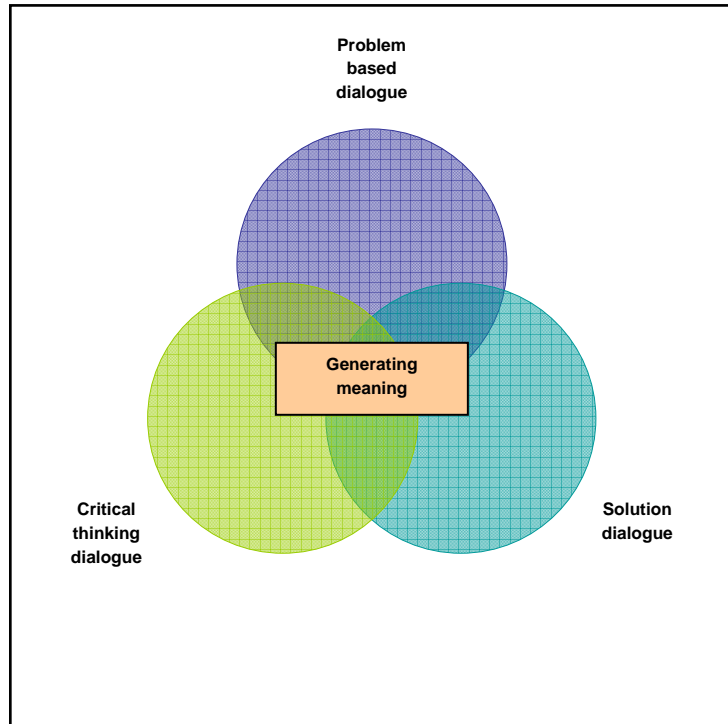
In this respect, the challenge of this article is for us to begin to incorporate the benefits and flexibility of the COI approach to adapt and enhance existing training methodologies so that they result in a more consistent degree of cognitive engagement and the generation of meaning, as opposed to the passive transfer of information.

The process of engaging learners in a COI is a democratic one: dialogue must exist not simply between learners and their teacher, but between each of the learners themselves. Not only does this function of community address the affective issues so often absent from most business training, but it develops a democratic means of exploring problem solving tasks and of evaluating the relative merits of different approaches to their resolution.

In schematic form, the process may look something like a Venn diagram, with each overlapping circle interdependent upon the others in order to generate both meaning and purpose in the context of training. In this sense it helps to indicate the

emphasis placed upon the generation of meaning, not simply information, in the COI model.

What results is a democratic pattern of dialogue based upon the skills of critical thinking, affective and social intelligence and problem solving.



The most critical aspect of the COI model rests in the areas of overlap that exist between each of the dialogue modes. It is in these areas that social and affective skills are enhanced, contextual problem solving skills are refined, and the motivation to generate meaning is nurtured and sustained.

The emphasis on community in the COI model makes it immediately applicable to the development of online communities, where ideas, approaches to problem solving and interaction are all required. Provided that a democratic model is followed, in which all participants have an equal voice, meaning can be just as successfully generated as in a

physical context. This adaptability is one of the COI model's strengths.

COI and Flow

The democratic learning benefits of COI can be paired with Cziksentsmihalyi's concept of Flow.

Flow is the optimal state of focus for learning, in which the learner's motivation, sense of achievement and development of meaning in the process of acquiring knowledge are at their peak.

In a group context, the goal is to harness the collective resources of a group in working towards whatever desired common goal exists. The key difference being, in this model, that the emphasis falls on responses and solutions generated from within the group rather than upon those imposed from outside.

This approach certainly presents a challenge to more traditional, hierarchical notions of leadership,

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organisation and training methods. It requires a belief in the ability of an organisation's employees to work for a collectively defined benefit – in this instance, for the improvement of their performance.

It requires a sustained and meaningful organisational emphasis be placed upon the idea of community as a decision making body, and not simply as a tool for the implementation or execution of external decisions.

Flow is more easily achieved under these circumstances because of the inherently social nature of learning. In order to facilitate Flow, rules can be established to direct the operation of a COI prior to its initial operation regarding information gathering, the length of time devoted to problem solving, the pattern of interaction desired between the COI and any external agency, the use of available tools and even specific allocated functions for individual members of the COI.

These basic rules of operation for the COI then act as a conduit for the operation of Flow and create the psycho-social conditions that work against diffusion of effort rather than against focused and goal oriented learning.

Cziksentmihalyi himself made a number of suggestions for enabling individuals to achieve Flow while working collaboratively in an optimal group situation. The characteristics of such groups, of which a COI is one, are:

- the utilisation of creative spatial arrangements such as the use of a work space in which there are chairs, pin walls and charts and no desks, with the optimal capacity for individuals to

move within the physical space to facilitate thought and communication;

- the incorporation of a 'play ground' design in which charts are available for information inputs, flow charts, project summaries, a space for 'crazy' ideas – there is a place for 'craziness' – and a safe place, where thoughts otherwise unvoiced can be written and expressed;
- the use of parallel group working;
- a key target group focus;
- an emphasis on visualisation, which can also contribute to an increase in efficiency by allowing individuals to communicate succinctly and accurately.

In this, Cziksentmihalyi's theory of Flow in conjunction with the COI model invokes elements of the theory of mindfulness developed by Ellen Langer, Guggenheim Fellow of Psychology at Harvard University.

Both approaches emphasise the necessity for the continued critical communal awareness of problems and their potential solution for optimal learning.

This emphasis is not one that currently finds a natural home in the structure of our public and private sector enterprises. It is, therefore, more of a challenge to consider alternative ways of incorporating democratic learning and practices for the generating of meaning that circumvent the less motivating aspects of many current traditional and E-learning strategies.

It also requires the need to invest in physical resources – spaces – in which groups may work reflectively, a necessary precondition for achieving Flow, without undue external disturbance from outside sources.

The challenge for us, as trainers, is to devise systems that will make this possible for the benefit of both businesses and their employees.

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