LEARNING TASKS: TURNING A DRY SUBJECT INTO AN ENGAGING EXPERIENCE

BY ADRIANO PIANESI

"It is not the subject but the imagination of the teacher that has to be alive before the interest can be felt."

—Jacques Barzun

How do you teach a dry subject effectively, particularly in the workplace? In what ways can you engage your students when your content has a high level of abstraction? What strategies are most effective to bring "learning to task"?

In the next pages, I provide some practical tips and advice about the design and use of *learning tasks*— experiential, hands-on activities—based on my 15 years of experience as an adult educator and leaning heavily on the contributions of Jane Vella in this field. In *Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), Vella describes "a different approach, where teaching and learning are integrated and where the learning task is the overall design." These learning tasks introduce learners to the intricacies of applying what they have learned to their daily work. Despite some disadvantages (they can take a little longer than lectures and can be messier to handle), I believe that learning tasks are an effective way to teach for results. This article will discuss:

1. What "mind shift" is necessary to be able to teach with learning tasks;
2. What is a learning task;
3. What are the four types of learning tasks that, properly sequenced, can generate engagement and fun, no matter what the content you teach;
4. How to debrief a learning task to maximize its learning potential for your students.

> So-called "domain knowledge" (concepts, facts, and procedures), while often necessary, seems largely insufficient to empower people to solve problems at work.

Why Learning Tasks

I am biased! My personal way to train in the workplace emphasizes results through group work, learners' autonomy, and a new role for the trainer as a facilitator of learning rather than a conveyer of content. My biases bring me to see *collaboration/diversity* and *hands-on experiences/action* as necessary conditions for learning to take place.

These biases come from my direct observation. So-called "domain knowledge" (concepts, facts, and procedures), while often necessary, seems largely insufficient to empower people to solve problems at work. Adult learners generally are not interested in formal knowledge—the "knowing about" the entire background behind what they are learning. Rather, they are focused on "knowing how," "knowing when," and "knowing if" in order to improve their own ability to solve problems,

often with limited time and incomplete information, in the context of their day-to-day tasks. The result of this focus is the creation of new meanings, new connections, and new expertise with the qualities of immediate returns, clear transferability, and evident usefulness. Learning tasks support this kind of integration.

In addition, I have noticed that by using learning tasks, aside from helping trainees acquire the necessary skills on the subject at hand, we build a true organizational ability to learn through action and reflection. This kind of learning involves the *creation* of knowledge rather than the *consumption* of data. Learning tasks thus nurture students' capacity for actively integrating new concepts into their existing work practice on a given subject.

Building Blocks for Creating Expertise

Learning tasks are not just fun games and activities that supplement lectures or exercises to practice the content. They are a different way to teach altogether, where the tasks themselves are the whole shebang. According to Vella, "A learning task is a way to structure dialogue. It is an open question put to members of a small group who have been given all the resources they need to respond." She also says, "A learning task is a way of ensuring engagement of learners with the new content."

Learning tasks are based on the assumption that new expertise is built through *experiences*. They expose learners to situations where they can safely practice the content they are learning and collaboratively nurture their own ability to solve problems with their new skills. The work of designing learning tasks is *turning content elements*

TEAM TIP

Use the learning tasks ideas outlined in this article to design workplace training sessions that foster collaborative learning and "unlearning."

into problem-solving experiences set to resemble the learners' work context. Three key moments make up a learning task: instructions, task, and debrief.

1. The Instructions (5 percent of the total time for the lesson) are given by the trainers to present the activity, demonstrate its basic components, and provide guidance on how to perform it (see "Learning Task Instructions"). So, for example, for a task I assign in my "Emotional Intelligence of Team Results" workshop, I say to students:

• Introduction, Goal, and Reason: *"Have you ever thought about what the one thing is that gets you going? Self-awareness is a key skill to build your emotional intelligence. In the next task, we are focusing on your self-knowledge, which the ancients Greeks considered the source of all wisdom. By doing this, we are gaining the clarity required to start building your emotional IQ."*

• Instructions 1: *"I invite you to read the poem on page 23 and individually write in your learning journals the responses to the three questions that you find there. I will then ask you to share your thoughts with a person you have never worked with before."*

• Instructions 2: *"Again, Step 1: Read the poem on page 23. Step 2: Write down your answers to the three questions in your learning journals. Step 3: When I ring the bell, please turn to a person you normally do not work with and share your answers. You have 15 minutes for this task."*

• Question: *"Any questions?"*

There is an art in giving good, specific, clear instructions. Instructors present the activity and the materials and check people's understanding of how to proceed. They clearly state why they selected the activity and what they hope it will accomplish. It is imperative to provide clear goals for the exercise (for example, "We are doing this task for these reasons …"), because the smallest omission or lack of clarity will make people practice the wrong way, will thwart their chances of success, and will undermine their learning. Trainers also need to state what the reward is for the activity, that is, what positive outcome will come from doing it right.

2. The Task is the actual exercise (55 percent of the total time for the lesson). Participants work on solving a problem to practice the content to be learned. The task always comes with written resources and materials. For instance, in the previous example, I ask people to go to page 23 to read a poem. The task is about reading, reflecting, and sharing as a way to experientially build self-awareness.

3. The Debrief is the review/ debriefing phase (40 percent of the total time of the lesson). The instructors facilitate a conversation after the activity has taken place that outlines key questions to drive the group's learning. For instance, in the same example, we can ask students if they liked the poem or not, whether the exercise came easy or not, if it holds some meaning, what they discovered in conversations, and so on. I can share my observations ("I notice a kind of relief in the room, am I right?") or my experience ("I selected this poem because . . ."). The reflection is the critical "harvesting" moment of the learning; below, we will look at strategies that can help maximize its effectiveness.

Four Kinds of Tasks

Jane Vella talks about four kinds of learning tasks and how they should be sequenced to build an effective learning experience:

1. We start with an **INDUCTIVE learning task**. With this kind of task, we "invite learners to qualify where they are at present in terms of the content, where they begin their study, and what the present conception of the topic includes." An inductive learning task can be used as a warm-up, but it is never an icebreaker. My inductive learning tasks start the work of learning and demonstrate that I care about how the learners' backgrounds and knowledge inform their work in the class. By showing this interest right from the start—in the crucial first three minutes that shape people's perceptions of the entire program—I establish a level of respect for them and for the rich experience they bring.

For example, in a class on effective time management, I opened the session by having participants fill out a form that included the following questions: "What do you hope to learn from this class? What are your time wasters? What situations do you hope to improve with more effective time management skills?" In a customer service workshop, I asked the trainees: "Tell me about your experience with bad customer service." In an online train-the-trainer course, I requested that attendees send in advance the name of an instructor who made a difference in their lives and why. This step creates a climate that is conducive to learning.

2. We create opportunities for learners to experience the content with an **INPUT learning task**, in which they meet the new materials hands-on. For example, I once taught a class on federal records management (talk about a dry subject!). Rather than present records management definitions and concepts with a PowerPoint slideshow, I broke the group into teams and gave each team a set of cards with 20 key concepts in federal records management. I encouraged them to sort the ones they were familiar with from the ones that they didn't know. I told them that in 15 minutes, we would hear the "provisional definition" of the concepts and asked them to pass the cards with concepts they were not familiar with to the other tables. We invited the agency's Records Management Officer to provide guidance. We only needed his expertise for five key concepts, as

LEARNING TASK INSTRUCTIONS
• INTRODUCTION, GOAL, REASON
• INSTRUCTIONS 1 (what to do, how much time, what happened in the end, and so on)
• INSTRUCTIONS 2 (repeat)
• QUESTIONS?

the groups pooled their knowledge and managed to come up with the correct definitions for most of the terms on their own.

3. With an **IMPLEMENTATION learning task**, we invite participants to do something with the new content. This kind of task solicits the learners' participation, asking them to "wear" the learning and run with it for their own purposes, from their own perspectives. For learners, it is a great chance to bring the content into their own lives; for trainers, it is an opportunity to verify that students have really absorbed the material.

In my "Dialogue as Facilitative Leadership" workshop, I ask trainees to write their own list of possible questions to ask someone with whom they disagree. The questions are based on the concept of open versus closed; the challenge is to ask open questions in response to aggressive statements like "No way" or "This is totally wrong!" The simulation that follows requires trainees to respond to interruptions and defensive statements only with the questions they have designed. In a class about supervisory skills, I created five brief stories that illustrated dilemmas for the main characters similar to the ones the learners were facing in supervising their own staffs. Each case finished with key questions; participants then chose either A or B as a course of action.

4. With an **INTEGRATION learning task**, we move into the actual use of the skill in the workplace. In a class about a new performance system, for example, I encouraged learners to write the three things they learned in the class, their own plan with dates for implementing it, and the factors they anticipated could derail their efforts, including the potential for routine to take over and cause them to return to their set ways. The conversation about implementation also raised the idea of "enablers," such as 30- and 60-day follow-ups by web conference and plans for involving the learners' supervisors in defining and ensuring the ongoing use of the class content.

The Learning Task Debrief

"There was a person constantly talking and disrupting the class. Unfortunately, that person was the instructor."
—From a real evaluation form

Task-based learning is grounded in the assumption that the quality of the learning process depends largely on the quality of the questions we as trainers ask during the dialogue that follows the action. According to World Café founders Juanita Brown and David Isaacs, learning questions "enable us to challenge our underlying assumptions in constructive ways. With a simple and consistent focus on questions that matter, casual conversations are transformed into collective inquiry." Indeed, learning takes place even after the task

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has been executed, through a dialogue in which powerful questions unleash the team's ability to reflect.

The dialogue that follows a learning task allows people to "talk the learning out," to express it, to verbalize it, to give it words, to reflect on it. Here we make learning visible through several iterations in order to produce an output, an actual sharable product. No matter how imperfect or partial this product is, it is nevertheless "owned" and serves as a basis for further learning.

For example, in a class on systems thinking, I introduce causal loop diagrams through a learning dialogue. Without explaining the concepts of reinforcing and balancing loops, I distribute a document called "Peter Russell's Credit Report," explaining that this fictional gentleman's poor credit rating can be traced back to the interplay of two variables: the amount of debt and the number of credit-card

transactions. I draw a reinforcing loop of those two variables and explain that this is another way to describe his situation. I then distribute other sample artifacts that illustrate similar situations and ask them to read them at their tables (for example, "Jenny's Diet" is about the interplay of variables in weight-loss decisions; "Mark Is Always Late!" focuses on the interplay between people's perceptions of others and reality, and so on). After students have read the stories, I ask them to jot down the variables they see in action, identifying the loops similar to the one I have written on the wall. The focus is on getting them to verbalize their understanding in order to introduce the new ideas "balancing loop" and "reinforcing loop."

For each kind of task (inductive, input, implementation, or integration), I have identified four partial sets of questions (see "Questions for Prompting Learning Dialogues" on p. 5). You can use these questions in the dialogue that debriefs the learning tasks to ensure a rich and productive conversation around the task experience.

• After an **INDUCTIVE learning task** (one that starts the training session and evokes previous learning), the trainers' focus is on listening and clarifying, while probing the rich experience participants bring to the class. The instructor ensures that trainees fully participate in the activity and prepare them for plunging into the content. By conducting a learning dialogue right after an inductive learning activity, trainers establish a safe space for everyone to speak. The conversation also gives people a chance to articulate what they already know about the content and review their experience with it.

• After an **INPUT learning task** (one that presents new content), trainees ask a lot of questions. In this phase, instructors clarify the concepts presented as new content and invite participants to describe what happened during the activity, to explain the content or their thinking about it, and to extract meaning and knowledge from the experience. Depending on the content or context of the task, much of

the dialogue after these input activities involves clarifying the input and ensuring understanding. Instructors focus on articulating the content, making sure that people participate, and tolerating a few mistakes.

• After an **IMPLEMENTATION learning task** (one that centers on applying what participants have learned in their own context), the dialogue meets the content in its most challenging aspect: application. This conversation normally raises a lot of questions, comments, opinions, and disagreements, allowing for multiple perspectives to emerge. In my experience, after an implementation task, you can expect a learning dialogue to go anywhere—most likely to disputing the key learning ideas and assumptions. For example, in our class "The Virtual Trainer," which is about teaching using web-conferencing technologies, when we ask participants to structure a lesson plan that makes for effective online engagement, the conversation often goes back to the benefits of doing face-to-face sessions and to the importance of understanding the audience's needs in order to select the right training media. By allowing trainees to express these different perspectives, which normally enrich the perspective of everyone involved, we honor the freedom of the learning process. In these situations, instructors need to use their emotional intelligence, negotiation skills, and conflict management abilities to ensure that group members give fair consideration to the concepts being taught and that they do their share of work or analysis.

• After an **INTEGRATION learning task** (one that brings the learning into the trainees' work life), the dialogue normally addresses the future. In this phase, the conversation should clearly identify two or three specific actions that students can implement immediately, individually or as a group, as a follow-up after the class.

The rule is simple. After performing any learning task, always involve students in a learning dialogue, because it is only through conversation that the experience is distilled in usable learning.

QUESTIONS FOR PROMPTING LEARNING DIALOGUES

After Inductive Learning Tasks:

To get learners ready to learn by evoking past experience, hopes, and expectations

- What was the theme of your past experience in one word?
- What is your attitude on the subject based on your past experience?
- What behaviors have worked/have not worked for you in the past in this area?
- What do you hope to learn about this subject that you know is important?
- What do you know about this subject that you know is true?
- What would you like to explore about the subject?
- What will you need to forget in order to learn this?
- Why are you excited/not excited about being here?
- Where will you be using what you learn about the subject?
- What do you hope to change as a result of your learning?

After Input Learning Tasks

To get learners to describe or interpret what happened during the activity

- How was it? (easy or difficult, etc.)
- What happened during the activity? I noticed . . .
- Who was really into it? How did you like this part?

To get learners to verbalize content or thinking

- Can you summarize . . . ? How would you describe . . . ?
- What happened as you did . . . ?

To get learners to extract meaning or knowledge from the experience or content

- I noticed you took this action. Why did you decide to do it?
- How would you describe the problem you were dealing with?
- How close do you think you have come to achieving what you wanted to achieve?
- How successful do you think you were?
- How do you see your role in this activity?
- How does this part relate to you?
- Why were there differences between what happened during the activity and your expectations?
- What actions will you take as a result of . . . ?
- What will you do differently next time?

After Implementation Learning Tasks

To get learners to describe or interpret what happened during the activity

- How was it? (easy, difficult, etc.)
- What happened during the activity? I noticed . . .
- Who was really into it? How did you like this part?

To get learners to verbalize content or thinking

- Can you summarize . . . ? How would you describe . . . ?
- What happened as you did . . . ?

To get learners and trainer to go deeper into analysis

- What do you need to consider when using this approach?
- What can you do right now to ensure you apply this tool?
- How are your current skills/information/knowledge/attitude giving you the results you want?
- What data make you say that this approach is difficult to use in real life?
- What would you need to see to agree with this idea?
- What is needed for you to change your mind?

After Integration Learning Tasks

- What do you think will simplify the application process for you?
- What obstacles might you encounter as you apply this approach?
- What problems do you anticipate?
- What could be a quick victory in doing this work?
- How can we support you in implementing this learning?
- Who do you need to enlist to make sure this really happens?
- What specific actions can you take to have a greater chance of success?
- How will you know if you have succeeded?

In conclusion, when we design a class using learning tasks, our lesson plan looks like an accordion. The basic sequence "Instructions–Task–Debrief" is the building block of the program; as such, it is repeated several times. First, we position an "Instructions–Inductive Task–Debrief" block, then an "Instructions–Input Task–Debrief." An "Instructions–Implementation Task–Debrief" follows, and we close with "Instructions–Integration Task–Debrief." Organized and assembled in various fashions, those elements create powerful learning programs.

A Learning Community

"Learning cannot be designed. Ultimately it belongs to the realm of experience and practice . . . It slips through the cracks; it creates its own cracks. Learning happens, design or no design."

—Jim Wenger

We know that telling is the least effective way to teach. In these pages, I have provided an alternative practice through the use of learning tasks. Our basic assumption is that trainers don't need to spoon-feed concepts to trainees. Trainers should become experts in finding great, creative, new ways to have people learn something, rather than being experts in what people learn. Yes, the trainer needs to know about the content. But that's not enough.

By shifting focus from conveying content to creating a learning experience, the job of a trainer becomes:
• Setting up learning tasks that allow trainees to experience the content first-hand;
• Giving clear instructions about the tasks to be performed;
• Being a resource during the actual tasks as well as sitting back and letting trainees do the work;

• Facilitating learning conversations by debriefing the task through the use of great questions.

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Trainers who use a task-centered approach play yet another role—they support the creation of a community of learners. A key element is building a sense of openness and trust in the group. A well-executed debrief after a learning task is essentially an exercise in community building.

When trainers see knowledge as book knowledge—facts and trivia—and individuals as lonely learners mandated to absorb something, then they don't perceive the need for dedicating time to building a learning community. With this mindset, it is not surprising that community-building work is often ignored and dropped in favor of more "meaningful" activities. But the fact is that learning communities are the very engine that makes learning turn into change for organizations. Without it, the

organizations we work with can't reap the full benefits of new approaches.

Training adults by using learning tasks embraces the action/reflection paradigm, develops real-world learning as situated expertise, and builds communities of learners. Besides, by spreading the joy of learning, training professionals can have a profound, positive impact on organizational change. And, isn't that what our work is all about? ◘

For Further Reading

Vella, Jane. *Taking Learning to Task: Creative Strategies for Teaching Adults* (Jossey-Bass, 2000)

Brown, Juanita, and David Isaacs. *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* (Berrett-Koehler, 2005)

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NEXT STEPS

• Start turning your own materials from "things learners need to *know*" into "things learners need to *do*" by using the examples provided in the article.

• Create mini-scripts for giving instructions on your learning tasks so you can provide learners with unequivocal understanding of what they are supposed to do.

• Select a few of the questions provided for designing your own learning dialogues.

• Give up control in your classes and enjoy the ride.

• Take the content of this article and come up with your own ideas.