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IN PRACTICE

April 2008

Brain-Based Learning

By Bob Lucas

I would like to introduce myself as a new Field Editor for ASTD Links, focusing on the theory and application of brain-based learning concepts. Currently, I am president of [Creative Presentation Resources](#), an Internet-based company that markets more than 1,000 creative learning products, as well as managing partner in Global Performance Strategies, a human resource performance consulting firm. Some of my books include *The Creative Training Idea Book: Inspired Tips and Techniques for Engaging and Effective Learning*, *The Creative Learner: Activities and Games That REALLY Engage People*, *The Big Book of Flip Charts*, *People Strategies for Trainers*, and *Training Skills for Supervisors*.

For more than three-and-a-half decades, I have been training adults, and I've been researching and writing about the topic of brain-based and accelerated learning for many years. I have used these concepts in hundreds of creative workshops and trainer development workshops, and in presentations at conferences, such as the ASTD International Conference and Exposition. I recently completed work on an edition of ASTD's *InfoLine* focused on brain-based learning, which scheduled for release in Fall 2008.

What is brain-based learning?

Brain-based or brain-compatible (active) learning theory focuses on creating an opportunity in which attainment, retention, recall, and use of information is maximized. This concept incorporates the latest research on the brain and encourages application of findings to training and educational learning environments.

A key to the successful application of brain-based learning theory precepts is for everyone involved in the learning process (program designers, managers, trainers/educators, and learners) to first understand how the brain functions. They must then identify personal strengths and areas for improvement related to the theory concepts and modify their approach to learning accordingly. They must also consciously focus on learner needs and learning styles to ensure that format and program delivery are effective.

According to the brain-based theory, learning is an active process in which

challenges, ambiguity, novelty, and creativity are used and encouraged through accelerated learning strategies (actively engaging participants in their own learning). Participants are prompted to think outside the box related to examining information and issues. Problem-solving, questioning, ongoing interaction, and feedback are important elements in the absorption process and are used freely. Learners are also provided with many opportunities to make associations with knowledge and skills they already possess while forming new patterns and making additional connections. These connections are strengthened by the use of analogies, simulations, metaphors, jokes, stories, examples, and various interactive techniques.

In brain-based learning environments, material and instruction must be learner-centered and delivered in a manner that is fun, meaningful, and personally enriching. It must also provide opportunities and time for participants to process what they experience so they can make mental connections and master content. In doing so, learners can increase personal comprehension and better grasp meaning and potential opportunities for application.

One way to ensure you are adequately addressing true learner needs when creating program content is to take the time to do an advanced assessment of what participants already know related to your intended session topics. You can accomplish this by mailing a questionnaire to participants and their supervisors a few weeks before scheduled training. You can also conduct face-to-face or telephone interviews, hold focus groups involving those who will be attending and/or their supervisors, or make visits to worksites to observe participants' on-the-job behavior. Take the information gained into account as you design program content.

If advance assessment is not possible, post flipchart paper on the training room wall with closed-ended questions related to program content—such as, How much experience do you have in ____? Or, How many times have you ____?). Have participants respond to the questions as they enter the room, then tabulate and incorporate their responses into your session content, if possible. You can also pass out small notecards or blank paper and have participants respond to questions that are either collected or discussed in small groups and then offered to the entire class.

Brain-based learning offers many opportunities for enhanced learning and retention of information and skills if used properly. I look forward to presenting additional ideas based on these learning concepts, and welcome your questions or suggestions. You can reach me at blucas@presentationresources.net.

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