Confessions of an Instructional Designer:
Being a Learner and Teacher

A colleague once remarked that the hardest audience to please is usually practitioners and peers from the same profession. As an instructional designer and master trainer myself, I have my fair share of being a “difficult learner” when it is my turn to take a back seat and learn from other trainers and masters. This article explores our own biases and how we can remain open and curious to new learning, so that we can be better learners and teachers.

Judger vs Learner Mode

Being a consultant and facilitator, my rational-logical instincts are often activated as a participant in a training workshop. Admittedly, I tend to be impatient and over-analyze new concepts and learning activities rather than let the learning evolve and emerge naturally.

Being rational-logical has its benefits; it allows me to quickly sieve through the mountain of new information rather than drown in them. On the flip side, being too quick to judge eliminates gems of wisdom. In my critical evaluation mode, I analyze every aspect in the activity - use of examples, content flow and facilitation method by the trainer. I confess, I am guilty of being a “judger” and having a fixed mindset about learning and development rather than approaching the learning with a “learner” mindset (Change Your Questions, Change Your Life by Marilee Adams).

Jumping Up my Own Ladder of Inference

Recently, my colleague and I were asked by a client to develop a coaching session for first time coaches and we found that the Ladder of Inference (The Fifth Discipline by Peter Senge) was a useful tool for them. However, I have used the Ladder of Inference in other trainings and many learners have found it a rather abstract concept to use. I have tried using lectures, stories, anecdotes and written exercises to get learners to understand and apply the concept but have met with resistance and reluctance.

I raised my concerns to another colleague and she suggested using videos and interactive exercises instead. I immediately rejected the idea as “too simple” without giving it any serious thought. My mind was on a “judger” mode. Unconsciously, I have “jumped up the ladder” and came to the conclusion that my colleague’s idea wouldn’t work based on my own experience and assumptions.
Coming down the Ladder of Inference

It would be indeed ironical that I have moved up my own Ladder of Inference while trying to facilitate the learning of others to use the Ladder of Inference! Luckily for us, I noticed my own Ladder of Inference and became open to her method of introducing this topic. In the end, it turned out well and I even managed to help a learner walk through her own Ladder of Inference in the class.

Oftentimes, I suffer from a “not invented here” syndrome which leads me to think that my instructional methods are superior to others. However, over-confidence can lead us to be closed to alternative ideas and methods. I call myself the “Chief Learning Curator”, because I want to be open, curious and integrate the best of western management theories and methods with eastern philosophies and context. I serve others better by practicing what I preached.

ABC to be a Better Learner and Teacher

To better serve others and our profession, we need to keep an open mind and be the learner too. Here are the ABCs that I remind myself:

- **Ask**, “Am I judging this or learning from this event?” If we find ourselves, criticizing, blaming or belittling what others have to say, most likely we are in a judge mode;
- **Be** open and try out the new methods of ideas first; and
- **Climb** down our ladder of inference to look at the reality and facts to make a better judgement of what we have learned and avoid jumping to a premature conclusion.

In this way, I hope to be both a learner and teacher, and a good learning and development role model for my participants and my children.

Signing off,

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