

If They Don't Dispute it, They Don't Learn it

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This principle has guided my search in how to interpret and deal in an instructionally effectively fashion with people fighting the content I am teaching.



The principle provides a fresh new outlook on how to see - and manage - the learning process as really pushing people out of their comfort zone to new territory. In that simple statement, we have a gem for the adult educator that sees the process of UNLEARNING unfolding in front of our very eyes during a class.

Have you ever tried to drive on the left side of the road if you are born in a country that drives on the right side of the road? Or, have you broken out in a sweat trying to learn a foreign language or the latest version of a software system you have been using for years? These are all familiar situations confronting us with a tough challenge: our previous experience of behaviors, knowledge, attitudes and skills, *acts as a barrier to our new learning effort*. But how do we deal with this process in our learners when we are teaching a class? Consider these stories from my own experience:

- Three hours have passed. I am in the middle of a debriefing in the workshop “Facilitation Skills for Project Managers.” A man raises his hand and says, “The answers you gave are possibly correct for HR types. But you need to state and clarify to the class, that if you are not an HR type, this is not necessarily the correct thing to do.”
- In a new system implementation class, a trainee would not stop asking questions with an increasingly confrontational tone. I gave an answer and then another one and then another one... . At one point, with frustration she stood up and stormed out of the room screaming, “I am not going to take this anymore!”
- “No thanks,” said one trainee in one of my workshops about effective teamwork as we were talking about a way to increase effective listening. “I do not think I will use this. I understand it, but I don’t believe this skill will make a difference in my team.”

While professional training books term those behaviors “dysfunctional”, recommending dealing with them a mix of tact and assertiveness, Jane Vella has provided us – counter-intuitively – with a way to see these reactions as evidence that the learning process is really taking place.



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Good educators know that the path to learning is intertwined with another process: *the unlearning process*. And that unlearning is marred by anxiety, solitude, embarrassment and anger: inner upheaval within us as well as our relationship with our world. The road to replacing assumptions, concepts, and values leads us straight into the unknown and uncomfortable. Rather than labeling people's behaviors "resistant" or "dysfunctional", we are suddenly challenged by Jane Vella's idea. The question "How do I deal with resistance in the class?" turns into: "How can we facilitate the unfolding of the exquisite inner process of 'unlearning' in our learners?" I have three suggestions drawn from my own personal experience as an adult educator:

1. **Do not take it personally.** Welcome unlearning and recognize it: disputing content reveals that your learners are taking the new content seriously. Minimize your defensive reaction in dealing with disagreement about the content you are teaching. Instead, attend compassionately to the dissonance of your learners.
2. **Create a safe space for unlearning *and* learning.** I once worked with a trainer that would always bring candy to class. I have always deemed those strategies ineffective for increasing motivation, as if that can be accomplished through seduction and (ultimately) manipulation. Instead, I think that for unlearning the trainer needs to radically rethink his role in the class and manage it according to a different role as trainer: one as Host of a learning space. For an adult educator the premise for dealing successfully with the issue of "safety" - and therefore unlearning - in a productive way is the creation of a safe space in the class.
3. **Tap into your creativity to surface un-expressed emotions.** Emotional intelligence and conflict skills are called for to manage this process effectively. However, here are a few group activities that can help:
 - a. In a class I once used the "wall of shame": I left the room and asked the group of learners—who would clearly rather be in a dentist's chair than in the class—to write anonymous messages on a poster that looked like a wall, stating openly (within the limits of decency) why they would rather leave than stay in the session.
 - b. In another "baggage" exercise with a different group, I asked that they write down their past bad experiences with the content I was teaching. All their messages were read aloud, collected, locked in a tiny box and dropped in the garbage.
 - c. In the "goodbye exercise" people were asked at the end of the class to write the message "Goodbye and Welcome.....," naming what they had jettisoned and what they actually gained from the class.

As I continue my learning in this area, more questions are left to ponder:

- How do we design instruction for adults that is unlearning/relearning-friendly? How do we design/plan for unlearning/relearning?
- What role does the trainer's conflict management skills and creativity play in the process?
- What best practices can be outlined to handle the chaos or disruption that all this entails?

I invite any and all your thoughts and responses to these questions and/or my writing: adrianopianesi@yahoo.com.



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