



# Is Your Training Giving Employees the H.O.T.S.?

by Thomas Dullien

Executives and academics agree that it is less critical for today's employees to possess the highest degree of technical knowledge and skills, but rather how quickly and successfully they can apply them to solve operational problems through sensible and convincing decision-making and collaborative teamwork. Such abilities demand that training methods and learning strategies promote 'Higher Order Thinking Skills' (H.O.T.S.). Problem-based learning (PBL), a constructivist learning approach, is a valuable tool in the advancement of Higher Order Thinking Skills. While various fields, such as medicine, biology, architecture, law, engineering, and education, have implemented the H.O.T.S. process years ago, it is surprising that training towards Higher Order Thinking Skills, at least in its "authentic" form, is a novelty in the training of the casino/hospitality industry. Maybe it's the perception that a workforce with less formal education may be better served with 'TLC' i.e. Traditional Lecture and Coaching; maybe it's the persistent misconception that the knowledge of the instructor is the key element in the learning process.

Training and development must offer opportunities to promote the higher order thinking skills of adult learners by giving them opportunities to continually further their critical judgment and to synthesize and evaluate the work problems they face. Traditional training does well for knowledge acquisition and comprehension; it does okay when it comes to the application of knowledge; but it falls pitifully short when it comes to analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. As a result, there has been an increasing appeal for training with a focus on organizational problem solving and a close alignment to the corporate strategy.

### Objectives of H.O.T.S. Training

**Constructing useful knowledge:** Training must produce an genuine interest in order to initiate a cognitive process that retrieves prior knowledge/experience, determines the problem dimension, seeks out new information, and reconstructs information into decision driving knowledge/skills.

**Developing reasoning powers:** By addressing the problem before the learning of the theory, adult learners develop abilities to identify a problem, realize its dimensions, formulate and analyze possible hypotheses and make decisions about appropriate actions to solve the problem rather than arbitrarily applying (mimicking) a theory-based resolution to a problem.

**Increasing effective self-directed learning strategies:** Self-directed learning makes the adult learner aware of the importance of personal learning needs. Additionally, it

encourages the learner to find and to utilize an assortment of information resources.

**Stimulating life-long learning:** Adult learners need to perceive the problems as relevant in order to invest and feel motivated in learning. Intrinsic interest is further promoted when the sessions are structured in form of develop-mentor-ing discussions.

**Becoming effective collaborators:** The H.O.T.S. process compels adult learners to work together and, together, gain an understanding of what they are learning and its relevance to the problem. It also develops the incentive to become accountable for their learning.

The principal goal of this approach, which includes curriculum design, learning approach, adult learner assessment and program evaluation, is the development of Higher Order Thinking Skills by stimulating the adult learners to become skilled at their next higher thinking levels, where they analyze, synthesize and evaluate instead of simply acquire knowledge, comprehend and apply (see Benjamin Bloom's "Taxonomy").

Problem-based learning is in accordance with the principles of adult learning theory and renowned corporate trainer Donald Kirkpatrick's evaluation model. Educational psychologist Malcolm Knowles suggested that adults are more motivated to learn when one of four conditions exist:

1. Their individual learning needs and experience supply the starting point for learning.
2. The emphasis for learning is on direct application to relevant situations.
3. Their personal experience is relevant.
4. They guide and evaluate their own learning.

Problem-based learning is also consistent with constructivism; a teaching/learning approach that is built on the insight that knowledge cannot exist outside our minds. Knowledge cannot be transported from one brain to another. Innovative knowledge is 'constructed' from within people through experience. The opportunity to construct information for oneself, to compare one's perception of that knowledge with others' perception, and to reorganize knowledge as more relevant experiences are acquired, improves learning and increases knowledge retention.

### Resources for the PBL Approach?

Your HR department should have a seemingly endless supply of problem-based learning material right from your own work environment. Once the circumstances are reduced to the

most critical information, and the names, gender when reasonable, dates, times and other potentially incriminating details are modified, the problem scenario will be many times more realistic, compelling, and practical than the majority of constructed case studies available in print or video products.

### What Defines the H.O.T.S. Process?

It is essential that the process is (a) problem-centered, (b) adult learner-centered, (c) collaborative, (d) active, and (e) utilizes small groups. If the program is "instructor-centered" rather than "adult learner-centered," the essence has been lost, along with the opportunity for the learner to construct his or her own knowledge under the development-mentoring by fellow group members and the facilitator. Generally, the process involves four successive steps.

### Step 1: Introduction of the Problem

- It is important that problem-based learning attracts adult learners' interest and inspires them to investigate the underlying concepts being presented.
- The problem should allow adult learners to make decisions based on facts, information, logic, and/or rationalization.
- The problem should tempt adult learners to determine what assumptions are required (and why), what information is relevant, and/or what procedures are needed in order to solve the problem.
- The problem must be formulated in a way that discourages adult learners to work individually.
- The problem should fit with adult learners' capabilities, yet represent a real challenge for them. If the problem is very difficult for adult learners, it can trigger feelings of self-doubt and failure. In contrast, if the problem is too easy, the adult learners may become bored and alienated.
- Finally, the problem must clearly integrate the different learning outcomes of the course.

### Step 2: Knowledge Application Towards Comprehension

After reading the problem, adult learners have to (1) extract important aspects of the problem, (2) find out what information is on hand and what is still required to solve the problem, (3) formulate and analyze possible assumption,

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and (4) identify learning issues. Learning issues are relevant questions that require further investigation and clarification. It is important to note that this process is repeated several times to establish confidence towards problem resolution.

### **Step 3: Individual Reading-Research-Preparation (RRP Analysis)**

During this phase, adult learners collect information they need from a variety of sources such as books, journals, the Internet, on-line databases, content experts, consultants, etc. In this way, adult learners will learn how to search out current information.

### **Step 4: Synthesis and Evaluation**

During this last step, adult learners (1) communicate what they have learned, (2) re-evaluate their hypotheses, or (3) formulate new hypotheses in light of their new learning experience. It permits them to apply their newly acquired knowledge to the problem. In other words, adult learners reconstruct the problem through the lens of their own newly accessed knowledge. Additionally, they share information about how they obtained their data and assess their resources, all of which helps them to become self-directed learners.

The distinction from the case-method is that the problem

is introduced before adult learners have learned theoretical concepts, not after. The instructor does not initially present or synthesize all the information required to solve the problem. The H.O.T.S. approach consequently provides a greater realism and free inquiry, with more motivation and focus on part of the learner.

Finally, what differentiates the H.O.T.S. training environment from a conventional instructor-centered classroom is the fact that adult learners do most of the work. They collect information, they propose hypotheses and conclusions, they work in teams, and they do research outside the classroom. In other words, they are already self-directed and modeling the performance that is desired in the work environment.

It is subsequently the responsibility of the operational department to challenge, monitor, and encourage the new H.O.T.S. level until it becomes the plateau from where we reach for new performance heights through 'Higher Order Thinking Skills.' ♣

*Dr. Thomas Dullien, CCE,CCM,CHE is the Executive Director of the Barona Institute at Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino. He can be reached by calling (619)328-3442 or email tdullien@barona.com*

## HUMAN RESOURCES

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Conducting an EAS is the first step in understanding whether an organization's team is satisfied/engaged. Benjamin Schneider, *Leadership Excellence (2006)* sees a difference between employee satisfaction and employee engagement: "Before you can increase engagement, you first must measure it. An accurate measure of employee engagement requires a special survey-not the employee satisfaction survey. There is a difference between employee satisfaction and engagement.

- Satisfied employees feel pleasant, satiated, content, and gratified. And they tend to have low absenteeism, low turnover, and low substance abuse. But they may be neither engaged nor motivated to expend extra effort in their work or for customers.
- In contrast, engaged employees behave in ways that enhance the customer experience. They go the extra mile in the interest of service quality and customer satisfaction. When your customers receive superior service every day, it can have a dramatic impact on your financial health."

Conducting an EAS can be a costly financial endeavor and may be time consuming to the staff of an organization. The long-term benefits to the organization of conducting the EAS far outweigh the costs. Considering the use of a third party administrator to conduct the survey is an important decision for the leadership of an organization. There are many third party survey administrators who can achieve successful results and report how your organization compares with others in similar industries. The most difficult decision that the organization must make is whether to begin the EAS process. A well-handled first survey will set the stage for the success of future surveys. Follow up and communicating the results of the EAS are important to the team's commitment to organizational goals. If the EAS is handled with importance of a guest survey, the organization can act on the results to celebrate victories and to make changes critical to the needs of the people. ♣

*Donald Hoover is a Recruitment Consultant for Casino Executive Search. He can be reached by calling (732) 583-0597 or email info@casinoexecsearch.com*