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**Susan Wallace: Learning in a nourishing way**

Teaching shouldn’t be about hurling information out and hoping some of it sticks – like throwing spaghetti at a wall. The more students are encouraged to engage with what they’re learning, the more likely they will retain it. Susan Wallace discusses five practical and straightforward strategies for success.

I’ve heard people speak recently about teaching being like chucking spaghetti at the wall. Why? Because, they say, you never know how much is going to stick. But this is not a very useful simile and it’s one, I would have thought, best avoided (especially if you teach in hospitality and catering).

While it’s okay to think of supporting learning in terms of providing food or nourishment, it’s obviously not okay to throw it at learners in a hit or miss fashion with no forethought about how to maximise the likelihood of it ‘sticking’.

During our training, most of us will have heard those wise words attributed to Confucius: I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand. We recognise this as an important principle to bear in mind when we’re planning teaching and learning activities.

It’s another way of saying that the more we encourage learners to engage with their learning – the more opportunities we create for them to be active participants in the process – the more likely it is that they will retain what they have learnt and be able to build upon that firm foundation as their education and training progresses.

Research has highlighted a number of factors that play a key role in the longer term retention of learning. They are: enjoyment, clarity of purpose, appropriate pace, style of presentation and variety of activity. So let’s have a look at each of these in terms of the practical and straightforward ways we can apply them in the classroom or workshop.

Enjoyment

There are lots of means of ensuring that learners enjoy the learning process. Most of them are common sense; and the reason we may feel they are not for us often comes down to the time constraints under which we have to deliver a demanding curriculum. But they are worth considering because the pay-off in terms of learners retaining skills, knowledge and understanding can be considerable. They include:

* Planning your lesson around methods and strategies that are not only appropriate but also fun, such as games, workplace simulations, and exercises in discovery.
* Demonstrating your own enthusiasm for the topic. Enthusiasm is infectious (and takes up no more time than its opposite).
* Using learning materials or resources which will relate to learners’ interests as well as providing sufficient challenge.
* Allowing humour into your lessons.

Clarity of purpose

* Make sure the learners are aware of the planned outcomes of the lesson in terms they will understand: ‘By the end of this lesson you will be able to...’
* Implement the famous three-stage clarification:

1. At the beginning of the lesson explain what we’re going to do.
2. As the lesson proceeds explain what we’re doing.
3. At the end of the lesson explain what we’ve done.

* Begin each lesson with a recap of the last. Use questioning or a quiz, or similar activity, to check whether learners have retained a sufficiently sound foundation to continue building on.

Pace

* When setting group tasks, give clear instructions about the length of time allowed at each stage, and provide regular reminders of the time remaining: ‘Ten minutes to go.’ ‘You have two minutes left to complete the task.’ This keeps learners focused and provides a challenge. Allowing too much time for tasks breeds boredom and encourages disengagement.
* When you’re ‘teaching from the front’, make sure your pace is appropriate to your learners’ note-taking skills (or lack of them). If they’re noting things down from PowerPoint, avoid clicking through it at the speed of a demented Morse code operator, otherwise your learners will retain very little.

Presentation

* Always respond positively to learners who volunteer answers to your questions. You can find ways to praise them for having a go even if their answer is wrong. Discouragement and a sense of failure or embarrassment are detrimental to the retention of learning.
* Arrange the seating in your classroom or workshop in a way that allows you to make eye contact with all the learners. This will enable you to spot if someone is ‘drifting off’ or needs extra help or explanation.
* If this isn’t possible – because of fixed benches, Health and Safety or the caretaker’s rules – make sure you move around the teaching space so that you’re able to observe everyone and they can stop and question you if they need to.

Variety

* Incorporate as wide a range as possible of teaching and learning strategies into your lesson planning. Challenge yourself to extend your range if necessary. It’s important that learners don’t switch off because the pattern of your lessons and activities has become predictable and boring. If they do switch off, they’ll retain very little.
* Consider your range of resources. How interesting/varied/appropriate are they?

What if – after all that – the learning hasn’t ‘stuck’?

If your formative assessment strategies suggest that there’s a problem with retention of learning, you might find it useful to invite learner feedback as part of your reflection, evaluation and re-planning process. Here, for example, is a simple seven-point list of questions to which learners can respond with a straightforward ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

1. The introduction to the lesson gained and held my attention. Yes/No
2. The introduction told me clearly what the lesson was going to be about. Yes/No.
3. The introduction told me what would be expected of me in the lesson. Yes/No
4. I felt comfortable taking an active part in the lesson. Yes/No
5. The teacher asked questions and responded to answers in a way that made me feel comfortable about answering. Yes/No
6. I found the lesson interesting. Yes/No
7. The lesson provided enough information for me to begin my assignment. Yes/No

If you’re collecting ongoing feedback, keep it brief and keep it simple. The last thing you want is for learners to see it as an extra – and possibly punitive – assignment. Learner feedback on what helps them to retain and recall what they’ve learnt, and what does not, will be helpful to you, even if responses turn out more negative than you would have hoped – it may provide useful data upon which you’ll be able to draw as you review and revise your lesson planning.

Hopefully the responses you’ll get will not be so disappointing that you’ll want to throw your spaghetti at the wall.

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