Near-peer training resulted in better outcomes

Workplace learning comes in many shapes and sizes. It can happen formally through mandatory training, informally during peer discussions, and by chance when two co-workers happen to meet in the hallway.

The benefits of informal peer-to-peer learning are well documented (for more, see Rapid Learning Insights Vol. 2, Issue 11). But formal training should be left to the professionals, right?

Not necessarily. Sometimes the best people to teach something are those who recently learned it themselves.

It’s not quite peer training. It’s “near-peer” training: delivered by people who are just a step or two ahead of the folks you need to teach.

According to a recent study, getting near-peers involved in training can significantly improve outcomes.

The research

The study took place at a prestigious medical school in Germany. Researchers divided a class of third-year medical students into two groups.

Both groups attended the university’s standard lecture conducted by an experienced faculty member. For Group One (the control group), lectures were supplemented with tutorials by the professor, who demonstrated proper examination techniques.

Group Two also got supplemental classes, but these sessions were conducted by fourth- and fifth-year medical students – students just slightly more experienced than the learners themselves.

The near-peer instructors covered the same content but were allowed to stray from the tutorial model. They taught the material in their own style, organizing the students into small groups to promote more hands-on learning experiences.

On the final exam, Group Two’s median test score was 20% higher than the group taught by the experienced professor. What’s more, more than 90% of the peer-instructed students rated the course “very good” or “good,” compared with only 18% of Group One students.

Why did it work?

One of the benefits of using near-peers was simply that there were more people to teach. When only the professor was teaching the tutorial, there was no opportunity for hands-on small-group work.

Here’s what you’ll find inside this edition of Rapid Learning Insights:

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Near-peer training ...

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But that wasn’t the only reason the near peers did better, the researchers concluded. They also were better able to relate to what the students were going through, since they’d recently gone through it themselves.

The near-peers were thus able to avoid the well-known “curse of knowledge” that makes it difficult for experts to teach what they know. Experts literally think differently from novices. Near-peers can still see the training through their students’ eyes.

How near?

In the study, the instructors were fellow students with one or two more years of experience than the learners. They’d recently passed the course they were now teaching.

The right amount of experience was important to the success of the course, researchers said. The near-peers needed to be knowledgeable enough to confidently conduct the course, yet still close enough to remember their own experience as learners.

This combination allowed them to teach the subject matter the way they would have liked to have learned it.

Can you use near peers?

Can near-peer training be effective in the workplace? Yes – if you can find people with the right level of experience. That may be easier in organizations that engage in more formal training, since there’s more likely to be a pool of recent “graduates” to help train the next group coming up.

Where training programs are less formal, it may be harder to identify near-peers, but it’s worth trying. For example, you might pair up a newly promoted manager with someone who’s been managing for a year or so, or have last year’s crop of new hires to work with the newbies coming in this year.

Here are more recommendations for applying this research in your organization:

Use it as an add-on. As in the study, use near-peers to support your existing training program, not take the place of qualified trainers.

Be careful about recruiting senior employees. They may suffer from the “curse of knowledge.” Peer instructors should be able to recall being in their learners’ shoes.

Make it a positive experience for the near-peers too. Peer instruction isn’t just good for learners. It helps the “teachers” dive deep into the subject matter, expanding their knowledge base. It also provides valuable leadership experience and can boost instructors’ self-confidence.

Source

Study: Spaced training works for teaching complex skills, too

Many studies suggest that people learn more when training is delivered in a series of small doses rather than all at once.

But most of those studies focus on simple tasks like memorization or motor skills. So what about complex, skills-based training?

Well, few skills are more difficult to master than sales, so the results of a 2010 study are encouraging.

**All at once vs. spaced**

The study found that small doses get better results than delivering training all at once.

It compared 64 salespeople working for a major German bank. They were enrolled in a course that trained them on six complex sales topics: finding prospects, initiating contact, needs analysis, proposals, closing and cross-selling.

All of the learners were exposed to the same content and taught the same way, with one exception:

One group was trained for one day, then went back on the job for a few days, then returned for another day of training, and so on. In all, this group received six full days of training, spaced out over several weeks.

The other salespeople got just as much training. But they got it all at once, and then were sent back to their jobs.

**Same learning, more transfer**

Curiously, both groups ended up learning about the same amount of information.

But the group that got the spaced training was more likely to apply what they learned.

In other words, spaced learning was more likely to result in learning transfer and, ultimately, changes in the on-the-job behavior.

And that, of course, was the goal.

**Early successes boost motivation**

This study expands the notion of why spaced learning is effective.

This study concluded that the spaced learning worked in part because it gave salespeople the opportunity to practice what they’d learned before moving on to the next topic.

These practice opportunities not only improved the learners’ skills, but also had a big impact on motivation.

When learners had a chance to try out their skills early in the learning process, they could see that the content they were learning was effective and relevant to their jobs.

As a result, these learners came to the next training session in a more positive and accepting frame of mind, which made them more receptive to the next training topic.

The learn-a-little, try-a-little structure created a positive feedback loop. The more people used what they learned, the more they wanted to learn.

**Better outcomes, too**

Here’s the icing on the cake:

Not only did spaced learning result in behavior changes, it also resulted in better outcomes. The salespeople who were trained that way generated more revenue than the ones who went through the all-at-once training.

**Source**

Sensitive topic? Dim the lights

The brighter the lights, the stronger our emotions, a recent study suggests.

Researchers studied subjects’ reactions to a variety of stimuli – including hot sauce, pictures of attractive people, negative words – under different lighting conditions.

When the lights were bright, participants’ reactions were extreme: they wanted spicier hot sauce, thought people were more attractive, and judged negative words to be more offensive. When the lights were dimmed, their emotions dimmed as well.

Training tip: The next time you conduct a session on a sensitive topic – or assign a training exercise where emotions could cloud learners’ judgment – consider dimming the lights to reduce the emotional response.


A nature walk can boost recall

A walk in nature can boost memory by up to 20%. A walk through the city? No such luck.

In a study, subjects were asked to memorize several strings of numbers and were tested on their recall. Then half of the participants were told to go for a brief walk through a nearby park; the other half were instructed to walk along a busy street.

When they returned to be retested, the subjects who walked through the park scored 20% better. The city group showed no improvement.

Researchers concluded that the city’s various distractions monopolize the brain’s attention. A nature walk, however, allows the brain some restorative downtime to process new information.

The takeaway here involves more than a walk in the park: You could expect similar results if you throw learners back into a busy office or distracting environment right after teaching them something. They need some quiet time to process what they’ve learned.


Memory: Get a grip

Make a fist with your right hand before you learn something new. Clench your left hand when you have to recall it later.

Sound a little nutty? Not to the Army.

In a study funded by the U.S. Army, subjects were presented with a series of words to memorize. Afterwards, participants were given a pencil and paper and asked to write down every word they could remember.

The subjects were divided into five groups.

Four groups were prompted to squeeze either their left or right hand for 90 seconds before memorizing the list. They received similar instructions just before their recall was tested.

The fifth group – the control group – received no instructions.

The right-then-left group scored significantly higher on the memory test than the others.

Clenching the right hand, researchers explained, activates the brain’s left hemisphere – associated with encoding – and the left hand activates the right hemisphere – the area associated with recall.

Try it with your learners in your next training session and see if it works for you.