

In the first of a regular series, Hugh Greenway says the commercial training industry should be aiming to make itself redundant

"Sell a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you ruin a wonderful business opportunity." Anon¹

Let's be honest. Most of us in the learning industry have jobs because of the failings of managers. If your average manager could identify what his business issues were, assess his available resources, make decisions, communicate them, motivate and develop his staff and then get on with it, we would all be out of a job. You could close HR and L&D completely and replace them with an outsourced payroll bureau and a web-based learning forum built on shareware.

And before those of you working in systems and technology training providers start reaching for your keyboards to disagree, just try typing 'implementing SAP', or 'salesforce.com' or 'Windows Vista' into YouTube. And bear in mind that those videos are free!

Fortunately for us, our industry is not alone and my exhortation in the standfirst is unlikely to happen in the immediate future. Look at the diet industry, for instance. It could be wiped out with the phrase 'eat less and more healthily, and exercise more often'. But, fortunately for them and for us, there are many people who find this too difficult without help. The gap between knowledge² and action is too wide and, in most cases, knowledge is becoming free³.

Nonetheless, I am convinced that the recession (and I am in the camp of Cassandra, not Pollyanna) will bring this change towards us quicker than we have expected. So how do we get across the chasm between knowledge and action? I think the answer is motivation.

Those of us who deserve to call ourselves learning professionals will know that different people learn differently. And this is the heart of our profession: being able to help people

change. I am sure most of you will accept some variation on the PPP model of learning (Presentation – this is what we are going to learn; Practice – we explore it together in a safe way; Production – I take the stabilisers off but hang around to catch you if you fall).

One of the keys of the presentation stage is a concept called 'elicitation'⁴. Rather than

tell the learner the answer to the question at hand, try to draw it out from his existing bank of knowledge. Even if this process is unsuccessful, the learner is more likely to retain the concept afterwards (the 'if the medicine tastes bad, it is more likely to work' principle).

One of the most popular forms of elicitation is brainstorming (we are quite a lazy profession) but there are many learners who would rather eat their own face from the inside than take part in one. Experienced classroom managers will have a plethora of alternatives from crosswords, gap fills, silent Post-it auctions, treasure hunts, reading activities, hangman, or simply asking the question and letting people think about it in pairs or groups.

This knowledge of how people prefer their learning served applies to all parts of change. With a burgeoning world of free learning gadgets, widgets and devices⁵ on the Internet, it becomes increasingly easy and cheap for us to accommodate these differing tastes.

It is in this process of 'suiting the learner to the learning and the learning to the learning'⁶ that our future lies. All too often, learning professionals are destroyers, rather than enhancers, of motivation.

Personal trainers work well in gyms because they help with extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. You go more often because you have paid them, because you don't want to let them down, because they find out why you want to be fitter and reflect it back to you while asking for the 40th stomach crunch. Now, I don't want to suggest that the future of the learning profession will hang upon skimpy pieces of Lycra and leggings but I think we need to move our position from one at the front of the class to one, whether physically or virtually, beside the learner. ■

References

- 1 This quote, in various forms, is attributed across the Internet to Karl Marx but I don't think I believe this, so I am sitting on the fence. All the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* will attribute is the original Chinese proverb "who teaches me for a day is my father for a lifetime".
- 2 Knowledge does not appear to be sufficiently correlated with action and for this reason I would prefer to stop talking about the 'knowledge economy'. An economy is based on actions, however small.
- 3 Google, Wikipedia, YouTube, Face Book, LinkedIn etc.
- 4 One of my early mentors in teaching said that the perfect lesson began with you asking the class "what are we going to do today?" and then managing to do this while delivering whatever was on the required syllabus.
- 5 See Jane's E-Learning pick of the day
- 6 Apologies to Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act II sc ii



Hugh Greenway is managing director of Reed Learning. He can be contacted via www.reedlearning.co.uk