

Do Train, Don't Educate

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I failed my first driving test. At age 16, I thought about blaming it on the rainy weather. Or on the clunker car I was driving. Perhaps the bird that flew in front of us and dropped decorations on my windshield. But in the end the truth was: I didn't know how to drive. To save my life.

Yet, just a few months beforehand, I passed a driver education course at the top of my class. Days after, a DMV employee told me I received one of the highest scores possible on the written driver test. And I attended driver training class where I received a certificate of completion. So what was the problem?

The instructor of my driver training class taught by sharing information. He spent an inordinate amount of time on the regulations, lecturing on safe driving methods and discussed accidents others had as lessons learned. At the end of the day he allowed me to practice for a few minutes. I put on my seat belt, started the ignition, drove around the block and parked the car. And that was the very problem.

Instead of nurturing driving skills, he was filling me with knowledge about the Vehicle Code. Information, however, does not necessarily translate into behavior change. When it comes to instruction, we must be conscious of the difference between telling and training.

Yet, in the world of safety training we often revert to sharing information. It's not surprising that we focus on informing others about compliance-based issues, especially in light of serious incidents and Cal/OSHA inspections. We're often led to believe that we should stress the importance of stuff. The "why" something is the way it is. Or the history of how things came to be. But in doing so, it's easy to forget the purpose of having a class in the first place. If your intent is to provide information, then have a meeting or create a website. If instead you want people to do something different, then train them on a desired behavior. Eliminate the pontification.

You can do that by identifying objectives for your course before putting it together. What do you want people to learn? It's easy if you begin by filling in the sentence, "By the end of this course you should be able to ____." List out a few things you expect people to do differently. Then, outline your course around these things. Your course should be laden with command words, or verbs. Examples include: A) Pull the pin of the fire extinguisher, B) Select the glove based on the chemical you're working with, or C) Conduct a hazard assessment. These are verbs that lead to action. Avoid inserting too much history or regulatory references. That can be done on a website, or in a handout, but shouldn't saturate the mind. Think instead about performance. Working from a set of learning objectives helps focus your training on skill development, rather than information overload. Stay on track with these objectives throughout the course.

Imagine you were my driver instructor. And you were dealing with a teenager who had a short attention span. What things would you want me to learn before the end of the course? It's probably cool to hear stories from you, but likely more important to make sure I've made a connection between my brain and hands on the wheel. Creating objectives for safe driving, and organizing your training around those objectives, would help focus me and keep me on track. Choose what you disseminate wisely, for training is an opportunity; not a given.

I often emphasize that there's a difference between training and education. Training focuses on dissemination of skill. Meanwhile, education attempts to develop knowledge. Training teaches "how" to do something. While education attempts to answer "why". When you instruct, try to do more training. Because it's behavior that will lead to a positive change in safety culture.

One of my favorite instructors in the system was Debbie Decker from UC Davis. When I attended her class on laboratory safety, she gave us resources we needed and pointed to where to find information in a binder. Then she stopped talking and gave us a scenario to work through. Debbie walked around the class, gave hints on what to do, and left people the heck alone. At the end, the class came together to share what they learned. They were engaged, and picked up a few skills by practicing the safety concepts; instead of being told them. Debbie's training was a success.

I ended up passing the behind-the-wheel driver test and getting my license the second time around. How did I do that? My parents hired another driver training instructor who talked less and nurtured more. She made me drive, and spoke up only in the form of feedback. I learned how to navigate the car with her guidance on where to place my hands, direction in which to turn my head, and tips on how to gently press on the brake. She gave me training, not education.

Whether it's how to drive, work safely in a laboratory, or aim at the base of a fire when using a portable extinguisher, safety instruction should focus on training. I still can't drive for the life of me. But, I learned early in life to distinguish between what I needed, and what others wanted me to learn.