



WEDGEWOOD GROUP

For Training Instructors, Relevance is Extremely Relevant

Helping Trainers Answer the Call to Improve Learning Acquisition in the Public Sector

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The Administration's Emphasis on Training and Education

The current presidential administration has called on academic institutions and government organizations to play a significant role in meeting the country's challenges. On issues ranging from national defense to unemployment to life-long learning, President Obama has emphasized the need for increased training and education.

The President has:

- Directed the Department of Defense to ensure the country has a "strong, agile, well-trained, and well-equipped U.S. military force."
- Stated that an unemployed person cannot look at the situation only as "a time to look for a new job, but also a time to prepare yourself for a better job." The administration is encouraging States to change rules that prevent the unemployed from enrolling in education and training courses.
- Asserted that education should be a cradle-to-grave endeavor for all Americans, from pre-kindergarten to lifelong advanced learning, emphasizing the relationship of education to economic prosperity.

And the list goes on...

Clearly, the administration is not looking to simply increase spending on training and education, but to do so in a way that predicts learning outcomes. The watch out for those implementing this guidance is to avoid focusing solely on counting how many people attend an event. Trainers and educators (referred throughout this paper as 'instructors') must also ensure that the participants are learning as much as possible from the experience. Moving from merely counting participants to ensuring knowledge acquisition will not come without deliberate efforts to improve how learning is delivered.

This paper reveals the results of a Wedgewood Group research study focused on how instructors can improve training to increase learning outcomes. The study analyzed over 1,000 training participant workshop feedback sheets from workshops delivered to both public and private sector participants and organized comments into major instructor communication categories. The categories were analyzed to determine the connection between specific instructor communication behaviors and knowledge acquisition. The study led to a specific, pragmatic recommendation that public sector instructors can implement today to drive learning outcomes.



The Instructors Dilemma

Most instructors face a similar challenge. They typically lack a feedback mechanism to assess how their content delivery approach ultimately influences knowledge acquisition. So, they are left to anecdotal feedback from the most vocal of participants, a cursory review of participant comments without a formal analysis framework, or worse yet, they simply guess at what might work. In the end, many fail to find the best way to communicate content to participants.

Difficult to identify or not, a lack of clearly articulated connections among instructor communication behaviors, participant evaluations, and learning outcomes, in a time of increased accountability and diminishing budgets, is precisely the situation in which public sector training professionals find themselves.

Wedgewood Group recently focused on a key component of the learning outcome equation by considering the influence of instructor communication behaviors on participant evaluation scores. Arguably, understanding the relationship among instructional communication concepts and participant evaluations is a fundamental piece in the ultimate connection between instructor communication behaviors and knowledge application.

In our study, we analyzed feedback from 1,064 training course participants to assess the influence of three common instructional communication concepts (content relevance, immediacy, and clarity) on course evaluation scores. Our analysis of the study's results provided insight into how public sector instructors can improve course evaluation scores, influence learning, and positively impact the administration's training and development vision.

A few key terms defined:

Relevance

Most have sat through a course and thought, "what does this have to do with my needs, goals, or requirements of my current job?" This question cuts to the essence of relevance. Content relevance is about connecting course content both in design and delivery to the needs of each participant. The argument, which has been supported in previous research studies, is that increased relevance leads to increased motivation to learn and knowledge application.

Immediacy

Instructors often use non-verbal communication behaviors to connect with participants. Calling a student by name, smiling, or nodding in agreement are examples of how an instructor apply nonverbal communication to connect with participants. The desire is to close the psychological distance between teacher and student and in doing so increase



immediacy. An increase in immediacy has been correlated to improved attitudes about course content, desire to enroll in future training/education opportunities, and improved cognitive learning.

Clarity

Most have experienced a lack of instructor clarity. The cutting of eyes from one classmate to another tells the story. Everyone, except the instructor, seems to see the more confused everyone becomes about the subject. Somehow he or she has managed to take a relatively straight-forward topic and made it so muddy that everyone is confused. On the other hand, most have attended a class where the instructor teaches a complicated concept in an easy to follow way that allows those in attendance to understand the subject matter because of the clarity provided. Researchers have found that improved clarity enhances participant motivation, attitudes, and achievement.

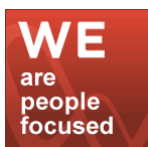
Our Study – Approach

We applied a two-stage approach to prepare and execute our investigation. In the descriptive stage, our researchers collected samples of summary-level participant feedback sheets, established a coding system for the content analysis of the sample, and analyzed the collected samples using the established coding system. In the analytical stage, we performed data analysis and developed a pragmatic recommendation.

Descriptive Stage

We performed a content analysis of feedback from 1,064 training participants who attended one of 30 one-day training programs conducted by a large training company. The participating training company is a self-proclaimed leader in the training industry, employs over 2,000 associates, operates in 95 countries, and trains thousands of public and private sector participants daily on a growing number of business related topics.

Summary sheets were randomly selected from 30 courses that met five criteria. First, the session's instructor must have taught the identified course for at least one year. Second, selected course sessions had to be taught within the last six months. Third, since we wanted to compare the scores for both male and female facilitators, we asked for summary sheets for 15 male and 15 female instructors. Fourth, identified sessions had to have taken place in a public setting within the United States. Training companies often deliver workshops using one of two primary formats. The first format involves having a trainer deliver the content at a specific client organization to an intact group of employees. The second option, commonly referred to as a public program, occurs when individuals register for an open enrollment program. These workshops are typically held in a hotel meeting room or conference room space. We focused on the latter of the two situations as these courses have the widest range of participants including those from large



businesses, small businesses, and public sector organizations, as well as, individuals investing their time and money in personal and professional development. Fifth, selected sessions had to have a minimum of 20 participants. Lastly, identified evaluation sheets had to come from those who attended the same professional development program.

Coding System

Our researchers elected to focus their analysis on comments greater than a single word, but less than a complete sentence or paragraph. A complete sentence or paragraph often loses the sensitivity desired at the recording unit level. Consider the following participant comment, which was taken from a summary. The participant wrote that the instructor was “very easy to listen to and understand.” This sentence conveys not one, but two sentiments. The first, captured in the phrase “very easy to listen to” suggests teacher immediacy, while the words “and understand” convey instructor clarity. Complete sentences were only considered in their entirety when they clearly conveyed one thought.

Positive versus Negative

Within each theme, items were identified as positive or negative. Arguably, each content theme offers a bi-polar dimension that one should consider and failing to distinguish a comment as positive or negative could influence the results of the study. For example, consider two participant comments that fall into the content relevance theme. The first comment, “very useful information,” is a positive relevance item. The second comment, “due to the nature of my job, this time management class will not be very helpful,” also discusses content relevance, but it conveys a negative sentiment. Failing to identify items as positive or negative would conceal these nuances; therefore, all recording units were categorized by theme and identified within the theme as positive or negative.

Analytical Stage

For each selected class session, the training company’s summary sheet provides a mean score for the course. Scores can range from zero (low) to ten (high). The mean score for all 30 sessions was 9.05, with individual session means ranging from 8.29 to 9.49. The summary sheets identify the rating each participant provided and categorize respondents as high (9-10), medium (7-8), and low (0-6). Comments are organized in each of these categories. This level of detail allowed the researcher team to analyze the results at the low, medium, or high score levels, thus increasing the unit of analysis from 30 sessions to 75 groups of participants identified as high raters (n groups = 30), medium raters (n groups = 30), and low raters (n groups = 15). Each identified recording unit was organized by theme, defined as positive or negative, and categorized as coming from a high, medium, or low rating groups.



Our Study – Results and Discussion

The study included 837 unique participant comments across 75 respondent groups. Five hundred and seventy of the units belong to the content relevance theme (68.1%), 211 to immediacy (25.2%), and 56 to clarity (6.7%). Seven hundred and eighty five of the comments were identified as positive (93.8%) and 52 were determined negative (6.2%).

Based on previous studies that point to the ability of content relevance, instructor immediacy, and instructor clarity to influence course evaluation scores, this study focused on identifying, which of these constructs are significant predictors of course evaluation scores.

To assist the reader in connecting the results of the study to his/her own experience with participant feedback, the following relevance, immediacy, and clarity examples are provided. These examples are taken from actual workshop summary sheets coded in this study.

Relevance examples:

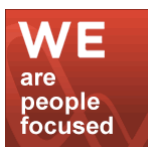
- “the information is immediately useful”
- “it is applicable in both your personal and professional lives”
- “I can’t wait to begin using all I learned in today’s session”
- “system helps me address the time management challenges I face”
- “taught great skills that can be applied to personal and business tasks”
- “gave real life experiences”

Immediacy examples:

- “...pleasant to listen to”
- “...remembered everyone’s names”
- “...amazed by the presenter’s ability to remember names”
- “I love the humor”

Clarify examples:

- “Easily understood”
- “Explained material well”
- “Very clear presentation”
- “She made sense”
- “Presented in a way I could easily understand”



The results of this investigation revealed that content relevance is a significant predictor of course evaluation scores; however, the results did not support either instructor immediacy or instructor clarity as significant predictors of training course evaluation scores. Stepwise regression results show that both negative and positive content relevance comments significantly predict training course evaluation scores.

Summary of Stepwise Regression

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Standard Error
+ Relevance	.713 ^a	.508	.502	1.252
+/- Relevance	.795 ^b	.632	.622	1.091

^aPredictors: (Constant), Relevance Positive

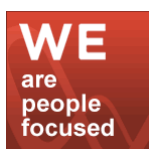
^bPredictors: (Constant), Relevance Positive, Relevance Negative

Positive content relevance items achieved an $F = 75.45$, $R = .508$, adjusted $R = .502$, and $p < .0001$. Including negative content relevance items in the model resulted in $F = 61.77$, $R = .632$, adjusted $R = .622$, and $p < .0001$, with positive relevance beta = .478 and negative relevance beta = -.423. Instructor immediacy (positive or negative) and instructor clarity (positive or negative) did not enter the stepwise multiple regression.

Analysis of Variance

Source	SS	Df	MS	F	Sig.
Regression	146.91	2	73.46	61.77	<.0001
Residual	85.63	72	1.19		
TOTAL	232.54	74			

Our study provides evidence of the importance of content relevance in a training context as a significant predictor of training course evaluation scores.



Public Sector Instructors Should Employ Relevance Strategies

Participants take notice when they recognize that the content is relevant to their needs or interests. The instructor plays a critical role in communicating value and helping participants make connections. This section provides a pragmatic recommendation that instructors can employ immediately to increase relevance and enhance knowledge acquisition.

Research suggests that participants will be motivated to perform behaviors that are perceived to be personally satisfying and have a positive expectancy for success. The key is for instructors to help participants find their own connections between the content and their personal needs and goals. If making content relevant is important, how can an instructor communicate that training is useful, interesting, important, and worth the cost?

Six Application Strategies

In his work on motivation, Dr. James Keller outlines six application strategies instructors can draw from as they work to increase content relevance and improve participant feedback. These are: experience, present worth, future usefulness, needs matching, modeling and choice.

#1: Experience

Build on participant's existing skills. Facilitators who apply this strategy will use familiar analogies to make connections and take the time to discover participant interests and relate them to the instruction.

#2: Present Worth

Focus on helping participants understand how they can use the material immediately to improve their personal and professional lives. Instructors shouldn't be 'preachy,' but should help participants answer questions like "why should anyone care about this?" or "what's in it for me?"

#3: Future Usefulness

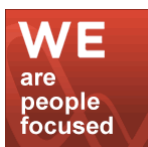
Help participants connect what they are learning today to future needs or activities. Challenge participants to relate the instruction to their own future goals.

#4: Needs Matching

Focus on helping participants link the content to their needs for achievement, promotion, and growth.

#5: Model

Demonstrate and model the value of the content. Through your own personal examples, you can demonstrate your enthusiasm for the content.



#6: Choice

Afford participants the opportunity to provide meaningful alternative methods for accomplishing a goal.

Instructors should challenge themselves to think of ways to employ these strategies to increase content relevance, participant engagement, and workshop feedback. To accomplish, instructors can create a content relevance worksheet as shown below and complete it prior to every training course.

Strategy	Description	Situations	Actions
List the six content relevance strategies	Describe each strategy as discussed in this paper	Identify situations encountered in the past	List actions to address future situations

In the past an instructor may have had a participant challenge the value of the program based on his/her current professional or personnel situation. This can be an uncomfortable situation and if not addressed will erode how relevant participants consider the workshop. One way to address this situation in the future is to have stories ready to share with participants about times when someone expressed a similar sentiment who nonetheless decided to try what was taught in the class and found that the content helped them achieve something they didn't imagine possible – be specific.

An instructor may have experienced 'pushback' from a participant. Perhaps the specific examples given did not relate directly to what the student uses in his/her daily job. Instead of dismissing the issue or allowing the sentiment to grow, the instructor could ask the participant questions about how things differ and his/her role and then walk the individual through the differences to both highlight the applicability of what is being learned and help the participant see the connections.

These are just two brief examples. We hope the reader gets the point and takes time to explore what he/she has experienced in the past to identify ways to address similar situations in the future.



Is your organization struggling to design, develop, and deliver successful training and education initiatives?

Do you find yourself questioning whether the investment made in learning and development is having the desired impact on your organization?

Do you need someone to assess the effectiveness of your training programs?

If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions or find your organization struggling with a clear plan for developing your people, please contact this study's lead researcher, **Dr. Patrick Leddin**, at pleddin@wedgewoodgroup.com or **502.240.0625**.

About This Study's Lead Researcher, Dr. Patrick Leddin, PMP

Dr. Leddin has over 21 years of experience working with organizations and teams to achieve positive, measurable results. Today he leads project teams to deliver strategy, technology, and custom learning solutions to both public and private sector clients. In recent years, Patrick has delivered workforce development and training solutions to a long-list of clients including, but not limited to: Aveda, Barilla Pasta North America, CareerBuilder.com, Eli Lilly, John Deere, Kimball International, Manpower, McDonalds, Sony Corporation of America, and the United States Department of Defense. Patrick is a PMI certified Project Management Professional (PMP) and a member of the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) Speaker's Bureau. He earned his doctorate from the University of Kentucky where he studied organizational and instructional communication.

Prior to joining Wedgewood Group, Patrick was a senior consultant at both the FranklinCovey Company and KPMG Consulting. He began his career as an officer in the United States Army where he served as a platoon leader and a company commander in the 82nd Airborne Division. During his time in the military, Patrick successfully completed Airborne, Jumpmaster, and Ranger schools.

About Wedgewood Group

Wedgewood Group is a management-consulting firm with expertise in human capital and organizational development. We help organizations set strategies and goals, implement policies and plans from the organization to the team, down to the individual level in order to achieve objectives, and ensure accountability through performance measurement. Our firm is diverse, experienced, professional, and capable of delivering solutions that exactly meet our clients' needs.

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