Synthesizing Learning in a Workshop or Conference

In the mid-1980s, Harvard University engaged in exploring effective collegiate teaching (Light, 1986). One of the outcomes of that exploration is a strategy known as the “one minute paper.” Basically, it was designed to be done in this manner: at the end of the class, the educator would ask learners to use a piece of paper and record on that paper the following two questions:

- What was the big point of what you learned today?
- What questions remain?

Learners were allowed one minute to respond. The educator collected the papers, then collated the responses and provided content at the next class session regarding what people thought the big points were and what the big questions were. The questions were accompanied with answers.

This strategy morphed into e-mail responses, which greatly accommodate hybrid courses where learners may only engage in a workshop or conference session once a month or less. This strategy is also effective for follow-up feedback in continuing education programs that conduct follow-up surveys (or at least communication) with participants who attended a particular course.

However, what can be done in a “live” situation where the learners may never interact with each other again? That question, combined with the desire to increase learners synthesizing information rather than merely restating it, led to the following strategy. Note that this strategy requires some supplies (Table) and a trusted colleague to enact the subsequent teaching effectively.

**ORIENTING LEARNERS**

Because most learners have not participated in this approach, the educator needs to alert learners what to expect throughout the day. Learners need to know they will be asked to reflect on content and then submit what they thought were the big points and any big questions that remained. Pointing out to learners that Post-it® notes are available for recording these ideas and that the notes should be placed at the front of the tables or submitted in a specific spot to be collected at all breaks helps to increase the rate of participation in this activity.

**CREATING THE BIG POINTS/ BIG QUESTIONS**

Although several approaches could be used, one of the simple approaches is to have different colored Post-it notes; 4-inch squares work exceptionally well. Two colors are needed so that one color represents big points and the second
color represents big questions. Each learner should receive at least one to two sheets of both colors for each learning segment. At the end of each learning segment, learners are asked to reflect on the discussion and then record big points and big questions.

PROCESSING THE BIG POINTS/ BIG QUESTIONS

At the various breaks throughout the day, a trusted colleague needs to collect (and perhaps remind learners of their need to submit) the Post-it notes. While the educator offers the final area of content, the trusted colleague is charged with creating themes that could be shown on big easel display boards or on adhesive-backed easel sheets.

Groupings are made in themes. For example, big points might be about feedback (it is critical to performance and better to do negative than nothing) or about role (creating the environment is the role of the manager and the manager serves as a role model). Big questions might be organized around themes such as “boss as the problem” and “incivility.” Questions such as, “How do you deal with the boss who is the problem in setting examples?” and “How do I get my boss to run meetings effectively?” might be grouped under the first heading. Questions such as “How can I stop incivility when I am outnumbered on my nursing unit?” and “What if everyone tolerates a particular physician because she is chief of the service?” could be grouped around the second theme.

The trusted colleague assembles all of the points and questions accordingly, and any outliers that exist can be included under the heading “miscellaneous.” This colleague then places the adhesive-backed easel sheets around the room.

ANSWERING THE BIG POINTS/ BIG QUESTIONS

Assuming time is limited and many ideas were shared, it might not be possible to address all of the items. Asking designated learners to select one big point and one big question from each of the themed areas allows for those individuals to “evaluate” what is the BIG big point and big question from the themes. Those individuals simply read the comments or questions; they do not need to respond.

Making the big points first allows for a quick summary of the day. The rest of the time can be devoted to the big questions. The questions can be challenging because they might be tough real-world situations or something fairly personal. If greater clarity is needed, rather than asking the person who wrote the question to self-disclose, ask participants to hypothesize what might be behind the question. Ask, for example, what might you think could be a factor in this situation? If clarity is not needed, moving to a response is a positive step. Responses can be provided by a member of the group or by the educator. The key is to answer the question. Sometimes these questions do not seem to relate to the specific content the educator provided, but the learner made some connection and is awaiting assistance.

It might be necessary to skip a question and come back to it to answer questions that have more definitive answers. This approach also allows greater time to consider what best responses to give.

This strategy can last for 30 to 50 minutes, and the educator would be wise to have a general sense of the themes prior to the posting. If the questions are beyond the educator’s expertise, simply stating that and asking the learners to offer ideas allows the person who asked the question to have some assistance rather than merely ignoring the question.

CONCLUSION

Building in reflection time and the opportunity to synthesize learning can enhance the effectiveness of learning activities. Modifying how to use an established strategy for continuing education purposes allows adult learners the opportunity to ponder their learning.

REFERENCE