Adapting for Differences in Ability, Prior Knowledge, and Motivation

Ability, prior knowledge, and motivation strongly affect learning. Can we, as trainers, instructors, educators, or managers of learning influence all of these? Fortunately, the answer is “yes.”

ABILITY

Although we can’t later a person’s ability, we can observe and detect his or her strengths and weaknesses. As a result, we can adapt the learning system by taking the following measures:

- Adjusting the amount of time for learning
- Providing more practice for those who require it
- Simplifying and breaking learning into smaller chunks for those are experiencing learning difficulties
- Providing additional support for those who need it
- Including activities with greater challenge for those who learn more quickly

Those are only a few ways of compensating for differences in learning ability. The key is to observe and acknowledge such variations and make suitable modifications to the instruction, whether live, online, or from a book.

PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

If learners are missing prerequisite knowledge and skills, we can make adjustments to these gaps in the following ways:

- Creating pre-learning session materials to close the gaps
- Building special supplementary learning events prior to or concurrent with the learning sessions
- Creating peer tutoring pairs and teams to provide mutual support for overcoming gaps
- Providing overviews and summaries of prerequisite content in outline or summary form
- Directing learners to online sites that can fill knowledge or skills gaps.

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MOTIVATION

Based on the three major factors that affect motivation, we can overcome deficiencies in the following ways:

- Enhancing the value of what is to be learned. Show the learners what’s in it for them. Provide examples of benefits. Show them admired role models valuing what is to be learned. The more the learners perceive personal value in what they are learning, the more motivated they will become.

- Adjusting the learners’ confidence levels with respect to the learning content. Be supportive to build their confidence that they can learn but provide sufficient challenge so that they don’t become overconfident about it.

- Creating a positive learning atmosphere and work climate. The more open and optimistic the context you build, the more open and positive the learners will be, and that leads to greater motivation… and to learning.

Keep in mind that all learners are different. Whether as a group in a classroom, as a team at the worksite, or individually through a manual or via computer in real time or asynchronously, they come to use with widely differing characteristics. Training, in its broadest sense, is a compensation for what each of our learners lack. Just imagine what our job would be if all of our learners came to use with elevated general and specific learning abilities, vast prior knowledge, and tremendous motivation.

Would we

☐ Teach until they learned what we provided them?
☐ Give them the learning resources and then get out of their way?

If you checked off the bottom box, you’re right. Talented, knowledgeable motivated learners only require learning resources and useful feedback. The less they possess of each of the ingredients, the more we trainers have to work to compensate for what they lack. Yes, that’s our job – compensating for what our learners don’t have, managing the learning context, and providing feedback and rewards for success.