

Establish Your Credibility to Maintain Learner Respect

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Credibility is a mainstay of any professional development or learning event. When you fail to establish and maintain validity in the eyes of learners, you risk failure of your venture from the outset. Unfortunately, many trainers and educators neglect this basic premise and haphazardly use information or quote data without thoroughly double checking their facts. In doing so, they not only share erroneous and sometimes misleading information, but they also detract from the potential learning outcomes.

Credibility Equals Trust

How many times have you sat through a class, presentation or training program and heard the facilitator or teacher say “Research shows that...”? If you are like me and many other curious or skeptical attendees your hand immediately goes up and you ask something like, “Could you give me the citation for that study, I’d like to learn more about it?” Normally, the response that is received after a bit of stammering and hesitation on their part is, “I don’t have that right now, but if you’ll see me after the session I’ll get your name and get it to you.” I cannot tell you how many times this has happened over the years, and I am STILL waiting for most of those citations.

One of the fastest ways to destroy your credibility or trust with a group of learners is to be caught without substantiating data for statements or claims that you make. This is why, when I do trainer and staff development programs, I stress the need for including a reference page in lesson plans or notes. On that page, detailed citations for books, articles, studies, and other data that will be used during the program should be listed so that there is a ready response to questions from participants.

Authors are also often guilty of failing to do their homework and in many cases, simply copy or quote data, models, or other sources of information from someone else’s published work. This is a serious mistake and can come back to haunt them later. Often a writer will assume that since something is in print, that the original editor or someone else has verified the facts. This is a bad assumption! Unless the editor is an expert in the field covered by the work, they assume that the writer is the subject matter expert and has done all the homework. The role of the editor is to make sure that grammar, spelling, syntax and other such rules are followed in the actual preparation of the document and that the work is professionally designed. They do not generally correct expert content, although they may make suggestions. If an author simply parrots or modifies what was written by someone else without verifying, they could be perpetuating inaccuracies and simply putting out incorrect information. Besides, if it is something created and written by another person, the originator owns copyright and no one else cannot modify it without permission.

Examples of Incorrect Data

Two examples come to mind related to over used, and many times, misused information that I have experienced through my career:

The first example is the practice of referencing Dr. Albert Mehrabian's classic study (findings published in his book *Silent Messages*) on the meaning of messages exchanged during interpersonal communication. You may have seen the study results – 7 percent of meaning come from words, 38 percent come vocal cues (e.g. pitch, volume, intonation, rate of speech) and 55 percent come from facial cues (e.g. eyes, smile, etc). Mehrabian's study focused on degrees of *liking* and the meaning that someone draws from various sources during communication with another person. Unfortunately, his findings are often expanded upon and used to explain communication between a teacher, facilitator, or presenter and an entire class or audience of people. Obviously, the two scenarios differ by sheer volume of the number of people involved and the study's finding are not applicable, per se. This is akin to the old adage of "comparing apples to oranges" or trying to compare two things that are not alike, with which many people are familiar. Mehrabian even addresses this issue on his website (<http://www.kaaj.com/psych/smorder.html>) and says, "Please note that this and other equations regarding relative importance of verbal and nonverbal messages were derived from experiments dealing with communications of feelings and attitudes (i.e., like-dislike). Unless a communicator is talking about their feelings or attitudes, these equations are not applicable." Still, I continue to see trainers, teachers and authors refer to this study when doing trainer and staff development programs or when writing about various topics related to group communication. In doing so, they typically reassign Mehrabian's figures to other situations.

The second example of often misquoted information involves Figure 1 (or some variation), with which many trainers and educators are familiar. The challenge is that there is much controversy surrounding the origin and authenticity of such graphs and their content.

FIGURE 1

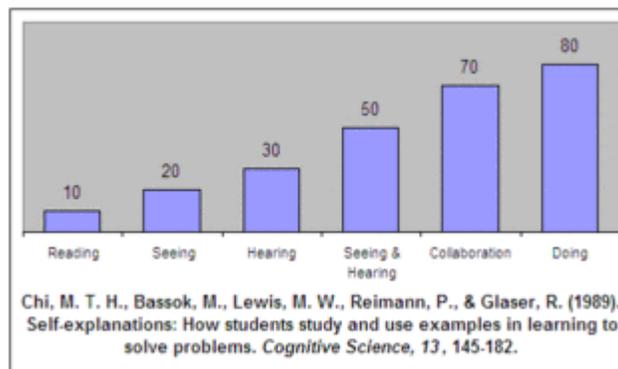
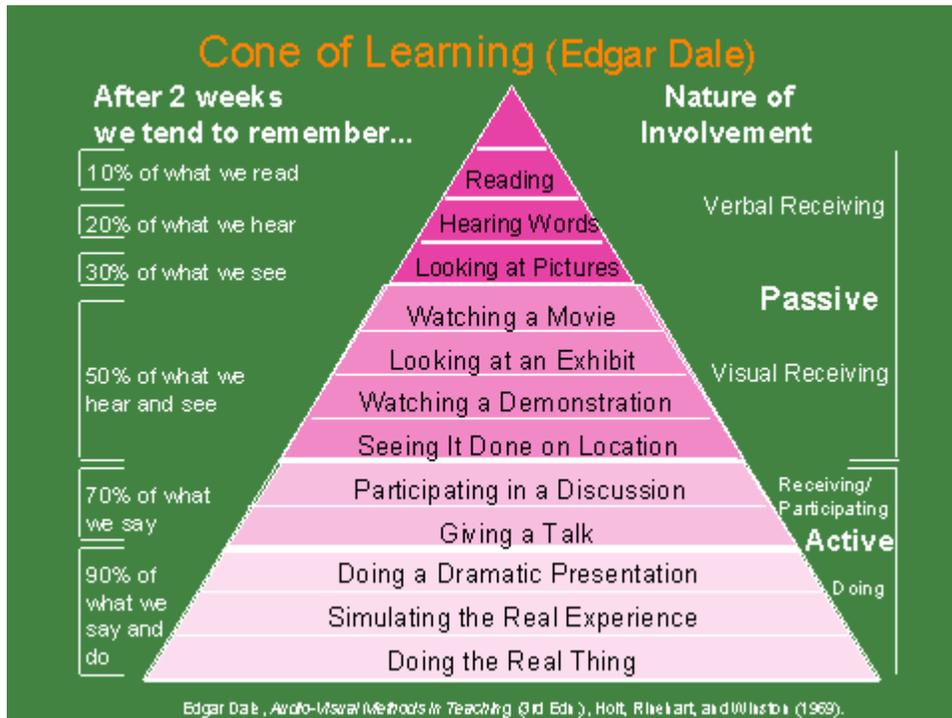
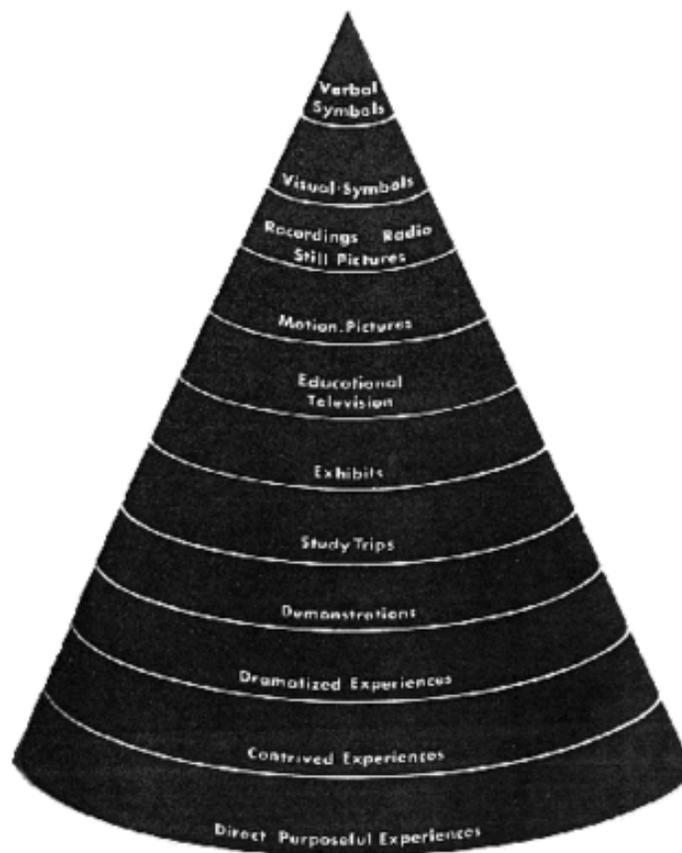


FIGURE 2



Such graphs seem to be a variation of chart called “Cone of Experience” (see Figure 3) found in the 1969 version of Edgar Dale’s book *Audio-Visual Methods in Teaching* (pg. 107), which first appeared in 1946. However, as you can see in Figure book, there were no statistics associated with the original image. Since the publication of that book in 1946, there appears to have been a number of variations and additions to Dale’s original model by other people (including the addition of percentages and other details) with an incorrect attribution still being made to Dale’s book.

FIGURE 3



The problem with the Figures 1 and 2, and many others, is that they are simply wrong. The attributed article graph in Figure 1 does not even contain the graph or the statistics shown in Figure 1 and the chart in Figure 2 does not appear in the 1969 version of Dale's book. Dale also does not call his model the "Cone of Learning."

In over four decades of involvement with training and adult learning, I had never seen any one source consistently associated with such figures as these. In fact, until I researched the statistics several years ago for possible inclusion in one of my own books, I had no idea of possible origin. Apparently, no one else does either because, depending on the user of the charts, you will be referred to the NTL Institute® or articles written by numerous people. The dilemma still exists today and I cannot find a definitive source of the research to for the statistics to substantiate them. The numbers in the figure seems to be a compilation of information by a couple different sources and are often shown and discussed by many trainers and educators and used in presentations and publications. Over the years, I have seen various iterations of the charts along with

differing percentages. That is what actually started my research on the topic. I had two different charts in my office with differing percentages.

The point here is that anyone who stands in front of a group or purports to be an expert should conduct him- or herself as such. This means, doing some homework, checking facts, being ready to substantiate what they say, and always projecting a professional and credible image.

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Bob Lucas B.S., M.A., M.A, CPLP is an internationally-known author and learning and performance professional. He has written and contributed to thirty-one books and compilations. He regularly conducts creative training, train-the-trainer, customer service, interpersonal communication and management and supervisory skills workshops. Bob can be reached at blucas@robertwlucas.com or through his website www.robertwlucas.com. Follow his blog at www.robertwlucas.com/wordpress and like him at www.facebook.com/robertwlucasenterprises