

Stimulating Learner's Brains through Their Environment

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Many trainers and educators make a BIG mistake by taking their learning environment for granted when preparing to transfer knowledge. They do this by failing to adequately prepare the classroom, equipment and materials before their learners arrive. They also accept the status quo of what is provided to them. An example of the latter is coming into a classroom or auditorium shortly before learners arrive, quickly organizing their lesson plan and checking their training aids, then waiting for participants or students to arrive. They do all this without considering the impact of other environmental factors such as seating arrangement, equipment positioning, lighting, material placement, and temperature. All of these elements can either enhance or detract from learning outcomes.

Take a look at the following three simple strategies for effectively creating an environment that helps stimulate learners and maximizes potential learning outcomes.

1. **Present a Professional Image.** The old adage of “not getting a second chance to make a positive first impression” certainly holds true in the classroom. If your learners are greeted by a lackluster learning environment, you are likely to have to struggle to “jump start” their motivation later. Rather than waiting until your opening remarks to grab their attention, why not provide a creative non-verbal environment that will send a positive message about you, your content and your approach to facilitating before the session even begins.

Think about the average learning environment. People arrive early to a quiet, sterile looking classroom in which materials are often placed on desks in no particular order or without even being neatly arranged, and there is either nothing on the walls or there are photos or other non-topic-related materials posted. Contrast this to an environment in which participants arrive to find that there is background music playing, a colorful flip chart page with graphics has a welcoming message, a rotating slide presentation with photos and session-related quotes is projected, posters with session-related content are hanging on the walls, and materials (e.g. pencils, notebooks, name tents, and handouts) are neatly placed at each learner location in the exact same order. Which environment would likely have a more positive impact?

2. **Use Learning Aids Productively.** It is crucial that you create effective and efficient support materials and that you employ them in a manner that complements and enhances your text or spoken content. Part of doing this involves thinking about when to best use a learning aid, where to position them for ease of use. For example, flip charts should be positioned to the left of where you stand if you are right-handed and vice versa if you are left-handed in order to allow efficient access and or/writing. They should also be placed where a light source shines onto the paper rather than being behind the easel where a shadow is cast upon the page, making viewing more difficult for viewers.

3. **Arrange Seating to Support Session Content.** The types of activities that you have planned or session you will be conducting will typically determine what type of seating configuration that you should use. For example, if you want learners to network and work in small teams, you should select an arrangement that will easily facilitate that with little movement and without the need or relocating furniture. Figures 1-4 illustrate some possibilities. In sessions where you are doing most of the talking (e.g. lecture), a more formal theatre style or row configuration might suffice (see Figures 5-7). Ideally, you should have access to learners so that you can move into and out of the group, engaging them non-verbally and if needed quelling side conversations and discussions by simple movement among the group.

Figure 1 - Rounds Style Seating (with tables)

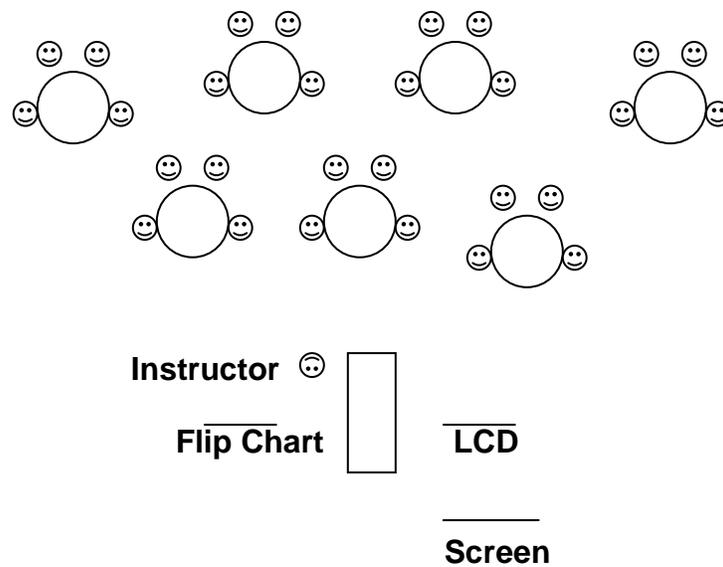


Figure 2 - Circular Style Seating (with table)

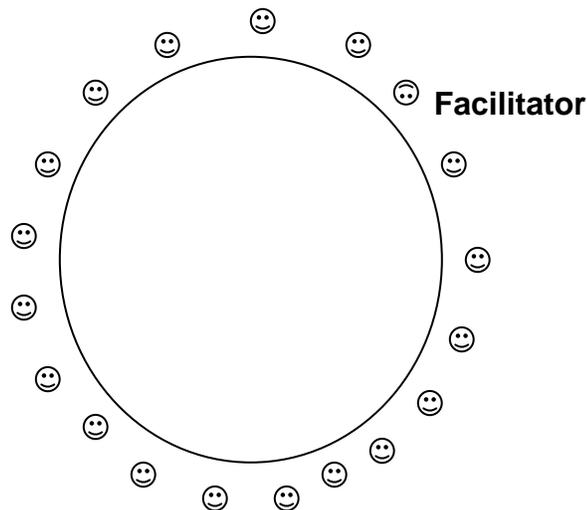


Figure 3 - Open Square Style Seating (with tables and Flip Chart)

Flip Chart _____

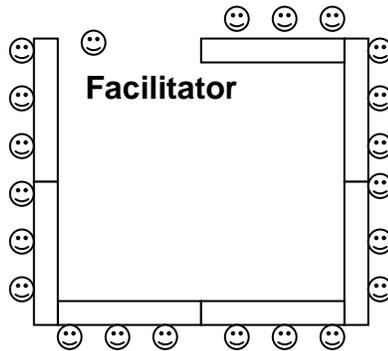


Figure 4 - Horseshow Style Seating (with tables - using LCD Projector)

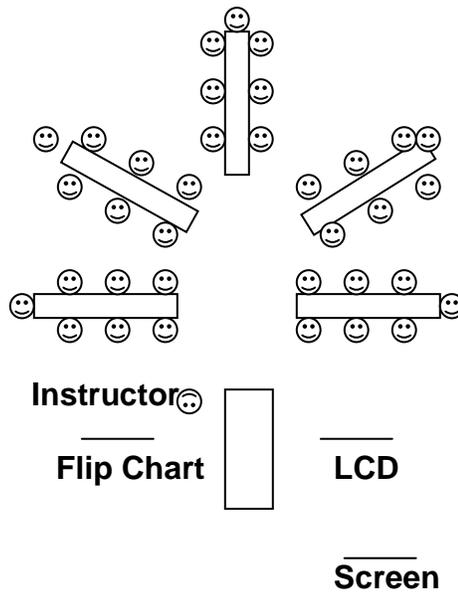


Figure 5 - Semicircular Style Seating (without tables - using LCD Projector)

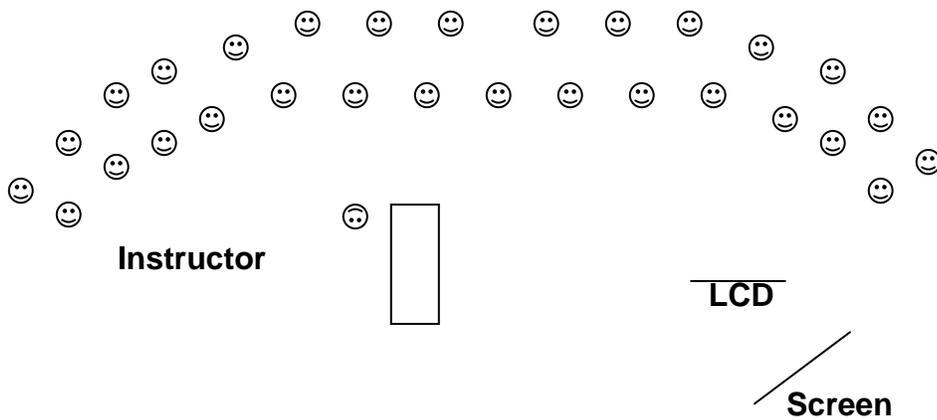


Figure 6 – Classroom Style Seating with Tables

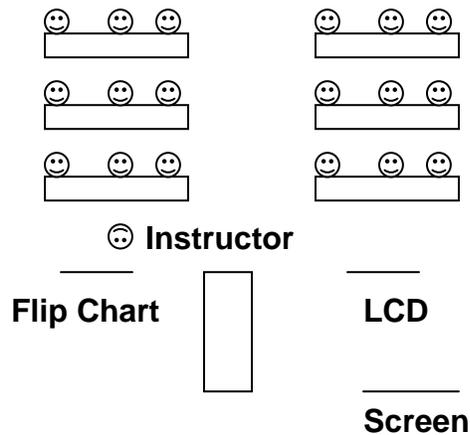
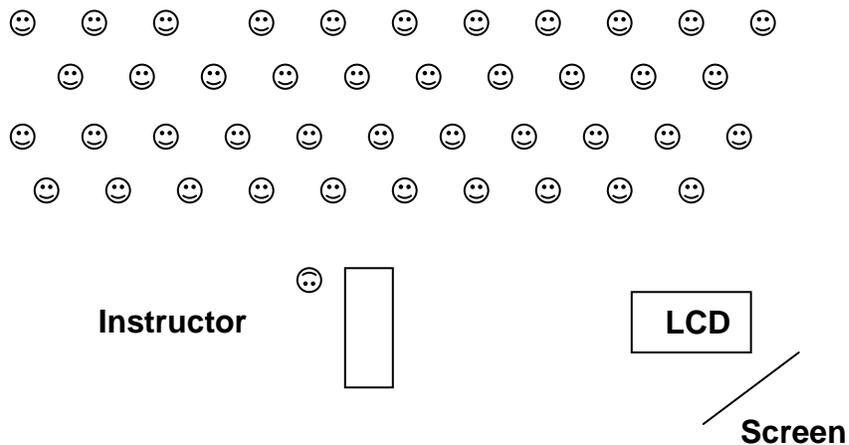


Figure 7 – Theater Style Seating (without tables – using LCD Projector)



A key to any successful learning environment is to make it functional and professional and to have everything that you will need to address learner needs and program objectives already in place and ready for use. It should also have distractions removed or reduced to the maximum possible level. Finally, you should actually rehearse your presentation in the actual environment that you will use, if possible. This will allow you to spot any potential problems or shortfalls and correct them before learners arrive.

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