

THE IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS ON LEARNING

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Brain-based researchers have found that classroom environments affect learning, retention and ability to recall information. If you examine the research by Malcolm Knowles, Howard Gardner, Eric Jensen, Pierce Howard and others prominent in the field of learning, you can find common linkages between environmental factors and successful learning. Factors, such as, use of activities, color, music/sound, light, aromas, nutrition, setting, and many others, play pivotal roles in determining the outcome of a training session.

It is not enough to be an expert in your field as a trainer, you also have to understand the dynamic brain and how it processes information in order to achieve maximum success with transfer of learning. While the more traditional perceptions on left and right brain thinking are valid, much more was learned since the 1990s about the complexity of the brain and its functions. In fact, so much research was sponsored during the 90s that it is sometimes referred to as “the decade of the brain.” The result of what researchers discovered through observation and the use of scientific study facilitated by Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) and other electronic means has literally opened the brain to the world. Through use of such technology, we can actually see what is going on inside a person’s brain as they receive stimulus and react to it. What this means to trainers is that we now have quantifiable proof that when someone sees various colors or hears certain sounds they react in a specific manner. This allows us to tailor our environment and activities to better tap into those natural learner responses.

The following are some simple things that you can do as a trainer to stimulate brain responses and potentially increase the opportunities for enhanced learning in your participants:

- Use colored paper for handouts and workbook cover sheets. This breaks up the monotony of walking into a stark room and seeing a bunch of sterile white paper on tables.
- Wear colored clothing to attract attention and hold interest. For example, instead of a white shirt or blouse, choose a yellow, blue, green or whatever. Obviously, you do not want to get carried away with the use of color or you can become a distraction.
- Add color to your walls with posters that are pertinent to the topic. If possible remove other items (e.g. pictures or posters) that might distract or cause participants to focus on them instead of you or what is going on in the session.
- Add balloons, colored crepe paper, party decorations or whatever else you can think of to the walls and tables. This not only adds color but also sends a non-verbal message as people walk in that the session is going to be potentially different and fun. While some topics may not lend themselves to such an

atmosphere (e.g. EEO training) most interpersonal type topics (e.g. communication, customer service, or teambuilding) do.

- Arrange seating so that people had a full view of the front of the room and can see and interact with you and one another throughout the training.
- Play upbeat background music (120-160 beats per minute) before the session begins and during breaks to get people “pumped up” and get their heart rates up. This can stimulate the brain. You can also use music during activities to stimulate neurons. Since the average heartbeat is around 60 or so beats per minute you can affect learner mood and spirit during brainstorming, discussion, problem-solving, writing or other such activities by using music in that range. Many classical pieces (e.g. Mozart and Baroque) fall into that range.

There are many other things that can be done to create an environment conducive to effective learning and transfer of knowledge. You are literally limited only by your imagination.

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