

Performance and Instruction in the Year 2000

A Rejoinder

Fred Nickols, CPT

6/6/2010



This article first appeared in the September 1983 issue of the Performance & Instruction Journal. It was a solicited response to an earlier article by Lowell Yarusso of Arthur Andersen. Because it ties to predictions he made in 1983 about performance and instruction in the year 2000, I thought it might be fun to resurrect it and set it out where others can see for themselves if his dire warnings have come to pass and if my pooh-poohing of them was warranted or unwarranted.

Introduction

In the March (1983) issue of the P&I Journal, Lowell Yarusso asserts that “Four critical areas must be addressed both theoretically and practically if we are to be ready for the world of tomorrow.” This article addresses each of those four areas.

Training Without Reference to Job Incumbents

Under this heading, Yarusso raises a number of points. Let’s examine them one at a time.

First, demands for job training to prepare individuals for positions that did not previously exist will become an increasingly significant fact of life. [And], Without the existence of optimal performers, our role will be transformed from that of identifying and verifying tasks to that of identifying and defining job roles.

What Yarusso seems to be speaking to here is the frequently encountered requirement to specify mastery performance in the absence of a master performer. So what’s new? Job design has been part of the skilled training developer’s repertoire for some years now. I first encountered the problem in 1970 when trying to specify mastery performance for programmed instruction writers when the experts couldn’t agree on whether “program(m)ed instruction ought to have one “m” or two. The trick then, as now, is to focus on outcomes, not processes.

Second, the evaluation of training will be radically altered. [And], Thus, as Gilbert has pointed out, the key to training effectiveness will be the demonstrable impact of training on the bottom line performance of the organization.

Herein lies great humor. Managers, let alone training developers, can justify very little of what they do in terms of bottom-line impact – except when it comes to cost savings – and even these frequently evaporate under close scrutiny. What you have to do is make a case for the connections between what you’re doing and the bottom line, not prove any impact on it – unless that’s what you’ve agreed to do. Besides, very few trainers know where the bottom line is, let alone how to hook what they’re doing to it. More to the point, neither do very many managers. The central issue here is the same as it always has been; namely, what will your client/boss/user accept as evidence of a job well done? (I submit for judgment by my peers the notion that this frequently has nothing whatsoever to do with the bottom line.)

Third, entry levels will, in many cases, be vaguely defined at best. [And], As a result, we will be required to prepare training that is successful with any present or potential member of the organization.

Again, what’s new? Neither the issue nor the response. We handle varying entry levels the same way we always have – with a skilled instructor and a wide range of examples and applications. In other words, we accommodate individual differences. (Pre-tests, by the way, do an excellent job of sorting learners into various “tracks.”) *If* the target population could be specified in meaningful terms, *if* the resources were made available to measure them, *if* valid measures and measurements could be found, and *if* those who did not meet them could be screened out, then we might have something to worry about. But, the truth of the matter is that in training development, just as is the case pretty much everywhere else, you’ve got to work with what’s there, not what you’d like to have, and that means flexibility.

Cost-Effectiveness of Short Life-Span Training

Under this heading, Yarusso cites a number of issues (e.g., rate of change, organizational responses to technology and competition, and changed recruiting standards) and then says:

These and other factors will tend to shorten the life-span of the typical training program. [And], As Gilbert’s worth formula indicates, when value decreases, as it must if the life-span decreases, costs must also

decrease or the worth of the program declines. [And], The designer will, therefore, experience strong and increasing pressure to turn out materials that are of high value and to do so at reduced cost.

First of all, the value of a training course has very little to do with its life span. Instead, it has to do with the results of value outside the training which can be attributed (or, if you're lucky, traced) to the training. Moreover, the developmental costs to which Yarusso refers are usually a fraction of the total costs of the training. Operating costs (e.g., trainee and staff salaries, and facilities costs) are far and away the more significant of the two. And, if the life-span of a particular training course is reduced, these operating costs do go down. So what's the beef? Besides, value, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder, and anyone who hasn't learned by now that the measure of the value of training often takes the form of highly subjective judgments regarding things like "contribution to a smooth cutover," "supported a timely response in the marketplace," and "greased the skids for installation," is probably in the wrong business to begin with. Organizations live and die by economics, but the name of the game is politics.

Providing Self-Satisfaction

Under this heading, Yarusso expresses concern about what that great prophet of "future shock," Toffler, notes as one of the principal effects of rapid change: *angst*. Yarusso states:

The instructional designer or performance technologist will be expected to overcome these problems [the ones arising from Angst]. [And], In order to do so, it will be crucial that training programs contain activities that can assuage the sense of unease that will be part of the recipients' baggage.

I know from my experience in the OD business what can happen when you turn loose a lot of well-intentioned, half-baked therapists in the training environment. (Anyone remember T-groups and sensitivity training?) And, my experience as a trainer – and as a "recipient" – is that your sense of unease is best assuaged by laying your hands on a lot of subject matter that is relevant to the situations giving rise to your *Angst*. Moreover, a view of the "recipients" as "fearful of change," as having "a negative attitude toward the training situation," and as people who "doubt their own ability to cope" is most likely to result in training that is seen as condescending (and that won't even get you past the "smiles test"). Nope, I'll pass on all this. (Besides, "recipients" smacks of welfare, not training.) I prefer to think of the learners I encounter as hungry tigers who will eat *you* if you don't have something mighty good for them to chew on and digest. (I can tell you which part of your anatomy they'll go for first, too.)

Short Time-Lines for Development

Under this heading, Yarusso states:

The pace at which change will impact organizations will make rapid response to requests for training essential from the organization's perspective. [And], The instructional designers and performance technologists of the future must have a technology that will accommodate the need for quick responses to management's needs.

That's pretty good positioning with management, but, again, I must ask: So what's new? Management has always wanted a quick response – they're impatient people. And, short timelines have been the defining characteristic of many a training project for as long as I can remember (and that's getting to be too long for comfort). Nor should it be overlooked that keeping a project's timelines short is an old management trick for reigning in Parkinson's Law. More to the point, however, is that experienced practitioners know the shortcuts. For example:

- Get a prototype training session on line right away and fix it as you go.
- Apply Pareto's principle, that is, zero in on the 20% that produces 80% of the useful results and to hell with the rest of it.

- Skip the “slick” packaging and the “fancy” media at first; you can always add it in later (and, by then, chances are you won’t want to and neither will the client/boss/user once he or she sees what it’ll cost.
- Use job incumbents/assignees as developers, trainers, project managers/team members, and just about anything else you can get them to do – they’ll make certain that what you all come up with fits their needs even if they can’t articulate them so that you can claim you did it.

In summary, Yarusso raises the specter of a future that “is bearing down on our profession so rapidly that it will soon be too late to adjust to it.” I suspect that Yarusso’s time perspective is slightly warped – he’s talking about what *was*, not what will be. And, when he states in his closing paragraphs that “the current state of the art in instructional design and performance technology is inadequate to the needs of the future,” I think we get a glimpse of the source of his concern: Yarusso confuses our technology, as codified and captured in the curricula of our institutions of higher learning, with the state of the art.

What our practitioners are doing bears little resemblance to what our universities are teaching. The state of the art is in the hands of the artisans, not the academics. Theory, especially codified theory, always lags practice. It is perhaps true that what the universities are teaching is antiquated and irrelevant – to today’s world, let alone to tomorrow’s – but it is by no stretch of the imagination the state of the art.

So, when Yarusso sets forth his second “inescapable conclusion,” that “...the model that will guide our efforts in the future must be developed and tested soon,” I cannot help but wonder if he has been contaminated by the “old” one because of his use of “*the* model” [italics added]. You see, in a lightning-paced, topsy-turvy world like the one Yarusso warns is coming down the pike, there ain’t no *the* model. *That’s* the true state of the art – at least in 1983.

Reference

Yarusso, L. Performance and instruction in the year 2000. Some opinions and warnings. *Performance & Instruction Journal*, March 1983, pp. 17-18; 28.

Contact the Author

Fred Nickols can be reached by e-mail at fred@nickols.us. Other articles of his can be found on his web site at www.skullworks.com.