

Workshops

EXTEND LEARNING BEYOND YOUR PRESENTATION WITH THESE BRAIN-FRIENDLY STRATEGIES

MARCIA L. TATE

Visualize the worst professional development workshop you have ever attended. Chances are, you sat passively as your presenter talked aimlessly regarding a topic of little interest to you. The presentation may have been accompanied by an endless stream of PowerPoint slides from which the presenter read — as if you could not read them for yourself. Never once were you given the opportunity to interact with other participants. By 24 hours after the forgettable experience, if you could bring yourself to admit this, you were prob-

ably lucky to recall 10% of the content delivered.

Now, reflect on the best staff development workshop of which you have been a part. You were probably in attendance because you chose to be. The presenter facilitated your learning while providing you with opportunities to embark on an experience that was physically comfortable and psychologically safe. In this workshop, you had input into the content, were taught using multiple modalities, worked with colleagues solving specific job-related problems, were provided opportunities to share pertinent experiences and reflect on the content, and had follow-up and support that took the form of action research or peer-coaching. In other words, the conditions were right for optimal learning (Tate, 2004).

Whether you are perusing the brain research (Jensen & Dabney, 2000; Sousa, 2006), learning-style theory (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2000) or proven professional development practices (Joyce &

Showers, 1995; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997), there are strategies that, by their very nature, take advantage of the way brains acquire information. While these strategies facilitate instruction for K-12 students, they work equally well for adult learners. The most effective presenters use these 20 brain-compatible strategies to engage their audiences. Look for them embedded in the 10 professional development tips outlined here. The strategies appear in **color type**. The following 10 suggestions can make your meeting, workshop, or course unforgettable — and more importantly, effective.

1. Set a purpose, and capture the attention of your audience.

The human brain has only one purpose — survival in the real world. When adults cannot see the connection between your meeting or workshop and their professional real-world responsibility, they may question their attendance at your workshop. Hook your learners by setting the purpose

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and telling them exactly how the contents of the experience will help them do their job better. When I teach the class *Worksheets Don't Grow Dendrites*, I tell participants that by the time the workshop ends, they will have the answers to the following three questions:

WORKSHOPS

- (1) How can I look five to 10 years younger, stay healthier, and live longer?
- (2) What are 20 strategies that can teach any student anything?
- (3) How can I develop a lesson that results in long-term retention? For that moment on, their attention is mine.

2. Know your participants, and allow them to know you.

If you are not already familiar with your audience, find out about them prior to the presentation. What responsibilities do they fulfill? What are their needs and desires for the session? What challenges have they faced?

Arrive early, get set up, and be at the door when your participants arrive. Greet them warmly. This is the beginning of your relationship with your adult learners. Rather than having a biography read about me, I allow my participants to work with their families to ask me any question they choose in an effort to get to know me better. I then select three or four questions to answer for the entire group. I begin to see the trust level increase as participants have had some input into the session.

3. Create an unforgettable beginning and ending.

The theory of primacy-recency states that the brain remembers best that which comes first in a learning segment and remembers second-best that which comes last. Therefore, the way you begin and end the professional learning experience is crucial.

Storytelling is a good way to gain the attention of your audience.

However, it is a good idea to tell your own personal stories. For example, at a summer leadership conference I planned for the administrators in my former school district, a renowned opening speaker told an emotional story that gripped the audience.

However, a closing speaker (who was not present initially) told the exact same story and could not understand why it did not get a similar reaction. The stories I share are personal ones and always designed to teach a point I wish my audience to remember.

4. Incorporate music to create a mood.

Have calming **music** playing when your participants enter your workshop. Use both calming and high-energy music depending upon what state you want to create in the brains of your audience. Classical, jazz, new age, and Celtic selections tend to calm and lessen stress, while rhythm and blues, salsa, and big band sounds appear to energize your audience and make them glad they attended your class. These faster rhythms can be used as participants walk around the room and stop periodically to review content with other class members.

5. Make learning a fun experience.

The need for fun is one of the five basic needs of the adult learner (Glasser, 1990.) If my learners get back from breaks and lunch on time, their reward is a joke. I seldom have anyone return late. If you don't feel confident in your joke-telling ability, use cartoons. *The Lighter Side of...* series by Aaron Bacall is a wonderful reference for your selection of cartoons when working with teachers or administrators. After all, **humor** not only puts the brain in a positive state for learning, it also increases the amount of feel-good chemicals and T-

cells in the body, strengthening the adult's immune system. Why do you think most comedians live to the age of 80 and beyond?

You can even engage your audience with **games**. I use Jeopardy to review content, ball toss as participants provide answers, and charades to review vocabulary.

6. Arrange content in chunks and integrate activity.

A renowned educator by the name of Madeline Hunter asked this question many years ago: "How do you eat an elephant?" The answer, of course, was, "One bite at a time." Since the adult brain can hold an average of seven bits of information in short-term memory simultaneously, effective presenters chunk content into meaningful segments and integrate activity, such as **drawing** or **manipulatives**, to enable their audience to process the information.



7. Provide time for participants to talk with one another.

Providing opportunities for participants to **brainstorm** or **discuss** ideas, work in **cooperative groups**, or teach one another what they have learned not only increases oxygen to the brain but also helps to ensure that participants recall 90% of what you have taught them. The person in your workshop who is doing the most talking just may be the one growing the most brain cells.

8. Allow participants to move while learning.

Have teachers **role-play** an effective parent-teacher conference, make a date with another teacher to discuss content, or move around the room to **write** ideas on chart paper. These activities not only make the workshop enjoyable but assist the brain in recalling information at a subsequent time. Content acquired when participants

are **moving** places is stored in procedural memory — one of the strongest memory systems in the brain. It also keeps the adult attention span (approximately 20 minutes) focused on the topic.

9. Provide time for reflection on the content presented.

It is not so much the activities in your workshop that can change adult behavior, it is the **reflection** on the activities that make the change. Provide time for that reflection. Enable participants to write their thoughts, insights, questions, or reflections in a journal. Encourage them to review these thoughts at a subsequent time.

10. Provide a plan for follow-up and support.

It is not what happens during the workshop that results in long-term behavior change. It is what happens after the workshop. Try this activity:

BRAIN-COMPATIBLE STRATEGIES

Here is a complete list of the 20 brain-compatible strategies for easy reference:

1. Brainstorming and discussion.
2. Drawing.
3. Field trips.
4. Games.
5. Graphic organizers.
6. Humor and celebration.
7. Manipulatives.
8. Metaphor, analogy, and simile.
9. Movement.
10. Mnemonic devices.
11. Music.
12. Project-based and problem-based instruction.
13. Reciprocal teaching, cooperative learning, peer coaching.
14. Role play.
15. Storytelling.
16. Technology.
17. Visualization.
18. Visuals.
19. Work study and action research.
20. Writing and reflection.

Do yourself and your audience a favor. Do not conduct another professional development experience without using several of these strategies. I try to incorporate one from each of the four modalities — visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile — into every learning opportunity. I think this is the reason that many adults call the workshops some of the best they have ever attended. What is more important, these workshops result in meaningful adult behavior change that increases achievement for all students.

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WORKSHOPS

Cross your arms. Look and see if the right arm is over the left or the left over the right. Now reverse your arms. How do you feel? Some adjectives to describe your feeling might be: awkward, uncomfortable, and unnatural. This activity can be used as a **metaphor** for change, since these same adjectives are the words adults might use when you ask them to change their teaching habits. Without the proper support, they will return to crossing their arms the way they feel most comfortable. After all, adults are creatures of habit. Providing a follow-up job-embedded project or **action research** study for implementation and a peer coach or mentor for support helps to ensure that the change may become permanent.

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