

# Society for Prehospital Educators in Canada



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## More than good sight lines: What makes an effective learning environment?

**I** often start instructor workshops with two questions: “What’s the difference between teaching and learning?” and “Where does learning happen?” Both are, on their own, interesting questions. The answers and the discussion that follows are usually intriguing, leading into the differences between “transmission” styles of instruction and more collaborative learning approaches, formal and informal learning activities, learning styles, or why we teach and learn. These ideas are all elements of the learning environment.

My first full-time teaching gig in EMS was as a recertification instructor. Over two years, I had the privilege of meeting a couple hundred B.C. paramedics and felt the angst of watching them go through their exams. It was a strange program—a mix of mandated continuing education and protocol updates from the employer, “current practice” and “best practice” discussions (before those terms became popular in education literature), and a few fun bits of professional development—all sprinkled through 10 days of what was, at its heart, exam preparation boot camp. Our program staff struggled with the eternal question: “Who is the client?” Was it the paramedics whose livelihoods depended on maintaining their licenses, the employer who funded and controlled the process, the union who watched over it, the regulating body which set and conducted the exams, or

the mythical patient who is at the forefront of any EMS discussion. A strange brew, an odd experience, and, occasionally one of the most dysfunctional learning environments I've ever been in.

There are a number of ways of looking at the learning environment. Perhaps the most common definition describes the learning environment as the physical space of teaching and learning. Viewed this way, an effective learning environment is a warm, well lit space with comfortable seating and tables, good sight lines to audio-visual aids, and enough room, equipment and material for practice activities. Proponents of adult learning principles take a different view, seeing the learning environment as a shared space of varied backgrounds, common experiences, mutual respect and negotiated learning goals. Each of these perspectives provides different insights into creating effective teaching and learning experiences. I'd like to step back from the "in-the-moment" activities of learning and view the learning environment as a place of tension between the various players or agents involved in EMS education.

So what, then, is the learning environment? It is a place—physical, mental, emotional, virtual – where learners, instructors, institutions and curriculum meet. Each of these players enters the learning environment with a particular goal in mind. From this broader perspective, an effective learning environment is one in which each participant is pointed, more or less, in the same direction. A dysfunctional learning environment is one where the elements are not aligned—a space where different players in the educational game are seeking different goals.

Writers such as Malcolm Knowles and Stephen Brookfield note adult learning is problem-focused or needs-based. Adults enter the learning environment with their own individual goals shaped by personal and professional needs. In EMS, these goals can range from the desire to learn a new trade, explore prehospital care as an area of interest, obtain certification for employment, seek advanced skills and knowledge, or as professional development. Sometimes, as in my opening example, the drivers for change are external, in the form of mandatory training or required continuing education. Learners come to a course—they

enter the learning environment—with their own unique blend of these (and other) needs and goals.

Similarly, instructors approach the learning environment with an underlying intent or approach. Dan Pratt identifies five teaching perspectives that represent an instructor's beliefs, intentions, and actions in managing the learning environment.

Briefly, a Transmission approach focuses on carefully structuring and guiding learners through a prescribed curriculum with the goal of accurate and efficient mastery of the content. In a Transmission approach, teachers must be experts and practitioners to be effective.

An Apprenticeship approach focuses on socializing learners to the ways of thinking and performing in a discipline. The teacher shapes and guides learners toward accepted norms of performance, generally moving from simple to complex ways of thinking.

A Developmental approach looks at the process from the learners' points of view. Teachers use questioning and examples to make the content relevant and meaningful to individual learners, building increasingly complex cognitive structures and understanding of the content. By contrast, instructors employing a nurturing perspective provide support and encouragement, emphasizing that effective learning is a function of the hard work and persistence of the learner. These teachers focus on growth as well as mastery and strive to create a climate of trust and respect.

The final teaching perspective, Social Reform, sees teaching as a value-based activity in which the teacher awakens learners to the hidden values, beliefs and ideologies in the curriculum. By questioning and critically analyzing content, those from a Social Reform perspective challenge learners to create a position and affect change in their environments. Pratt notes that instructors enter the learning environment with one or

more dominant positions. Many teachers are able to move between their "back up" or less dominant perspectives to meet the particular needs of the moment.

But the learning environment includes more than just learners and instructors. Another key element involves the goals of the institutions or agencies that deliver EMS education. Educational goals can be roughly categorized into five "working philosophies" or approaches. Behaviourist programs focus on technical competence and efficiency. These are the programs that don't rely on bells and whistles; they focus on what learners "need-to-know" with the goal of producing competent practitioners with the skills and knowledge they need to work in the field.

Other programs deliberately build a broad base underneath their learners. This liberal approach (as in a liberal arts education) aims to ensure that learners can function not only now, but will have a foundation that supports future growth, both of the learner (into advanced roles) or the profession (through changes in scope of practice and role).

A progressive approach puts the advancement of society in general as its goal. Thus, a progressive EMS program would seek to improve patient care, not just focus on technical competence. A radical agenda is one that seeks to critically analyze the status quo and challenge learners to take on the role of change agents.

Finally, a humanist approach seeks transformative changes in learners, encouraging them to grow not just professionally, but in all the domains of their lives. Most EMS programs have one predominant approach, although they may have elements of other approaches embedded within them.

Finally, for the purposes of this article anyway, the learning environment involves the requirements of the content or curriculum itself. The curriculum of a program is shaped by the educational approaches and teaching perspectives of its authors.

To learn more about teaching perspectives and to take the Teaching Perspectives Inventory, go to:

[www.teachingperspectives.com](http://www.teachingperspectives.com)

But the content and domain of practice are essential elements of how a program is designed. EMS, for example, requires academic foundation (anatomy, physiology, pathophysiology), skill development (assessment and treatment) and the fostering of judgment (clinical reasoning, teamwork, leadership). An effective curriculum must recognize and blend various types of learning activities that support all of these outcomes, not focus on one at the expense of the others.

When I look back on my experiences in recertification training, I can see how the goals and intentions of each of the elements in the learning environment were often at odds with each other. The intents of the employer and regulators were to ensure the technical competence of practitioners. And so, the formal curriculum tended to focus on the decidedly behaviourist goal of ensuring that practitioners could work within the requirements of their license. The learners came in with a fundamental need to pass their exams. But, the program also served as the learners' primary vehicle for continuing education and professional development at the time. These were

more liberal or progressive aspirations. Similarly, while the structure and activities in the curriculum tended to favour Transmission and Apprenticeship teaching perspectives, many of the instructors in the program had more Developmental or Nurturing approaches.

There were times when the focus of the students and the intent of the instructors aligned with the program. When the various elements of the learning environment meshed, we had a great couple of weeks together.

We would burn through the exam prep, then focus on the pro-D parts. Other times, however, our groups included learners with diverse desires or needs. Or we had instructors with opposing teaching perspectives. Or, sometimes, we all forgot the goal of the program and focused on professional growth—great class, mixed exam results. In these cases, the learning environment became more dysfunctional.

A great learning environment is more than a comfortable room where learners can see the instructor and express their views in a respectful space. It's a shared place, a meeting

and mixing of the needs of the learners, the intent of the instructor, the goals of the program, and requirements of the curriculum. A dysfunctional environment is one in which one or more of the elements are at odds with the others. An effective learning environment is one in which these elements work together toward a common goal. Or one in which we recognize the differences between these elements and find a way to work together.

## References

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