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 learners. Such an approach is guided by the educational perspectives of its authors.

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