

## **Environmental Factors in Learning**

### **Environment requirements for an effective learning session**

An environment conducive for learning is key for learning to take place.

Characteristics of an effective environment include:

- Environment where students feel safe and supported. When asked to try new behavior in front of peers and cohorts, adults' ego and self-esteem is on the line. Environment has to encourage understanding and respect of individual needs and uniqueness.
- Environment that fosters intellectual freedom and encourages experimentation and creativity. An environment which is physically and psychologically comfortable.
- At the same time, the environment has to be intellectually challenging. Pacing the level of challenge is critical. Optimal pacing is challenging people just beyond their present level of ability.
- Environment that supports self-directed learning, where students take responsibility for their own learning.
- Environment that recognizes the fact that different people go through a different process of absorbing new information. A flexible environment that accommodates different styles of learning by balancing the presentation style (from lecture to breakout and group discussion).
- Environment where peers are accepted and respected as intelligent, experienced adults, whose opinions are listened to, appreciated, and respected. Adults bring a great deal of life experience in the classroom. Environment has to encourage interaction and learning not only from the faculty/trainer, but also from peers.
- Environment that stimulates active involvement in learning, as opposed to passively listening to lectures. To ensure effective learning, new information in the learning process has to be integrated with previous knowledge, and students must actively participate in the learning experience. People learn best by doing.
- Environment that provides feedback mechanism to ensure expectations and goals of trainers and trainees are being met.

Source: D. Billington, *Seven Characteristics of Highly Effective Adult Learning Program*.

## **General environment attributes**

The learning environment should be:

- Comfortable (both physically and physiologically)
- Familiar
- Accepting and supportive, yet critical to challenge intellectually
- An intimate and fun atmosphere
- An environment of mutual respect
- An open environment where everyone feels free to share
- A relaxed atmosphere; could also be casual and informal
- Visually appealing and pleasant
- Not too spacious, yet not crowded
- Environment that breaks the hierarchy and where everyone feels equal
- Environment that supports interaction
- Environment that supports learning by doing
- Environment that fosters self-motivation

## **Role of the facilitator/attributes of the physiological environment**

The learning facilitator should:

- Make use of names to break the ice and create an atmosphere of camaraderie
- Use humor and relax the atmosphere
- Create an open environment where there are no stupid ideas and everyone feels comfortable to share opinions and experiences; students are made to feel free to propose ideas without premature judgement
- Define and communicate goals and methods
- Draw people out to contribute in the discussion and provide positive reinforcement
- Balance the discussion (balance power in the room) and support the minority opinion
- Set boundaries and rules; communicate standards of judgment

- Create interest and generate curiosity
- Question participants so they realize the process of seeking explanation is of critical importance
- Empower people and assign tasks (encourage people to take responsibility)
- Actively encourage people to mingle and interact with each other (including effective rearranging of people)
- Be aware of the different learning styles and use a variety or types of learning activities to meet the wide range of students' needs (mix of different presentation techniques)
- Structure sessions effectively to provide breaks when needed
- Be aware of cultural diversity in the classroom and demonstrate cultural sensitivity

### **Physical environment attributes for effective learning**

Organizations are becoming increasingly aware that the physical environment plays an important role in designing a highly effective training/learning session. The new trends in learning and training in the information age are demanding more from the physical environment.

Studies show that comfort affects people's ability to absorb and retain information, and distractions in the learning environment certainly contribute to wasted classroom time. However, removal of physical distractions is only part of the issue. It is necessary to understand and accommodate the human psychology at all levels of the learning process in order to achieve maximum potential. The classroom should be conducive for learning:

- Open environment but not too spacious
- Not too crowded
- Right amount of space/enough individual space
- Ceiling/correct height of ceiling
- Perceived privacy (being able to signal need for privacy, visually separated areas inside the room)
- Good acoustics
- Temperature control
- Air control
- Simple, not visually overwhelming/integrated aesthetics

- Integrated room design
- Seamless integration of technology utilized in the process of learning
- Clean technical power and grounding (comprehensive infrastructure that is prepared for what comes next)
- Room that is infinitely flexible to accommodate a wide range of activities – reconfigurability/flexibility to accomplish different setups; design and layout that supports the featured subject
- Complete control over lighting; flexibility to adjust lighting and level of lighting in different parts of the room (lighting is important for creating a warm and emotionally comfortable atmosphere; lighting is important to be able to see visual aids and physical props)
- Having windows and natural light in the room are extremely important
- Color and decoration brighten up the room and wake up the participants
- Environment should appeal to all five senses; it should be physically comfortable
- Room should be close to restrooms and side rooms for coffee, food; also, close to exit to allow participants to step outside for fresh air
- Size and dimensions of room should allow for easy configuration
- Background music often creates pleasant atmosphere
- Environment that supports visual props; the ability to use props/proper placement of tools/physical objects/visual aids that spur creativity and ideas
- Non-obstructed line of site for participants

### **Role of the furniture**

The learning furniture should be:

- Comfortable and visually appealing
- Intuitive to operate
- Simple; not visually overwhelming/does not make too strong of a statement
- Flexible and allow for different room layouts and reconfiguration
- Multi-functional to accommodate a wide range of learning activities and different types of learning tasks
- Able to accommodate minorities and the physically impaired

- Supportive of physical props used in the process of learning
- Able to accommodate accessories that create emotional comfort (laptop locks, bag hooks, etc.)
- Supportive of integrated presentation tools and visual aids (presentation boards, flip chart pads, marker boards, presentation screen, etc.)
- Supportive of various technology utilized in the process of learning; sufficient power and data; wire and cable management

### **Overall, learning is changing**

- From traditional classroom and lecture to more dynamic, interactive, and “hands-on”
- From handouts/binders and overhead presentations to interactive CDs, LCD projectors, and other new technology
- From face-to-face, in-person training to a blended approach of traditional training and e-learning
- From formal to more casual and informal

Source: Allsteel training/customer visits.