

Running A Technical Training Course

A trainer requires very different skills from a technician, so if you are asked to take on this role it's well worth spending time preparing yourself.

Concluding our two-part article.

By Mike Lewis
Technical Journalist

Perhaps the most challenging part of your role as instructor is keeping the trainees interested in the subject at all times. You need to move the course along at a good pace to prevent people getting bored, but you must take great care not to lose anyone along the way. Each new topic must be fresh and interesting, and you must work hard to make everyone in the group feel that the course is relevant to them. This might sound like an impossible task, but fortunately there are some well-established techniques which professional trainers use to keep a course "alive".

Keeping Their Interest

One of the most important techniques is for the instructor to be enthusiastic about the subject matter, and to communicate that enthusiasm to the audience. If you constantly stress the benefits - both of the subject as a whole and of the individual topics - the students will soon start to share your zeal. For example, it's a safe bet that very few programmers care deeply about the theoretical concepts behind Microsoft's Component Object Model. But they do care about their own applications. To get them enthusiastic about COM you could explain how it can make their applications more functional or how it can help them create impressive user interfaces without involving them in a lot of extra work. However, don't get carried away. Your job is not to sell a particular product or technology. Be sure to point out the failings and weaknesses where necessary, but do stress the advantages as much as you reasonably can.

Many trainers try to avoid ever spending more than about 10 minutes on each activity, and they carefully plan each task so that it is followed by something

The screenshot shows the CustomGuide.com website. The browser address bar displays "http://www.customguide.com/". The website header includes the CustomGuide.com logo and navigation links: Home, Features, Prices, Order, FAQs, Downloads, and Newsletter. A banner at the top right states: "The most user-friendly, versatile, and well-written computer courseware available." The main content area is titled "Computer Training Courseware, IT Curriculums, and Lesson Plans" and includes a welcome message: "Welcome! Computer training courseware, IT computer curriculums, and computer lesson plans that are easy and fun to use. Whether you're training in beginning or advanced topics, our computer courseware saves you hours of preparation and gives your students a valuable reference that they will use long after class." Below this, there are four categories of courseware: "Print On-Demand Courseware" (with an image of a CD), "Printed Courseware" (with an image of a person reading), "Quick References" (with an image of a person looking at a screen), and "Web Based Courseware" (with an image of a person at a computer). At the bottom, a testimonial reads: "We are so confident that our computer training courseware represents the highest quality and value in a computer training/education series available that we have made all our computer courseware and computer lesson plans available for free evaluation. Feel free to download or preview any title and then compare it to the computer training courseware you're currently using. We think you'll agree that there is no choice but CustomGuide computer training courseware."

which involves a distinct change of mood. My own four-phase approach is an example of this, with its frequent switching from speech, to onscreen demonstration, to slides and to practical work. An excellent way to vary the pace is to insert jokes, anecdotes, quizzes, puzzles or group activities at suitable intervals. An occasional “fun quiz” never fails to give the course a boost and break up a long day - but be careful not to make it sound like a test. Read out some questions and get the students to write down their answers, but don’t make a point of asking for their scores. Alternatively, have the trainees shout out the answers, and give a small prize - chocolate is usually welcome - for the first correct response in each case.

Humour is an extremely valuable tool, but only if it is executed well. Play an amusing video clip, show a cartoon, tell an occasional funny story, but never stray beyond the bounds of good taste. These devices can do a lot to lighten the load, create a relaxed atmosphere and keep boredom away, but they should all be used in moderation. Your goal, after all, is to educate the delegates, not to entertain them. And if you are one of those people who is simply no good at telling a joke, it is better not to try.

Presentation

Not everyone can stand up in front of an audience and hold their attention for several hours while explaining difficult technical concepts. In fact, relatively few people have the presentation skills which teaching a technical training course demands. However, these skills can be acquired, and there are several techniques you can learn to help you improve your presentation.

To start with, get into the habit of projecting your voice. Try to speak a little louder than you might normally do, and take care not to swallow your words or let your voice trail off at the end of a sentence. Vary your tone as much as possible, and use stress to emphasise key points. Above all, don’t read verbatim from your notes. If you are uncertain what to say next, skim the notes first, then face the audience and deliver the information in your own words. A common mistake is to speak too fast. The trainees will need time to absorb what you are telling them - by definition, they are not as familiar with the subject matter as you are - and to take notes. Where possible, repeat the most important points using different words, and summarise frequently.

Pause often. Don’t assume that something has to be happening the whole time in order to keep the audience’s attention - after all, this is not television. Pauses always seem longer for the instructor than for the students. Twenty seconds of silence might seem like an age to you, but for the trainees it is just enough time to gather their thoughts and find the next page in their notes.

Try to move around from time to time. Walk from your PC to the flipchart to the first row of the audience - or even stroll around the room a little while you are talking. This will help vary the pace, but don’t do it too much as it could rapidly become irritating. And do make sure you are in sight of everyone the whole time. A particularly useful technique is the so-called “lighthouse manoeuvre”. As you speak, sweep the audience with your eyes, lingering for two or three seconds on each person in turn. This is a good way of making it seem that you are speaking to each individual personally. Finally, beware of mannerisms that might irritate the audience: jangling coins, constantly adjusting your clothing, waving a pointer around. Avoid, too, those verbal “tics” that we all so easily fall into: phrases such as “you know” and “you see what I mean”.

Difficult Trainees

In any group of trainees, the chances are that at least one of them will present particular difficulties for the instructor. It’s not that anyone will deliberately set out to cause problems or make life difficult. But people do vary in their personalities, their learning abilities and their attitudes to technology, and some trainees are simply less easy to teach than others.

The Heckler

You will sooner or later come across a “heckler”. This is usually a person who feels insecure, and who compensates for this by constantly interrupting - often in an aggressive manner - and questioning what you say. Don’t get into a discussion

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with this type of person, and never get annoyed or upset by the interruptions. Wait until they say something with which you agree, then express your agreement and resolutely move on to another point.

The Know-All

This is someone who knows more about the topic than the rest of the group - possibly even more than the instructor - and who wants everyone to know it. When they offer their opinion - and they often will - you should thank them and move on. If they ask you a question which is beyond the scope of the course, either answer briefly and return to the main topic without giving them a chance to follow up, or simply decline to answer on the grounds that it is not relevant. Never let them sidetrack you.

Lacking In Confidence

At the other extreme, some delegates lack confidence in their abilities, and are shy of asking questions or taking part in discussions in case this shows up their supposed ignorance. You can often help these people by asking them questions which you know they can answer. If they fail to answer coherently, summarise what they said and ask them to confirm. But don't force them to respond if they are clearly uncomfortable. And never say something like, "It's about time you answered a question, Steve; we haven't heard much from you today."

Out Of Their Depth

What about the trainee who really is under-qualified, and who should never have been accepted on the course in the first place? These are usually the most difficult cases to deal with. You will not have time to give them enough personal attention to compensate for their lack of knowledge, but you cannot simply ignore the problem either. The best you can do is to work with them a little more closely during the practical work, and perhaps give them easier exercises to do if possible.

The Whisperer

One other type you might come across is the whisperer: the person who insists on chatting to his neighbour while you are speaking. You cannot allow this to happen. Stop talking, look at the offender, wait for them to look up, then ask if they are ready for you to proceed. With care, this can be done in a light-hearted way while still making it clear that you disapprove of the chattering.

Courseware

It is usual for the instructor to hand out some form of printed notes - so-called "courseware" - for the delegates to take away with them. Among professional trainers, opinions differ on what form the courseware should take, and also on when it should be issued. Some trainers like to withhold the courseware until the end of the course. The reason is that, if the trainees knew in advance what you were about to say, they would be less likely to pay attention to you and might find themselves simply reading the notes instead. The counter argument is that the courseware will contain useful supplementary information which the students might need to refer to during the session. Also, if they don't have this information at the outset, they won't know to what extent they will need to take down notes themselves.

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My own preference is to hand out the courseware at the start of the course. My courseware does not contain narrative-style explanations of the topics, nor is it in any way a script of what I am going to say. It is more like a technical reference manual, containing such details as parameter lists and keystroke sequences, as well as step-by-step instructions for completing certain tasks. It is unlikely the trainees would read this rather than listen to my spoken narrative, which provides the flesh on the bones. My courseware also doubles as a course notebook. Each page has two columns: the left-hand column contains the printed material, the right-hand column is left blank for the trainees' own notes. This allows the notes to be entered adjacent to the information to which they refer, which in turn makes it much easier for the students to review their notes when they are back at their desks. It is important for the courseware to be clearly laid out and easy to navigate. Choose a simple page layout, with consistent heading levels, page numbers and running heads. Include plenty of cross references, and also a table of contents and, ideally, an index. Graphics, especially screenshots, also play a useful role. Print

the document on standard-size paper and issue it in a loose-leaf binder so that the students can add further handouts if necessary.

Some instructors produce courseware which is simply a hard copy of their PowerPoint slides. Personally, I dislike this approach as it leads to bulky handouts with relatively little information - by definition, the slides are just bullet points - but it does have the advantage of being easy to produce. However, I do sometimes include thumbnails of my slides in the margins of my detailed courseware. (If you do decide to print your slides, they will look much better if you use a monochrome setting rather than grey scale; in PowerPoint, select "Pure black and white" in the Print dialog to achieve this.)

Evaluations

After the course, management will need to know how successful it has been. You, the instructor, will also want to know what the trainees thought of it and how it might be improved in the future. The usual way to obtain this kind of feedback is to issue an evaluation form. Give these out at the end of the course and have the delegates fill them in straight away (if you ask them to fill the forms in later and send them back to you, most of them will never get round to it). The wording of the evaluation form must make it clear that it is the course that is being evaluated, not the trainees. Keep the form short - two pages is about right - and only include questions which are relevant to the evaluation process or which will help you plan future courses. Multiple-choice questions or tick-box responses are most appropriate, but make sure that there is also space for people to write additional comments if they wish.

If possible, arrange for the delegates to hand the completed forms to another staff member as they leave. Alternatively, ask them to put the completed forms into sealed envelopes and leave them on their desks. You will obtain more honest answers and avoid possible embarrassment if the delegates know that you will not be reading their responses while they are still in the vicinity.

Follow-Up

No matter how thoroughly you cover your material and respond to questions during the course, there will always be areas which you cannot properly deal with on the spot. There might be questions which you are unable to answer straight away, or you might simply forget to give out certain information. For these reasons, some form of post-course follow-up will often be desirable. Ideally, the trainees should be able to contact you if they need further help with any of the course material, and there should also be a mechanism for you to distribute follow-up information. The trainees will feel more secure if they know in advance that this facility will be available. How this works partly depends on your normal relationship with the trainees. If you are a member of a support team and the people attending the course are the users that you normally help, the course follow-up will probably become part of your normal support duties. Where there is no such ongoing relationship, consider giving out a specific email address for post-course questions. A dedicated area of a Web site might also be useful. You could use this to post additional information such as FAQ pages.

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Conclusion

Training and support are really two sides of the same coin. As a support person, you have probably already given users informal one-to-one coaching or been involved in *ad hoc* mentoring sessions. Running a full-blown training course is an extension of those duties. It might sound daunting at first, but the necessary skills are not too difficult to acquire. And once you have got into the swing of it, you might well end up enjoying your new role.

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