

A Spoonful of Sugar

By Lenn Millbower, the Learnertainment® Trainer

“We have long held that the normal gap between what is generally regarded as ‘entertainment’ and what is defined ‘educational’ represents an old and untenable viewpoint.”

Walt Disney said that when describing the Disney approach to delivering education in entertaining clothes. He later devoted an entire movie song to the notion when Mary Poppins sang, *“A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.”*

We learning professionals don't like to think of our instructional programs as medicines. Learners, however, often do.

And, although Walt Disney passed away in 1966, the need to entertainment-ize learning is more critical than ever before.

Learners today are overworked, over stimulated, over informed, and in many cases, over it. They confront an info-fog of information that makes it hard, if not impossible, to focus on our learning offerings.

As a result of my life experience – as a professional musician, magician, college professor, speaker and as a trainer, instructional designer, and training leader at Walt Disney World – I have created a methodology that Walt would likely endorse. It's a fusion of learning with entertainment into *Learnertainment®*.

Learnertainment® uses the time-tested principles of entertainment to deliver instruction that captures attention, maintains interest, and moves learners emotionally to favorable action.

There are eight Learnertainment® principles, and they are listed below.

Principle One: Emotion Creates Memory

Emotion is the root of behavior. Our brains respond to stimuli in nanoseconds. It's the brain's way of doing its job: keeping us safe. The brain's reaction to potential threats – like those perceived by the brain in a learning environment – require immediate; focused; emotional responses. All rational thought stops as brain neurons focus on the threat. Getting a learner to pay attention impossible when the brain is in survival mode.

To reach past this brain panic, create a safe, positive, enjoyable, emotional environment. Where many things create negative emotion, entertainment is uniquely designed to create positive emotion. Facts can reach learners intellectually but don't often change behavior anyway. Where logic proves, emotion moves: *Evoke Emotion!*

Principle Two: Perspectives Deepen Meaning

Learning programs are organized sequentially. Point A follows point B; C follows B; D follows C; and so it goes. The result is a series of talking points – often mind-numbingly boring – not a learner experience.

In contrast, a learning experience, like an entertainment experience, moves learners. It provides a depth and breath of perspectives. It deepens and enriches meaning. Just like a great movie, the story progresses logically and holistically; threads link all the story elements together, surprises reveal themselves over time, and the underlying meaning comes apparent in a grand moment of “aha!” The result is a whole greater than the sequence of its parts.

Deliver a message that is both sequential and deep: *Layer Learning!*

Principle Three: The Environment Talks

A well-made film thrusts you into its environment. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the *Star Wars* series, and James Cameron’s *Avatar* all succeeded spectacularly because they created their own believable worlds.

Walt Disney applied this immersion technique to his theme parks. When you enter Walt Disney World’s Magic Kingdom, you are transported to 1900s main street America. You smell the popcorn; you hear the music; you see the color. Your senses are overwhelmed with the experience.

Learners, in contrast, often open a grimy door, enter a cold room, sit in hard chairs, and view an underwhelming PowerPoint® welcoming slide. Imagine instead an immersive learning environment; one that thrusts learners into your world so they can leave their world behind: *Stage your Surroundings.*

Principle Four: Visuals Aid Retention

A picture is worth a thousand words, or so the saying goes. It’s true. Words are just pictures that need to be translated into language. Learners don’t listen: they look.

Visuals that speak your message will be twice as effective as bullet-burdened PowerPoint® slides. Colors that evoke the mood of your message will communicate emotionally. Props that align with key points will metaphorically anchor the learning.

Disney certainly used color effectively in his movies and theme parks. He developed over 2,000 different colors to portray the appropriate mood in his animated features.

You do not need to develop your own 2,000 colors. But the use of visuals will make your message more meaningful: *Present in Pictures!*

Principle Five: Suggestions Guide Outcomes

Entertainments are manipulative. So is training: a classroom: a speech. The audience goes along because the manipulation is in their benefit. It is a grand, but subliminal, bargain between the filmmaker, the magician, or the instructor and the student.

The agreement is simple. *“I will go along as long as it is apparent to me that you have my best interest at heart.”* The audience abrogates the bargain at the first sign that the film is preachy, the magician cannot deliver the illusion promised, or the instructor introduces a poorly executed; or stupid; or annoying icebreaker.

Walt Disney once explained his approach to an audience, *“you never play over their heads and you never play underneath them. You play straight out at them.”*

Play straight at your audience. Treat them as equals: as adults. Be positive, helpful, and confident in their ability to learn the material. You may not be a magician, but to the trainee, the learning should occur as if by magic: *Make it Magical!*

Principle Six: Sound Trumps Sight

Music may be the original language. It exists in the subconscious as a primitive and deep sub-language. And, because it is so important to us, we are uncomfortable when it is missing.

Music is also a key emotional component to successful movies. Walt Disney once said, *“I cannot think of the pictorial story without thinking about the complementary music which will fulfill it.”*

Movie music communicates character, danger, excitement, heroism, mystery; all the emotions we humans feel.

Learning environments can also communicate the various moods of learning by tapping into this primitive, emotional trigger. They cannot NOT listen to something anyway: *Mix in Music!*

Principle Seven: Laughter Produces Positivity

As the old movie song says, *“Gotta’ laugh.”* Walt Disney also comments that *“Laughter no enemy to learning.”*

People laugh for many reasons: to relate; to share; to cope; to understand; to ease tension. Humor is the natural healing tonic.

Learners are often so desperate for laughter in learning situations that they will laugh at our not-so-funny jokes. This is good. We don’t have to be comedians.

We do, however, have an obligation to create a positive environment where tension lessens and relationships grow.

Make the learning environment a joyful place to be: *Harness Humor!*

Principle Eight: Professionalism Produces Results

The last seven principles will not save a poor performer. Entertainers who cannot behave professionally and deliver consistent performances do not last.

The best performers are the ones who know their craft so well that the performance looks spontaneous: effortless. The details flow without conscious thought.

The viewer then thinks, *"I could do that."* Exactly what we want *learners* to think.

Many learning professionals do not feel the need to rehearse. *"Why bother? It's there on the PowerPoint® anyway."*

We should bother. Very few of us are good enough to devote full attention to our learners AND the mechanics of our performance. Your learners deserve your undivided attention. Know your material so well that you can focus on the message, not the mechanics: *Perfect your Performance.*

An Irresistible Invitation to Learn

Walt Disney once also declared, *"The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing."* So get doing. Learnertainmentize™ your learning production. Make your program an irresistible invitation to learn. Add that spoonful of sugar and watch the medicine go down.