The Challenges of Safety Training

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Training in general and safety training in particular has many “challenges” (also known as problems). As trainers, we all face some problems or challenges during the delivery of our training sessions. In this fun, engaging, and highly participative session, we will be discussing and problem-solving many of the typical “training challenges” that can and do occur in many a training class. First let’s review some of my own “guiding principles” regarding these challenges.

Guiding Principles

1. There are no “problems”, only “challenges”! These challenges are (great) opportunities to improve my skills as a trainer. This may sound clichéd, but is a truism. Just as the saying goes, “What doesn’t kill me, leaves me stronger”, the same is true in delivery of training—“What doesn’t kill my training leaves me a stronger, better trainer.”
2. Put the Learner first! What I mean by this is always encourage a “learner-centered” classroom instead of an “information-centered” one. The learner should come before (be considered more important than) the information. After all, why are we all there—to be learners.
3. Put yourself in the learner’s place! There could be all sorts of things going on that might be interfering with a learner’s abilities in the classroom. Again a saying makes sense here—“One can never hope to understand another until he walks a mile in the other’s shoes.”
4. Listen! Restate the question or issue to be clear of your understanding of it. I as a trainer am always trying to anticipate what a student is asking and often I “mis-anticipate” it.
5. Never ever get defensive! No matter what. Period. Take the high road instead. A third cliché (but a truism), “When given lemons, make lemonade”. I was insulted in front of about 200 trainees by one of them (I can’t repeat it here), and rather than get upset, I turned it into a funny story (at my own expense—not his) and got huge laughs. I ended the session on a high note!
6. “THB” or “Trainer Hold Back!” What this means is let the students go, answer, talk or whatever first. Only then I can fill in with what they don’t mention or discuss. This is based on my Dad’s dictum of “FHB” or “family hold back” meaning the guest is served and eats first—and seconds—before we do.
7. You or I, as the “Trainer”, are better described as the “facilitator!” I just coordinate and help with other’s learning. As the psychologist Carl Rogers said, “I can no longer teach others.” By this he meant that it was up to the learner to be responsible for his/her own learning.
8. You or I should not be (or feel the need to be) the only person doing “training.” As a matter of fact, the more we can get the students participating as co-teachers, the better; the more learning taking place, and the easier for us, too.

9. “In training there is no such thing as doing too much or going too far!” By this I mean that teaching and learning (and safety for that matter) are far too important to not do enough.

10. “Go the distance, then go a bit farther!” Similar to nine above, teaching lends itself to going “above and beyond” the call or the norm or what’s expected. Do the unexpected instead.

There are certainly many ways of approaching these challenges, but for each “challenge” I’ve discussed some of my approaches—you and others may have other valid approaches as well. Training setting will also influence options (e.g., are you an “inside trainer” or an “outside contracted trainer”)? On to the “challenges” of safety training!

The “Talker”
This is the student who has to always be talking. S/he may be talking to you, to others, to him/herself. S/he may be talking about the training or not—s/he’s just talking. What to do?

Try drawing them into the topic, “what do you think about this?” Or draw someone else into their talking, “Joan, what do you think about what Sam’s been taking about?” Ignoring them rarely works. Waiting for them to finish talking (like a grade school teacher) usually doesn’t work either—they just keep right on talking.

The “Commenter”
Similar to the talker, the commenter isn’t necessarily talking for nothing, s/he has a comment for everything you (or others) say. You talk about safety glasses, and s/he says that his/her glasses are always on. Just a harmless comment. Not particularly helpful for the lesson. What to do?

Try pairing him/her up with another student with a strong personality where the comments won’t last long. Ask what they mean by the comment (in a sincere fashion—not at all sarcastically). Ask them to “hold that thought until later”. Ignore it (up to a point). Use their comment to your advantage, “Bob makes an interesting point…” and then “spin it into whatever you were going to next discuss. Comment on the comment, “Hmm, ok. Let’s move right along.” I usually don’t bother approaching him/her at a break. It usually doesn’t make a difference and can backfire on you by shutting down all conversation (“I’d be happy to answer the question, but I was told I was talking too much!”).

The “Sniper” (or “Bomb-thrower”)
This person doesn’t just comment, s/he makes comments or “digs” meant to kill or ruin the lesson. Stuff like, “This doesn’t matter because we don’t have access to the equipment”, etc. What to do?

First, always smile—it’s disarming. Keep your cool—remember guiding principle five, never get defensive. Call him/her on it—but “call on” someone else for verification—a trusted soul. If it’s true, then it’s a valid problem. If it’s false, by making it public and addressing it right away it goes away. Just don’t be smug or snide about it (“Well., I guess we proved that wrong!”).

The “Negative One”
You say black, s/he says white. You say dark, s/he says light. You say high, s/he says low. Okay, you get the point. What to do?
Again, draw them in to the discussion, “What do you mean?” Also, try to pin them down, “Well, Chris, what specifically makes you say that?” Again, smile and say, “Well, let’s see which it is.” Then go on to prove your point—but be a gracious winner. Ask what the group honestly thinks—take a vote—maybe they’re right and you or I am wrong.

The “Wrong Info or Answerer”
This person gets it—albeit wrong. S/he answers—but incorrectly. Heck, that’s what learning is all about - learners often get it wrong (at least initially). What to do?

Teach them, of course! That’s what you and I are being paid for. Try a back-handed compliment like, “Oh, so close”—even if they weren’t that close. “Not quite” is another one. I also like the non-committal reply, “Well, that’s interesting. You know actually it’s more like this ….”

The “A/V Equipment Is Not Working”
This happened to me. “The overhead projector bulb is blown, there’s no back-up bulb or machine, and media services is closed. Deal with it!” What to do?

I dealt with it of course—what else could I do. I explained it to my audience and laughed it off (showing it didn’t rattle me). I apologized for it (I was sorry), but didn’t take responsibility (but didn’t “blame” anyone either). I asked the group to gather round closer in a circle with their chairs (no tables) and I used my paper copies of my overheads. Large print and reading them and showing them worked just fine. Handouts would’ve helped, too. So now I always bring back-up media and handouts.

The “A/V Equipment Is Not Present”
I show up with videos to use in the form of some brief clips that make my point for me and there is no VCR in sight. Let’s face it, sometimes mistakes are made. What to do?

Don’t get mad—and no, don’t get even either. Don’t let it rattle you—ask for and get some help from someone else. Then scramble, delay the use of the videos. If they cannot get you one, as in the above example, apologize with a smile, and describe the videos. The students will understand—it’s not your fault.

The “Debater”
This student wants to argue or debate every point you make. They’re not always so much wanting to just disagree, rather they desire to engage you or I as the trainer in a debate on the subject. What to do?

Debate, of course! A reasoned discussion of opposing viewpoints (the definition of a debate) is a useful teaching tool. So be the good trainer and go for it. But in a democratic effort to involve all of the students, try dividing them into two opposing teams to discuss and argue the points. The more that the students are involved in the discussion, the more learning will occur. Deflection of the focus off of you or me as the trainer by allowing another student to be involved keeps it from becoming a trainer vs. trainee setting.

The “Trainer Wanna-be”
This student obviously wants to be the trainer. S/he tries to “teach” the class from her/his seat. S/he may even interrupt you or me to make teaching points taking the focus off of the trainer onto them. What to do?
Let them, of course. Furthermore, encourage others to do the same. Remember guiding principle eight? You or I should not be (or feel the need to be) the only person doing “training”. Not only is student participation directly related to increased retention and learning, but also students teaching each other is associated with the greatest levels of retention and learning. Let’s face it, we all know that we learn so much more by teaching. Since we want our students to learn the most possible, they should become co-teachers with us. Now if they’re not covering certain material, then steer the discussion in that direction. If they’re not making correct points about the lesson (i.e., they’re wrong), then make gentle corrections (“Well, it’s actually a bit more like this …”).

**There Are More Students Than Planned On**
You were told to expect 10 students and there are 20. Not a problem? Well, that depends. Can the room (including size, tables, chairs, etc.) support that many? What about handouts or student manuals? Got enough training materials and supplies? Most importantly, what about the food and drinks?! What to do?

Again, it depends. First, can some of the students be deferred to another class later by chance? Room size, tables, and/or chairs a problem? Have someone else take care of getting a bigger room or more tables and chairs—you or I can concentrate on the teaching. Not enough handouts? Have someone else again start making copies and in the meantime ask students to double up and share the available materials. There can be an advantage to students sharing manuals as they will help each other stay on target. If there aren’t enough training materials, there may not be sufficient time to get more (especially if ordered ahead). Food and drinks? Order more and THB (you or I can wait for ours). By the way, even if it’s not your fault, it’s appropriate to apologize for any inconveniences.

**There Are Fewer Students Than Planned On**
You were expecting 10 students and only 3 show up. So what’s the problem you ask? A class of 3 does not have the same dynamics as a class of 10 does. Perhaps you’ve planned exercises based on 10 students. What to do?

Well, first of all, see what happened. Maybe it was cancelled, and these 3 didn’t get the message. Depending on the setting (inside vs. outside trainer), find out if the class needs to be rescheduled. If it’s to be held, then give it your all. But make appropriate modifications. I once was faced with this due to a snowstorm. Two out of ten showed up. We abandoned the classroom and went to the deserted cafeteria, got some coffees and muffins and sat down and talked. They got a heck of a lot more direct contact than they would have had all 10 shown up. Obviously, I altered the lesson plan “on the fly”. The students will understand—there’s nothing wrong with cluing the students in to what you’re having to do. As a matter of fact, you should do this. Adult learners actively desire to be directly involved in setting the training agenda or syllabus. So do it.

**The Training Room Is Not Suitable**
I’m not just talking about it being too small for the group (as discussed above) although this is common due to prevalence and overuse of conference rooms for training rooms. I’m talking about a training room that is not one. I’ve experienced all of the following (as an outside contracted trainer). Tables and chairs set up on the shop floor with no walls separating you from production. Training in the unfinished basement of an apartment building. Training in a garage in hot weather with picnic tables in one long line and a pump circulating on and off. Training in a
closed up, non-air conditioned packed room in mid-July with the sun beating down—right after lunch, too. What to do?

You can try to politely ask about alternative training spaces—I did. In each case, I was politely, but matter of factly turned down. So I taught. I did apologize to the students—they knew that it was not my responsibility, but appreciated my expression of regret. Then we (and I mean we) made some minor modifications. We set of false walls (boxes) to separate us from the shop floor. We posted notices directing people away from our “room”. We took more frequent (but shorter breaks) outside of the basement and took a “field trip” in the afternoon to get away from the basement. We got the noisy pump turned off and rearranged the picnic tables and got cool drinks and fans. Sometimes you just have to grin and bear it after doing your best to change things.

**Students Didn’t or Don’t Bring Necessary Supplies**
Do you also get tired of students failing to bring pens or pencils, paper, guidebooks, their respirators, etc. to the class? I sure do (or did—read on). What to do?

I found that (even several) reminders failed to work. So I arranged for what we needed instead of relying on the students to do so. I provided pens or pencils and small pads of paper. I brought (and bring) highlighters to my classes for students to use (and return). I bring multiple copies of the necessary guidebooks we need and ask them to share and look on with each other. I even bring several models of respirators with me to supplement their own. It seems to be working just fine and is infinitely better than the alternative—no supplies.

**Students Bring Other “Issues” into the Class**
Maybe someone wants to grouse about morale, pay, supervisors, other workers, work conditions, etc. none of which has to do with the training. What to do?

Other outside “issues” need to be checked at the door and left out of the classroom. Sometimes if the potential for it can be reasonably anticipated, a simple direct statement at the beginning of the session to said effect can “nip it in the bud” before it starts. If it occurs, above all else, do not take sides as you’ll certainly risk alienating students. Instead be polite, but matter of fact and indicate that those issues are separate issues not open to discussion in the class. That is, provided the issue does not pertain to the training. If it does pertain to the training (e.g., lack of adequate resources for safety supplies) then you’ll need to address. But don’t let the class and time get bogged down in it. A brief discussion may help to defuse emotions. Make a point of showing that you’re “making a note of it” and will follow up after the class. Then do so. Done.

**The Training Activity “Just Isn’t Working”**
You’re having the students engaged in a well-planned activity. Perhaps a debate, small group work, role play, brainstorming, hands-on work, etc. For whatever reason, it appears to just not be working. What to do?

Call a halt and ask the students—is it me or this not working? Figure out why—quickly analyze it. Call a break from the class. During the break figure out whether a modification to the activity is worth attempting or if an entirely new one is in order. There isn’t much else you can do.
The “Digresser”
This is the student who not only loves to talk, but also loves to change the subject. S/he will start by talking about the subject at hand—perhaps by answering a question or just making a “good” comment. Then s/he will weave it into something else entirely. They often love telling stories.
What to do?

Okay, first an admission. I’m as guilty at digressing as the next person. But I know how to limit it, make it work in the setting (as a little “break”), and how to get back on track. After all, a little digressing can be useful in training. But not too much. So cut it short—politely as usual. Wait for a pause then interject. If necessary interrupt them. Ask “What about what we were talking about?” If they still persist in continuing with their digression, I usually say something to the effect of “I’m sorry we can’t continue with the story, but we need to get back to our topic” and then I do so without waiting for a reply. You can also tell them they’ve got 10 seconds to wrap it up and make a point of looking at your watch. For those who just won’t quit, you can talk over them. Start with a word here or there (“OK. Good. Right. Let’s return to …”) and keep right on trucking.

The “Foot in the Mouth” (by Trainer or Student)
Someone says something very embarrassing or wrong to say aloud. Perhaps a comment about another in the classroom, a bad joke, or an inappropriate remark. What to do?

If it’s me (and it has been—we’re all human), I sincerely apologize for my discretion, then I move along. At the next break, I approach any aggrieved party and apologize again privately at more length. If it’s another student who did it, I see what their reaction is as well as anyone else’s. If it seems like all are laughing it off, I let it go and say “Let’s move right along”. If it’s more serious, then I make a more serious statement to try to deflect any hurt feelings and again get the class back on track. Sometimes taking a break is also in order and then see what’s needed outside of class.

The “Physical Altercation”
Yes, sometimes it even comes to blows. Two students get into a heated discussion that gives way to pushing and shoving or more. Maybe a student even goes so far to physically assault you (or me—it’s happened to me) as the trainer. What to do?

Everyone’s safety is of paramount importance of course. Break it up—safely and with help as necessary. Back away from it if being attacked. Call a break and deal with it “off-line” outside of class. Do not tell them to “take it outside” and become an accessory to it.

Run Out of Time for the Material
Let’s face it—it happens. Time has flown by and the class is over, but coverage of the material is not. It could be for many reasons, but regardless, it has happened. What to do?

As you see time running out, resist temptation to try to cram the too much material into too little remaining time. Instead stop. Inform the students of the situation (they’re probably ahead of you and realize it). Discuss what is left and decide—with the students—how to handle it. Re-schedule another session, try to answer any quick questions on the subjects missed, give them resources to pursue their own learning, see if everyone (or most) has some more time available.
The “Off-subject Reader” or Brought “Work to Do”
You’re leading the class in a discussion, you look around assessing class participation and you realize that one student is reading the newspaper, or a golf magazine (happened to me), or has budget reports they’re reviewing in class (also happened to me). What to do?

My general approach is to let them know you know and get them to put it away all without letting it be a big deal. How? If the classroom set up allows for it (say a horseshoe) I might work my way over and stop in front of them. That usually takes care of it. If not, I ask something funny about the reading or work material and ask quietly if they’d be so kind as to put it away and save it for the breaks. Above all, try not to embarrass them. Definitely do *not* take it from them or close it yourself. Have them do it. If they say that they’ll “only be a minute more” or they’re “under the gun to finish their budget,” sympathize and tell them it’s OK for them to be excused until they’re done with their work. You don’t want students in class working on other things.

Distractions
There are all sorts of possibilities for distractions. Mechanical problems with the lights, HVAC, noise from outside the classroom, etc.. It’s a nice day outside or something is going on outside. A student has a habit that is noticeable. The list goes on and on. What to do?

If a physical distraction, get someone else to help try to resolve it. If the outdoors is “coming into the classroom,” then try shutting the blinds. If a student is doing something, either try getting their attention without drawing attention or mention it to them at a break—they may not even be aware of it. Don’t make it a big deal. Don’t get mad, Don’t let it rattle you. Can’t do anything to alleviate it? Try laughing. It’ll help you and the students deal with it positively.

Language Barriers
You speak English and one or more (maybe many more) students don’t. They speak another language and you don’t. What to do?

Do you know it in advance (such as when all students are from the same organization) or is it a surprise (such as when the students are all from various different organizations)? Again, I’ve had both occur. The first case is obviously the easier one—plan for it. Bring in a translator. Meet with the translator in advance. Discuss and review what the vocabulary will be (technical terms often don’t translate well if at all). Plan on it taking longer—a lot longer. I’ve been told by translators to plan on 125% more as things tend to expand when translated. Get the written materials translated into the other language in advance. All of this may even be required under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

What if it is a surprise? This is much more difficult. Perhaps they speak some limited English or can understand it but are not proficient readers of it and speech is somewhere in between. Try doing more orally than reading by the students. Try using simpler terms and words. Make frequent eye contact with them. Not to draw attention to them, but rather to keep “checking in” to ensure they’re doing ok. Try using visual media that doesn’t require language to make the point. Be sure to address any post-test with them before it occurs. If not able to understand it given orally, then it may need to wait to be translating.

Literacy Issues
Similar to the above, one or more students are not proficient or functional readers (in English). What to do?
Again, similarly to the above, do we know it in advance (I always ask my contact person) or is it a surprise (sometimes they don’t know or don’t say). I now have a one page large-print sheet that I read at the beginning of each class telling the students that I’m happy to do whatever I reasonably can to accommodate their learning needs, if they will tell me what their needs are. (After all, I am not a mind reader). Again, do more oral teaching and less student independent reading. Offer (to all) to do the test orally. Encourage the student’s peers to help out. Both the student and their peers are usually more willing to do so. Use simpler terms and repeat as necessary.

**Students without the Necessary Pre-requisites**
You’re teaching an advanced course in some subject area (e.g., confined spaces, hazardous materials, etc.) and a student isn’t proficient the basics in the subject area? What to do?

If the student speaks up, asks questions, makes any comments, then it will become obvious to all very quickly. If s/he doesn’t speak up, others may be aware anyway, s/he will know, but you may not. In any case, once you know, see if continuing is worthwhile and salvageable. Often the other students can help out without it letting the entire course slow down or suffer. At the break approach the student and have a confidential discussion whether it’s prudent for continuing or for them to depart the class and seek the basic training or more experience first. It may be necessary to speak with their supervisor or you contact and have a frank discussion. If all (but you) want the student to just sit in to “absorb” as much info as possible, accept it graciously and explain to all that the student is in practical terms “auditing” the course and not actively participating.

**Physical Disabilities**
You have a student with a physical disability preventing them from participating in the same way the non-disabled students are. Perhaps they use a wheelchair, perhaps they are blind. There are many possibilities. What to do?

As mentioned earlier, this is an ADA issue requiring a “reasonable accommodation.” Hopefully, you’ll know in advance and can take steps to reasonably accommodate. Hold the course in an accessible space. Modify classroom set up. Change training equipment. Not sure what to do? Whether you know in advance or it’s a surprise, involve the student and ask what they would need or like to do. Sometimes it’s easy and a lot less than one might otherwise expect or anticipate.

**Learning Disabilities**
Similarly to several of the above challenges, a student has some type of learning disability and needs. Perhaps a student has dyslexia. Perhaps they’re not a good auditory processor. There are many types and examples of learning disabilities. What to do?

Again, similar to the above challenges, you can do more about it if you know adequately in advance than if it’s a surprise. Get help. Ask the student what they need. In this case, for you to know about it, they likely self-identified and probably don’t mind talking about it—so ask. Have a discussion and learn about their learning style and needs. Additionally, in many organizations, there is someone in human resources who can assist. If not call your local school system or college for help.
No Coffee or Refreshments
It’s 8:00 a.m., the students are there, you’re ready to start, and someone asks, “Hey, where’s the coffee and donuts?” It may not seem like the end of the world, but you might be surprised how much of a difference the presence—or worse, the absence—of food and drink can make or break training. What to do?

Send someone to check on it if it should be there. If not, consider sending someone out for it. Maybe wait for the break and take care of it. I always ask in advance, “Who is providing the food and drink—you or me?” I assume that it will be done by one of us, and I pin down my contact on it. It’s my training, and I want it to go as well as possible. A banana bread made the night before impresses students—trust me.

Students Are Taking Too Long for Break(s)
You tell them to take 5 and they take 10. Tell them 10 and they take 15-20. What to do?

It’s simple—do the math. If you want them to take 10, tell them they’ve got 5. Want them to take 5, tell them to take 2. Award (give out prizes to) those who return on time (but don’t penalize those who return late). Tell them that you can give them either fewer breaks at the length they’re taking or more if they return in a certain time. Also, once a majority have returned, start class. The others will either “get it” or not—it doesn’t matter. Do it for the students who return on time.

Trainer Burnout
You’ve had it with training. You’re tired of it. You dread it when it comes. You’re doing the same old training all the time. You need a break. What to do?

Take a much needed break of course. Find someone else to do the training—at least for a while. Talk with other trainers about it. Form a support group. Discuss and strategize possible solutions to your training frustrations. Make changes in your training. Spice things up. Throw out the same old lesson plans and do something different. Ask others for ideas. Ask the students.

Repetitiveness of the Topic or Material
You’re not tired of doing training, but you (and more likely the students) are tired of the same topics or training or materials year after year. What to do?

As just previously introduced, it’s time for a change. Spice things up. Throw out the same old lesson plans and do something different. Ask others for ideas. Ask the students. We all need change. Remember the saying, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over yet expecting a different result.” Go back to square one and re-design the training. If a wholesale change isn’t feasible, at least make some changes to the lesson plan. Design some different learning exercises.

The “Anticipator”
This is the student who always finishes your sentences. You say, “This is an MSDS or more formally …” and they interrupt with “… a material safety data sheet.” They do it repeatedly. What to do?

You’ve got two basic options with this one. Either let them continue (and play along) or try to get them to stop (nicely). Let them continue. Make it into a game of sorts. The more they do it, play along—give dramatic pauses, point to them, smile and cheer when they do it right. Try to get others to join in as well. S/he might grow tired of it after a while anyway. Try to get them to
stop—nicely. This can be a bit tricky—as well as sneaky. Set them up for failure—repeatedly. Give them a pause after you’ve started to talk but at a point where you have a couple of options on what you say. When they choose one, you politely say, “Oh, sorry, no. What I was going to say was …” and proceed to use the other option. After several times, they’ll realize they don’t know what you’re going to say, and will likely give up. You win, but they lose, and I prefer not to have students “lose.” You risk them not participating at all, thereby cutting off their learning and curtailing the same for the others as well. I find the first way is much preferred.

The Student Who Won’t Participate
Even though students are all different, this one just will not participate in the class activities. S/he won’t do individual work, group work, the hands-on, etc. What to do?

We are all different as are students with different needs and abilities. Try gentle persuasion. Try cajoling. But watch for body language—realize when they’re digging their heels in or closing off contact. Then you’ll likely need to take it “off-line” out of class. Be a good teacher and coach and counsel them. Find out what is going on with them and why they’re reluctant to participate. Above all, don’t try to “make them do it” during class—it’ll likely backfire—trust me, been there.

You Don’t Believe in the Need for the Training
You’ve been asked to provide refresher training because “the workers just don’t get it”. But you know better. You know that the problem is not a training issue it’s something else. Maybe it’s morale, resources, behavior, production, etc. What to do?

Talk to whoever is directing the training to be done and gently explain your concerns. If they won’t agree and want the training anyway you’re basically stuck doing it. So make the most of it. Try to find some new things to cover. Try to find a way to acknowledge the actual issue and offer solutions or leave it aside. Get the students to “buy in” to the training.

Contempt for a Student or Students
You know him/her. You hate them. They’re the worst students you’ve ever had, and you have them again. You’re dreading it—argh! What to do?

Get someone else to do the training if possible. If not and you have to do it, you’ll need to make the best of it. Start by identifying what it is about the students that bothers you. Rehearse other options for your response to their behavior. Try ignoring it. Pretend it does not exist. Do some “self-talk.” Say (to yourself), “I don’t care,” “It doesn’t matter,” etc. Plan on a reward for yourself if you make it through the training without being bothered by them—a meal at your favorite restaurant perhaps, so you have something to look forward to.

Loss of Electrical Power
The lights and A/V equipment just went out. What to do? Determine if there is an emergency going on requiring evacuation or other response. If not, and it’s safe to continue, is there sufficient daylight to continue? Can you continue outside (as every class always wants to do on nice days)? If not, then “bag it” and reschedule for another time. There isn’t much else you can do.

Students at Differing Levels of Expertise
Similar to the student without the necessary prerequisites, students are often at widely varying levels or abilities. What to do?
Teach them all and get them to help each other. Students are almost always willing to help each other, and they’ll learn more by helping teach the others. It’s a win-win solution. If needed, aim a little higher than the average. Usually, students can “rise to the situation,” like playing better against a better opponent in sports or games. Also, use or design group activities that don’t emphasize individual abilities or skill levels. Use team activities where they’ll help each other.

The Brand New (and Inexperienced) Trainer
You’ve just been given training responsibilities and you’re not sure what to do next. What to do?

So, you want to be a trainer, huh? Well, great! There probably aren’t as many short-term solutions as there are long-term ones. For an immediate need or course—get help. Find an experienced trainer and ask to co-teach it. Ask to shadow them in their course delivery. Ask for help in your preparations and course development.

On a longer term basis, get as much experience as possible. Get a mentor, too. Take a train-the-trainer course, or take several of them. Some colleges have good offerings. Join a training/trainers association, such as the National Environmental Safety and Health Training Association (NESHTA), the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) that has local chapters, or join (or form) a local Toastmasters group.

Getting “Them” to Come to the Training (at All!!)
You’ve noticed that the trainees/workers aren’t exactly showing up in droves at your courses. What to do?

Obviously, you need to find out exactly why they haven’t been coming to the courses. Is it their choice, or is their supervisor not letting them go? Is it a scheduling issue (see below)? Are they getting the training in other ways? Is there a “problem” with your training? Start asking why questions, and don’t stop until you find out “why.”

The After-Lunch Doldrums
It’s afternoon, the students have “stuffed” their bellies with turkey sandwiches (and tryptophan) and now you have to teach them about hazcom. What to do?

Make it as engaging, participative, interesting, fun, and hands-on as possible. In the future, see if you can schedule it for the morning. But maybe it’s a day-long training session. Save afternoon topics for anything that gets them up, moving, and actively involved in the training.

Redundancy (Same Old, Same Old)
You notice that you have to provide the same (annual refresher) training to the same group for the umpteenth time—ugh! What to do?

Don’t. Don’t provide the same training over and over again. What’s the saying, “Doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results is an indication of insanity.” Well, you know what—they’re right! It is training insanity to do the same training over and over again. So don’t do it. Instead, change it. Change the lesson plan, change the sub-topics, change the approaches or methods, change the activities, maybe even change the trainer (try co-teaching it for a change). Change something—change anything—change everything—just change it. Trust
me, “change can be a good thing”—don’t fear it. Try asking the students what they’d like you to
cover in this training—you might be surprised by their answers. Cater to their needs first.

**Scheduling Issues (Lack of Adequate Time or Inappropriate Times)**
You need to deliver OSHA-compliant hazcom in half the time that you estimated it’ll take. What
to do?

You may not be able to do so as you suspect. Ask about breaking it up into two “half”
sessions. Maybe a different time would work better. Perhaps they can give up half the group of
workers at a time for the needed full class time. No to all of those ideas? Well, then you’ll have to
get “creative”. Don’t try to cram it all in to the allotted time. Instead tailor it to meet their needs
and only their needs regardless of what the reg’s say. You’d be surprised how one can “cover” a
lot of material in a different way by just focusing on the students’ needs. Cover things more as
“bullet items” rather than as “paragraphs of discussion.” Small bite-sized portions of things that
they ask for. Then as you’re catering to their needs, throw in the “related bits and pieces” that you
know they’ll need to fully grasp the subject. For example, give them the needed anatomy and
physiology of the lungs when they ask about asbestos dust exposures.

**Training People Who Really Know You Well (“Familiarity Breeds Contempt”)**
These students know you, and you know them. You’re all good friends or close colleagues. You
kid around with each other—a lot. They’re as likely to (or have before) kid you in a class that
you’re teaching. What to do?

Nothing. Go with the flow. Don’t let it bug you, don’t get offended (remember the principle
“never ever get defensive?”). They just want to have some fun (granted at your expense), so let
them. Self-deprecation in trainers can go a long way toward creating a positive environment
similar to that done by comedians (think Rodney Dangerfield—“Hey, I get no respect!”).

**Different Trades Folk (with Different Needs and Issues)**
You have to teach lead safety to a group of workers who comprise a variety of trades (e.g.,
carpenters, plumbers, electricians, demo, auto, HVAC, etc.). What to do?

Be happy. Encourage them to teach each other about how their trade or work is affected by
the subject. The effect of a mixed group on training has a name—it’s called “cross-pollination”.
Many students come to enjoy the intermingling of ideas, concepts, issues, etc. They often do help
each other resolve issues if you facilitate it well. Design for success!

**You’re Not “One of Them”**
The students are all part of a group and you’re not a part of their group—and that seems to
present a problem—to them anyway. What to do?

First off, it’s their problem (if at all). So don’t let it become your problem, too. Get it out
and on the table right from the get go. Acknowledge it. Admit it. Embrace it. Go with it. Be glad
and “revel” in it. They’ll respect you more for it.

**Morale Issues (e.g., After or Just before Imminent Layoffs)**
You have a course starting, and all of the pre-class discussions are about the low morale. This is
just going to “kill” your training, you’re thinking. What to do?
Respect the reason(s) for the low morale. Announce your acknowledgement of it to the class, and indicate that the training is not related to it (if indeed it isn’t related—hopefully). Then move on—quickly and with no looking back. Whatever you do, don’t revisit it. Park it on the side. Sometimes you can also solicit help from allies in the group who, while sympathetic, just don’t want to hear about it anymore. Let others fight your battles. You’re there to train—so do it and do it well.

Happy training!

What challenges do you face in your safety training?